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Voice, silence and dissent in organizations

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To my family and to the future to come

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Introduction

Employee voice, silence, and dissent are central phenomena in organizational life. They reflect the communicative behaviors enacted by organizational members when deciding whether, how, and with whom to share ideas, concerns, or disagreements. These behaviors can be constructive and supportive of organizational functioning, but they can also be disruptive or even harmful, depending on the form and the context in which they occur.

In organizations, employees constantly face the decision of engaging in voice or remaining silent, and these behaviors can manifest in supportive or adversarial ways. Multiple factors including individual dispositions, organizational culture, leadership, and the fear of retaliation influence such decisions.

This dissertation aims to advance the understanding of these dynamics by examining the conditions under which employees choose to speak up, stay silent, or express dissent, and by exploring the implications of these choices for both individuals and organizations. It examines what often remains hidden in organizational communication, focusing on the deeper forces that shape employee communicative behaviors (ECB). It does so with particular attention to the growing sociopolitical and geopolitical pressures that society and employees increasingly place on companies, and to the rising emphasis on employee well-being and meaningful work as central dimensions of contemporary organizational life. While many studies address visible exchanges, the unspoken and inhibited dimensions are less understood, even though they play a crucial role in employee well-being and organizational functioning. From the perspective of corporate communication, employee communication, and related fields, these dynamics are essential for understanding how organizations manage legitimacy, internal tensions, and trust. For managers, future professionals, and society at large, voice, silence, and dissent reveal how power, inclusion, and responsibility are negotiated within contemporary organizations.

Contemporary workplaces are increasingly impacted by global crises, climate change, armed conflicts, and movements for social justice (e.g. Ravazzani et al., 2024). Employees, and society more broadly, now expect companies to take clear and consistent positions on sociopolitical issues and are actively pressuring companies to ensure that

their values are followed by concrete action. This environment, characterized by increasing social polarization, conflicting value systems, and a greater focus on sociopolitical issues, makes corporate communicative choices more complex. This escalating complexity directly influences organizational decision-making and communication climates. As stakeholder expectations diversify and perspectives diverge, stakeholders and organizational voice, silence, and dissent become highly contextual responses shaped by uncertainty, moral tension, and the interdependence that characterizes modern organizational life.

At the same time, employees demand greater attention to well-being, as reflected in the rise of hybrid and flexible work models that emphasize work-life balance, mental health, social connection, and purposeful work. This shift indicates a reorientation in the employment relationship: employees increasingly expect positive, supportive and respectful environments, where organizational practices align with their personal and professional needs. Beyond traditional concerns such as compensation and career advancement, employees seek in their workplace respect for boundaries, recognition of contributions, and opportunities for meaningful engagement. These evolving expectations are reshaping the psychological contract between employees and employers, establishing new standards for an acceptable and desirable workplace.

Employee communicative behaviors have therefore become a critical concern across disciplines and contexts. As corporate boundaries blur through globalization, networking, outsourcing and social media, employees increasingly interact with external stakeholders in ways often beyond the control of the company, making their communicative choices more important than ever. In such complex systems, even well-intentioned communicative acts may trigger unintended consequences, highlighting the need to study how individuals decide when to speak, when to withhold, and how to express dissent under conditions shaped by ethical expectations and societal fragmentation.

ECBs impact how information, issues, and ideas flow in the workplace and have significant consequences for decision-making, organizational culture, performance, and employee well-being (e.g. Morrison, 2011, 2014, 2023; Hao et al., 2022). They also influence internal dynamics and the way employees perceive and interpret their organization, making the concept integral to the field of employee communication in which this dissertation is situated.

Over the past decades, the study of employee communication has evolved from a focus on dissemination to an emphasis on interactive processes that generate intangible resources such as knowledge and engagement (Mazzei, 2025). ECBs are recognized as crucial in developing such resources, achieving competitive advantage, brand building, and strengthening organizational advocacy (Mazzei, 2025). Many organizations actively seek to encourage communication behaviors that support the emergence of new ideas, suggestions, and concerns (Mazzei, 2025; Morrison, 2011, 2014). This reflects the changing role of employees as active communicators, whose voices extend beyond internal boundaries and play a key role in shaping organizational reputation, acting as credible and trustworthy resources also externally (Mazzei et al., 2019). Thus, companies seek to foster a positive climate of voice in the workplace (Frazier and Bowler, 2012; Morrison, 2023) by investing in interpersonal relationships, empowerment, engagement and authenticity, to encourage employees to actively speak up and defend the organization at any time. Yet, companies face daily exposure to employee communication issues, including voices expressed in social media and personal networks by dissenting employees that go beyond corporate control and official narrative.

Recognizing employees as active communicators and seeking their authentic and organic voice implies that companies should also be open to dissent and deal with it constructively (e.g. Kassing 2011). A corporate climate that values dissent is critical for organizational learning, adaptability, and resilience, especially in the current competitive environment (e.g. Garner 2013).

However, employees do not always express their concerns or dissenting views openly but may withhold them in silent behaviors. Silence matters because it affects both individual well-being and organizational functioning. When employees remain silent, they retain important information from management and hinder collaboration and knowledge sharing among colleagues (e.g. Morrison, 2011), and this can constrain creativity and innovation, making the organization less dynamic and adaptable. At the same time, silence is not always a negative or passive reaction. Research has shown it to be a deliberate behavior shaped by motives, contexts, and relationships (Milliken and Morrison, 2003). Silence may arise from fear, futility, or disengagement, but also from altruistic, relational, or strategic considerations (Pinder and Harlos, 2001; Van Dyne et al., 2003; Brinsfield, 2012).

Given these evolving conditions, current research on voice, silence, and dissent leaves important questions unanswered, especially regarding how contemporary sociopolitical pressures, polarized public debates, and changing organizational models influence these communicative behaviors, their outcomes, and the environments in which they occur.

This dissertation addresses two specific knowledge gaps that have been largely overlooked in current research and are emerging as critical concerns for practice amid the contemporary geopolitical and sociopolitical pressures outlined above.

The first gap is that of *employee activism* under sociopolitical and geopolitical pressures. In contemporary workplaces, employees increasingly expect their companies to align organizational values with broader societal concerns. Companies are under growing pressure to take clear and consistent positions on these issues and to demonstrate their values through concrete action. Specifically, a growing number of employees are speaking out on social issues and extending their concerns beyond the workplace (Miles et al., 2021). In doing so, they position themselves as insider activists who put pressure on organizations and leaders by demanding change through voice, walkouts, whistleblowing, open letters or social media mobilization, especially when they disagree with the decisions of their employer (Li and Soule, 2021; Wowak et al., 2022). Such forms of activism redefine traditional understandings of voice by extending beyond formal internal channels, blurring the boundaries between organizational and sociopolitical spheres, and directly influencing perceptions of legitimacy, coherence, and reputation. However, despite its growing importance and influence on organizational life, employee activism remains underexplored in academic research, particularly regarding how communication executives and managers interpret and manage it and how employees experience, motivate and articulate it. This dissertation addresses this gap by examining activism from both a cross-national managerial perspective and the perspective of employees, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Moreover, research on voice, silence, and dissent has also frequently been associated with experiences of mistreatment, unethical behavior, or disputes over workplace practices and performance, particularly in silence literature (e.g. Brinsfield, 2012; Pinder and Harlos, 2001). These dynamics intersect with a growing demand for meaningful work, i.e., work

that connects personal purpose with organizational and societal values (Chamberlain and Hodson, 2010), and heightened concern for employee well-being.

Therefore, the second gap of this dissertation is that of the *dissenting voices* of employees experiencing *toxic work environments (TWE)*. TWEs hinder voice, normalize silence, or drive employees to leave. They undermine both personal fulfillment and organizational credibility but remain underexplored. Research in organizational psychology and management shows the serious negative impacts of TWEs on well-being, job satisfaction and performance (Einarsen et al., 2016). Frequently, toxicity is minimized to the presence of individual “bad apples”, such as abusive managers or unethical employees, risks oversimplification and neglects deeper systemic problems, which often arise from underlying organizational conditions that normalize destructive practices (Love et al., 2011). However, less attention has been paid to how employees communicatively respond in such contexts and how they perceive managerial actions in managing or exacerbating toxicity. This dissertation addresses this gap by examining the interplay between communicative responses of employees and managerial behaviors in toxic workplaces.

The gaps mentioned above underscore the need to examine employee voice, silence and dissent as phenomena embedded in organizations and broader societal and cultural transformations.

Methodology and structure of the dissertation

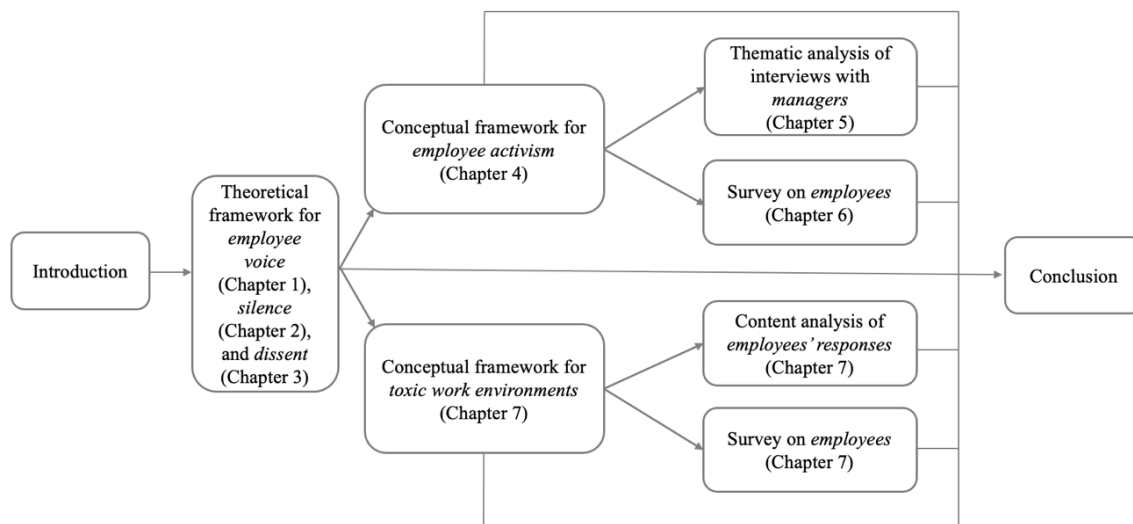
This dissertation combines the theoretical foundations sketched above with empirical studies that adopt both qualitative and quantitative approaches in international contexts.

For the theoretical frameworks, a methodological approach was adopted for reviewing the literature that forms the backbone of chapters (specifically, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4 and 7). The literature reviews were conducted through systematic searches in Scopus, using advanced Boolean queries to combine key concepts with related themes in a time-bound period. As a supplementary search strategy, snowballing was also applied (Booth, 2016), which included examining reference lists, footnotes, and citation tracking to identify additional relevant sources. This combined approach allowed reaching saturation, ensuring that no substantially new insights emerged and that all relevant studies were included. Further details are discussed in each respective literature chapter.

Empirically, given the sensitivity of employee voice, silence, and dissent to contextual conditions and interpretive dimensions, the dissertation adopts a multi-method strategy that integrates qualitative and quantitative research to address this complexity. Combining strategies allows the research to benefit from the strengths of each and compensate for their respective limitations (Bryman, 2012). In line with this rationale, this complementary design provides a more comprehensive and explanatory understanding of employee communication behaviors by integrating both managerial and employee perspectives for a deeper insight into the phenomena under scrutiny.

The dissertation is organized into seven main chapters. Figure 1 illustrates the structure of the dissertation, with the following providing a detailed description of each chapter.

Figure 1. Structure of the dissertation



Source: own elaboration

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 establish the theoretical framework of the dissertation by examining employee voice, silence and dissent, and describing their development, influencing factors and implications. This foundation is essential for identifying the gaps that motivate the focus of the empirical studies: the underexplored dynamics of employee activism and the communicative responses to toxic work environments.

For the literature review in Chapter 1, systematic searches were conducted in Scopus using advanced Boolean queries that combined the core concepts of employee voice, employee silence, and employee dissent with related terms such as advocacy, ambassadorship, work environment, whistleblowing, and speak-up culture.

The search covered the period 1970–2024 in order to provide a comprehensive overview of the topic, including disciplines of corporate communication, internal communication, crisis management, marketing, and organizational communication, in order to build an international and interdisciplinary literature base. To ensure completeness, supplementary searches were also performed in Google Scholar. In total, 120 articles were included in the review. These were systematically categorized in a table including reference, year, journal, author keywords, identified keywords, and notes, providing the basis for a structured analysis.

The sources for Chapters 2 and 3 derive from the literature review of Chapter 1. Chapter 2 on silence draws on 82 articles selected to explore silence, analyzing related themes such as the role of leadership, organizational climate and culture, social support, minority silence, sensemaking processes, and antisocial communication behaviors. Similarly, Chapter 3 on dissent incorporates 50 sources to explore related themes, research gaps, and potential risks for organizations.

Building on the conceptual foundations of the first three chapters and the research gaps identified, the empirical focus was placed on the issues of *employee activism* and the *dissenting voices* of employees in *toxic work environments*. As previously explained, this choice stems from the increasing relevance of these two issues in contemporary organizational and societal contexts, as well as their close connection to the communicative processes of voice, silence and dissent.

Chapter 4 turns to employee activism as the first focus of the dissertation. The chapter reviews how activism has been studied in relation to corporate, CEO, and shareholder activism, and highlights why employee activism in particular requires further investigation. This chapter prepares the ground for the empirical studies that follow. Following the systematic approach previously described keywords such as activism, employee activism, corporate activism, shareholder activism, CEO activism, purpose, authenticity, and voice climate were combined, targeting studies between 1970 and 2024 in the areas of employee communication behaviors and risk and crisis communication. In total, 85 articles were included in the review. As above, all articles were categorized in a table containing reference, year, author keywords, identified keywords, journal, and notes field. In addition to bibliographic details, the table for this chapter also records how activism has been previously studied empirically, including

research design, items, and questions. This process mapped the existing literature and informed the design of the empirical studies.

Building on the theoretical framework of *employee activism*, the dissertation presents two empirical studies on employee activism, addressing the first research gap from complementary perspectives.

Chapter 5 explores *employee activism from a managerial perspective* through a qualitative, cross-national study based on interviews with communication professionals working in multinational companies and consulting firms in Italy and the United States.

Interviews were chosen because they allow flexible exploration of the specific perspectives of participants, providing access to subjective meanings, interpretations, and contextual dynamics that cannot be captured through structured instruments alone (Bryman, 2012). The empirical material was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012) to systematically identify, organize, and synthesize recurring patterns of meaning across the dataset. The analysis combined inductive and deductive strategies: while themes emerged directly from the data, existing literature on employee activism informed decisions and interpretive refinements as the analysis progressed. This approach enabled the study to capture the interpretive frameworks, sensemaking processes, and managerial rationales through which communication professionals understand, label, and respond to employee activism. The comparative design across Italy and the United States enhanced the analytical depth of the study, providing valuable insights into cultural differences in expectations of employee voice, leadership roles, and the sociopolitical climate of organizations.

This study is the result of a collaboration established with an international research team based in Italy and the United States. The research was conducted together with Silvia Ravazzani, Associate Professor in Management at the Department of Business LECB “Carlo A. Ricciardi”, Università IULM, leading the Italian team; Yan Jin, Professor of Public Relations in Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia (UGA), leading the US team; Anna Rachwalski, undergraduate researcher within the University of Georgia’s Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication’s Crisis Communication Think Tank; and Sonny Glenn Robinson, undergraduate Public Relations student and a researcher of the Crisis Insights and

Analytics Lab at the University of Georgia's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication. This research group brings together scholars with complementary expertise to provide a cross-cultural perspective on the phenomenon. This study resulted in a journal article published in the *Journal of Communication Management*.

Chapter 6 presents employee activism from *the perspective of employees*, complementing the previous one involving managers. Using a survey design, it investigates how organizational factors (i.e., climate of voice, transparent leadership communication, authenticity) and individual factors (i.e., organizational identification, engagement, perceived external prestige) influence employee activism intentions, and the moderating role of corporate and CEO activism in this relationship. The survey method was chosen because standardized questionnaires produce structured and comparable data across a large population, allowing constructs to be quantified and theoretical relationships to be tested empirically (Bryman, 2012). This design enabled a broader examination of associations between key variables identified in interviews and prior literature and allowed for the assessment of their relative influence on employee activism intentions.

This second study is also the result of an international collaboration that was conducted together with Yijing Wang, Professor and Chair of Strategic Communication at the Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands, and Silvia Ravazzani, Associate Professor in Management at the Department of Business LECB "Carlo A. Ricciardi", Università IULM. Specifically, the study aims to understand how organizational factors (i.e., climate of voice, transparent leadership communication, and authenticity) and individual factors (i.e., perceived external prestige, organizational identification, and employee engagement) impact the intention of employees to engage in activism. Additionally, the study investigates the moderating roles of corporate activism and CEO activism and their potential impact on the relationship. Also, this study resulted in a journal article published in the *International Journal of Business Communication*.

After the presentation of studies about activism from the perspectives of managers and employees, the dissertation proceeds to its second focus, that of the *dissenting voices* of employees in *toxic work environments*. TWEs are viewed through the lens of the changing nature of work, in which long-term exposure to organizational dysfunction such as incivility, burnout and poor leadership poses a critical threat to employee well-being,

engagement and retention. These concerns are aggravated by ongoing public and academic debates about mental health, work-life balance and the desire for purpose-driven work.

Chapter 7 conceptualizes toxicity as a systemic organizational condition rather than the result of isolated cases. The literature review illustrates the conceptual landscape of organizational toxicity, including its manifestations, different levels of toxicity and consequences for employee well-being and communication. It was completed following the same procedure previously described. In this case, the search strategy combined keywords related to toxic work environments (e.g. “toxic work environment”, “abusive supervision”, “antisocial behaviors”, “psychological safety”, “retaliation”), and psychological and organizational consequences (e.g. “mental health issues”, “burnout”, “work-life balance”, “career dissatisfaction”). These keywords were chosen to identify studies at the intersection of workplace toxicity, communication behaviors, and employee well-being. The academic databases consulted were Scopus and Google Scholar, from which 76 articles published between 1970 and 2025 were included in the review.

On this basis, the chapter presents a mixed-methods study combining survey data and content analysis to investigate how employees communicatively respond and how they perceive managerial actions in such contexts. The combination of survey data and structured content analysis was adopted to leverage the complementary strengths of each approach: surveys enabled measurement of key variables across respondents, while content analysis facilitated systematic examination of narratives describing toxic dynamics (Bryman, 2012).

The questionnaire allowed the collection of comparable data across a larger population, making it possible to quantify constructs and test theoretical relationships empirically. The qualitative component of the study relied on a structured content analysis (Kuckartz, 2014; Lewins and Silver, 2014) of the open-ended responses collected via the online survey. This part of the research aimed to explore the characteristics of toxic workplace dynamics and the communicative behaviors they trigger, specifically voice, silence, dissent, and exit strategies. The analysis was guided by a hierarchical, theory-based codebook derived from established toxicity literature. This framework was designed to categorize the causes of toxicity at both micro- and macro-organizational levels, and its effects on personal and work-related dimensions. The codebook was initially applied

deductively and then expanded with inductive codes generated from emerging data patterns, following Kuckartz (2014) methodological principles. This study advances understanding of how toxicity affects ECBs and, in turn, organizational functioning.

In sum, through its literature reviews and three empirical studies, this dissertation addresses two gaps: *employee activism* and the *dissenting voices* of employees experiencing *toxic work environments*. The aim is to advance understanding of how employees express, withhold, or challenge their voices in contemporary organizations. These knowledge gaps are particularly prominent because activism often externalizes employee concerns and directly confronts organizational power, whereas toxicity suppresses voice, normalizes silence, and undermines organizational functioning.

The broader implications of these findings for theory and practice will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

1 Voice and silence in organizations: Defining the conceptual framework

Employee communication behaviors (ECBs) are central to organizational life, and determine how information, concerns, and ideas are created within the organization, influencing decision-making processes and organizational culture, effectiveness, and individual well-being. In recent decades, these concepts have received increasing attention in academia as they are important for understanding how employees interact with their organizations and what conditions promote or hinder open communication.

This chapter analyzes voice, silence, and dissent within the broader field of ECB and examines the key theoretical perspectives that have informed their study. It provides an overview of the foundational models of voice and the dynamics between voice and silence. Furthermore, it focuses on the factors that influence the decisions of employees to speak up or remain silent and the consequences of these decisions for individuals and organizations. The chapter also looks at how technological developments and hybrid ways of working have changed communication processes, and therefore the opportunities and challenges for employee voice. It concludes by highlighting key research gaps and identifying areas within the study of voice and silence that merit further academic investigation.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, for this literature review, systematic searches were conducted in Scopus using advanced Boolean queries that combined the core concepts of *employee voice*, *employee silence*, and *employee dissent* with related terms such as *advocacy*, *ambassadorship*, *work environment*, *whistleblowing*, and *speak-up culture*. The full Boolean used is: TITLE-ABS-KEY((((“employee voice”) OR (“employee silence”) OR (“employee dissent”)) AND ((whistleblow*) OR (*antecedent*) OR (*outcome*) OR (leader*) OR (manag*) OR (“brand building”) OR (“employer branding”) OR (*advocacy*) OR (*ambassador*) OR (wellbeing) OR (well-being) OR (*crisis*) OR (internal*) OR (anonym*) OR (*diversity*) OR (cultur*) OR (listen*) OR (“psychological safety”) OR (“voice climate”) OR (“silence climate”) OR (“employee engagement”) OR (engag*) OR (“employee communication behav*”)))).

The search covered the period 1970–2024 to provide a comprehensive overview of the topic, including disciplines of corporate communication, internal communication, crisis management, marketing, and organizational communication, to build an international and interdisciplinary literature base. To ensure completeness, supplementary searches were also performed in Google Scholar. In total, 120 articles were included in the review. These were systematically categorized in a table including reference, year, journal, author keywords, identified keywords, and notes, providing the basis for a structured analysis.

1.1 Origins and evolution of voice and silence studies

The theme of voice and silence has become increasingly relevant in organizations (Morrison, 2011, 2014). The ability and willingness of employees to express their ideas, suggestions, and information on work-related issues are crucial as they affect the quality of work-life, societal progress, respect for the rights of the people, and the economic performance of companies in terms of effectiveness and competitiveness (Hao et al., 2022; Hosseini and Sabokro, 2021; Mazzei, 2015).

In organizations, individuals face the decision of whether to speak up or remain silent, that is, whether to implement voice behaviors or remain silent, but this decision is often influenced by the fear of various types of retaliation (Morrison, 2011).

There is an ongoing debate in the literature about the definition of the constructs of voice and silence. Organizational research has evolved from the initial conceptualization of voice and its relationship to speaking up behavior and silence to a more complex examination of voice.

This section describes the development of the concepts of voice and silence and related themes from the origins of studies about employee voice and silence to related constructs in the literature on voice, and explores new perspectives that reflect recent theoretical developments. The analysis also extends to comparative insights across different disciplines, highlighting how different fields have approached these phenomena. Moreover, it recalls the conceptualization of employee communication behavior, before concluding with an examination of employee dissent as a specific form of workplace disagreement that challenges organizational norms and practices.

1.1.1 Conceptualization of employee voice and silence

The concept of voice has been studied extensively in organizational literature since the 1970s. In his seminal work, Albert Hirschman (1970) examines two main responses that economic actors (e.g. consumers, citizens or employees) can use to address their dissatisfaction with an organization or firm. These responses are *exit*, which involves leaving the institution in search of a better alternative, and *voice*, which involves attempting to improve the institution from within by speaking out and expressing dissatisfaction. Using voice means communicating directly in order to influence current situations in the direction of desired goals. This includes expressing opinions, discussing, negotiating and protesting. Exit signals a break in the existing relationships between the actors; voice stands for their continuation (Hirschman, 1970b). Moreover, Hirschman (1970a) argued that voice and exit depend on *loyalty*. The use of voice maintains existing relationships and is more likely to occur when employees show loyalty to the institution (Hirschman, 1970b). Hirschman does not provide an explicit definition of loyalty, but he describes three types: *unconscious*, when people do not think about the issues; *conscious/passive*, when they suffer in silence but hope things will get better; and *conscious/active*, when they speak up, hopefully to improve the situation. According to this view, loyal employees who show conscious active loyalty are more likely to use voice to express dissatisfaction, while those who are disloyal are more likely to choose exit (Brinsfield et al., 2009).

Voice is therefore defined as “any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge, through appeal to a higher authority with the intention of forcing a change in management, or through various types of actions and protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 30).

By the mid-1980s, researchers had established that voice and silence manifest themselves in various forms in organizations. Farrell (1983, p. 598) expanded on the work of Hirschman and identified a fourth response to dissatisfaction called *neglect*, defined as “lax and disregardful behavior among workers”. Those behaviors are typically associated with low job satisfaction or low commitment, including arriving late to work, frequently being absent from work, and having a higher error rate than usual. Additionally,

temporary abandonment and psychological inattention may also occur as a response to dissatisfaction. These behaviors should be closely monitored and identified as potential signs of decreased organizational effectiveness. If necessary, they can serve as a warning to management to act to address the underlying issues (Farrell, 1983).

As a result, voice is seen as active and constructive, whereas neglect is passive and destructive (Brinsfield et al., 2009; Morrison, 2011).

From the mid-1980s to 2000, the focus on voice and silence in organizations grew significantly, leading to the inclusion of several new constructs, such as whistleblowing and organizational citizenship behaviors (Brinsfield et al., 2009).

Researchers have studied the benefits of voice through Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCBs). OCBs are defined as work-related behaviors that are outside formal job requirements, are not recognized through formal reward systems, and do not result in negative consequences if not performed. In this context, the concept of prosocial behaviors becomes central, as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) is widely recognized to be inherently prosocial (Brinsfield et al., 2009; Van Dyne and LePine, 1998).

In the late 1990s, scholars in organizational behavior began to view *voice* not just as a response to unsatisfactory conditions, but also as a valuable form of extra-role behavior, which is way in which employees can exceed the basic requirements of their job. Building on prior research, Van Dyne and LePine (1998) introduced the term voice to the extra-role behavior literature and this conceptualization of voice has influenced much of the empirical research on discretionary voice behavior (Morrison, 2014).

In-role behavior refers to the required or expected behavior that forms the foundation of regular job performance (Katz, 1964), which can result in negative consequences if not met. Conversely, *extra-role behavior* is discretionary and positive, not specified in advance by role prescriptions and neglecting to perform extra-role behavior does not result in adverse consequences. Despite this, supervisors value extra-role behavior (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998).

Moreover, Van Dyne and LePine (1998) shed the light on promotive and prohibitive behaviors. *Promotive behaviors* are proactive and serve to encourage and initiate action, while *prohibitive behaviors* are protective and preventative, involving intervention to

shield those with less power and speaking up to halt unethical or inappropriate conduct. Considering all these factors, Van Dyne and LePine (1998, p. 109), defined voice as “promotive behavior that emphasizes the expression of constructive challenge intended to improve rather than merely criticize” as a distinct form of prosocial behavior. Liang et al (2012, pp. 74-75) further define promotive voice as “employees’ expression of new ideas or suggestions for improving the overall functioning of their work unit or organization”, while prohibitive voice as “employees’ expressions of concern about work practices, incidents, or employee behavior that are harmful to their organization”.

Van Dyne et al. (2003, p. 1360) defined employee voice as “intentionally expressing rather than withholding relevant ideas, information, and opinions about possible work-related improvements”, focusing on the idea of intentionality and work-related improvements.

Advancing with the definition of the constructs of voice and silence, Morrison (2011, p. 375) defined *voice* as the “discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organizational or unit functioning”. This definition has become the prevailing one within the field of Organizational Behavior (OB).

There are three points to consider regarding this conceptualization of voice (Morrison, 2023): *informal* refers to communication that occurs directly, such as face-to-face or via email to a supervisor, rather than through formal channels such as suggestion systems or grievance procedures; *discretionary* implies that this communication is voluntary and unsolicited; and it involves efforts to effect *change, reassess decisions or procedures, or address problems or concerns*.

However, often employees choose silence because expressing their voice is based on their perception of the effectiveness and safety of the act (Morrison, 2011, 2014). Therefore, according to Morrison (2011, p. 377), *silence* is the “conscious withholding of information, suggestions, ideas, questions, or concerns about potentially important work- or organization-related issues from persons who might be able to take action to address those issues”. In fact, silence encompasses situations where employees do not speak up about errors, unfair treatment, or behaviors that violate personal, moral, or legal standards (Knoll and van Dick, 2013; Morrison, 2023).

Those definitions open the debate about two key distinctions: the first is related to whether to consider voice and silence as a single construct; the second concerns the intentions underlying voice and silence behaviors (Mazzei, 2018a). Regarding the first distinction, Van Dyne et al. (2003) distinguished between voice and silence as separate and multidimensional concepts, underlining that the difference between the two concepts lies in the different motivation that drives individuals to speak up or remain silent. Other studies (e.g. Frazier and Bowler, 2009; Morrison, 2011, 2014; Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008) acknowledge that individuals may consciously choose to express their voice or remain silent: this is the position that considers voice and silence as poles of a continuum, therefore as a unique construct.

The second distinction concerns the intention of communication behavior that in literature is distinguished into *prosocial and antisocial* (e.g. Dalton, 2010; Van Dyne et al., 2003). Prosocial behaviors are functional, cooperative and supportive, while antisocial behaviors are dysfunctional and aim to harm others (Dalton, 2010). In both cases, they can be both in-role and extra-role (Van Dyne and Le Pine, 1998), discretionary and voluntary (Mazzei, 2018a). Van Dyne et al. (2003, p. 1371) define prosocial voice as the expression of “work-related ideas, information, or opinions based on cooperative motives” and acquiescent voice as “the verbal expression of work-related ideas, information, or opinions based on feelings of resignation” (p. 1373).

The definitions of prosocial and antisocial intentions are general and may refer to behaviors towards either the company for which the person exercising the voice or silence is working or the company or social group. For this reason, Mazzei (2018) proposes a new conceptualization more specific to organizations by introducing the terms *procompany* and *anticompany*. Voice and silence can then be categorized as procompany or anticompany behaviors: procompany behaviors aim to benefit the organization, while anticompany behaviors seek to damage it.

Procompany voice encompasses the expression of information, ideas, and opinions, upward communication (Morrison, 2011), and whistleblowing (Miceli et al., 2008). Conversely, *anticompany voice* involves expressing information, concerns, and opinions for selfish purposes (Van Dyne et al., 2003).

Procompany silence includes behaviors such as “protecting confidential information and avoiding conflict escalation” (Mazzei, 2018a, p. 24), while *anticompany silence* involves withholding information, suggestions, and opinions that would benefit the organization (Lee et al., 2014; Morrison, 2011).

Wilkinson et al. (2014) conducted field interviews to understand the dimensions of employee voice. They found that voice can take different forms, such as direct or indirect, shared or contested, and can be practiced through face-to-face communication, emails, grievances, or striking. The authors suggest that employee voice has both integrative and distributive dimensions and can occur in various settings, ranging from informal discussions to collective bargaining. Considering this, they defined employee voice as the ways and means through which employees attempt to have a say and potentially influence organizational affairs relating to issues that affect their works and the interests of managers and owners (Wilkinson et al., 2014).

Bashshur and Oc (2014, p. 2) define voice as “the discretionary or formal expression of ideas, opinions, suggestions, or alternative approaches directed to a specific target inside or outside of the organization with the intent to change an objectionable state of affairs and to improve the current functioning of the organization, group, or individual”. According to the authors (2014), this definition of voice serves to address problems, promote change, and foster a constructive environment. It includes extensive research on voice in various literatures, including related concepts such as upward feedback and whistleblowing. This definition emphasizes that the primary outcome of voice should be to change the current status quo.

Over decades, research has made significant progress in expanding the understanding of the impact of voice on individuals and teams. In particular, there have been notable developments in relation to the receptivity of voice and how it affects the speaker, their manager and colleagues (Morrison, 2023).

Table 1 summarizes the definitions of employee voice that were explored in these paragraphs, while definitions of silence will be explored in more detail in Chapter 2.

Table 1. Definitions of voice

Author(s)	Definition
Hirschman (1970, p.30)	Any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge, through appeal to a higher authority with the intention of forcing a change in management, or through various types of actions and protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion
Van Dyne and Le Pine (1998, p.109)	Promotive behavior that emphasizes expression of constructive challenge intended to improve rather than merely criticize. Making innovative suggestions for change and recommending modifications to standard procedures even when other disagree
Van Dyne, Ang, and Botero (2003, p.1360) <i>employee voice</i>	Intentionally expressing rather than withholding relevant ideas, information, and opinions about possible work-related improvements.
Van Dyne, Ang, and Botero (2003, p.1371) <i>prosocial voice</i>	Expressing work-related ideas, information, or opinions based on cooperative motives
Van Dyne, Ang, and Botero (2003, p. 1373) <i>acquiescent voice</i>	The verbal expression of work-related ideas, information, or opinions – based on feelings of resignation
Morrison (2011, p. 375)	Discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organizational or unit functioning
Liang, Fahr, and Fahr (2012, p. 74) <i>promotive voice</i>	Employees' expression of new ideas or suggestions for improving the overall functioning of their work unit or organization
Liang, Fahr, and Fahr (2012, p. 75) <i>prohibitive voice</i>	Employees' expressions of concern about work practices, incidents, or employee behavior that are harmful to their organization
Bashshur and Oc (2014, p. 2)	The discretionary or formal expression of ideas, opinions, suggestions, or alternative approaches directed to a specific target inside or outside of the organization with the intent to change an objectionable state of affairs and to improve the current functioning of the organization, group, or individual
Wilkinson, Donaghey, Dundon and Freeman (2014)	The ways and means through which employees attempt to have a say and potentially influence organizational affairs relating to issues that affect their works and the interests of managers and owners

Source: Own elaboration

1.1.2 A comparative analysis of voice and silence across disciplines

For many years, the issue of employee voice and silence in the workplace has been a matter of discussion among experts in Organizational Behavior (OB), Human Resource Management (HRM), Industrial Relations (IR), and Employer Relations (ER) (Kaufman, 2015; Morrison; 2023; Mowbray et al., 2015; Wilkinson et al., 2019). Although those research disciplines focus on the topic of voice, they differ significantly in their conceptualization and approach. Research on voice remains fragmented and this lack of integration is particularly evident in the fields of IR and OB, hindering the possibility of achieving a comprehensive understanding of employee voice, including its various intentions, dimensions, and manifestations.

OB scholars study the motivations behind the choice of employees to speak up and share their opinions, concerns, work-related information, ideas, or suggestions. Hence voice is viewed as a discretionary behavior that challenges the status quo aimed at bringing constructive change. Organizational behavior research assumes that employees generally desire to speak up about issues they care about, while management should value this voice for its potential to enhance organizational performance and mitigate risks associated with unaddressed concerns or perspectives. The focus is on micro-level factors that encourage or discourage voice, and voice is generally portrayed as an individual-level, proactive behavior (Detert and Burris, 2007; Morrison, 2014; Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2012; Van Dyne and LePine, 1998; Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Industrial Relations (IR) scholars consider employee voice as representing the interests of workers, which are distinct from those of the company. Employees seek voice to influence decisions affecting their daily work and to protect their interests, which may conflict with management priorities. Although employees have a moral right to express their opinions on working conditions, organizations often exert pressure to conform, suppressing dissenting opinions. Consequently, external voice mechanisms, such as unions and whistleblowing provisions, are necessary to defend the rights of individuals to speak up. Therefore, formal institutions like trade unions, collective bargaining, arbitration, works councils, and grievance procedures are seen as crucial in facilitating genuine employee voice (Wilkinson et al., 2019).

The field of Human Resource Management (HRM) incorporates elements from both Industrial Relations (IR) and other sources. In contrast to traditional IR, HRM considers a range of methods for employee representation beyond just labor unions. HRM scholars have also linked the concept of employee voice to broader themes such as employee engagement and the implementation of high-performance work practices. Voice comprises two components: articulating complaints or grievances through channels such as tribunals or unions and involving employees in organizational decision-making through mechanisms like semi-autonomous teams or other participatory structures (Wilkinson et al., 2019).

The three disciplines share an interest in understanding employee voice, however, have taken divergent conceptual pathways, and there has been limited interdisciplinary research, which is needed to better understand the complexities of employee voice in organizations (Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Additionally, Employee Relations (ER) research examines collective structures and systems that enable employee input, while OB research focuses on individual-level acts of speaking up and considers voice to occur through informal interactions with supervisors and co-workers. As a result, ER research tends to emphasize structural factors that enable or inhibit voice, while OB research focuses on identifying individual and micro-contextual factors, such as attitudes, perceptions, supervisor behavior, and team climate and the fact that employees often perceive their input as unwanted or personally risky when considering speaking up (Wilkinson et al., 2019).

The prevailing concept of voice within OB has been criticized by scholars in the IR and ER fields, who argue that employees should not be seen as solely responsible for expressing their concerns. Instead, voice encompasses various mechanisms and opportunities that enable employees to influence decisions affecting them, including formal channels such as unions, arbitration, and grievance procedures, as well as direct meetings between managers and workers (Morrison, 2023).

Empirical research on voice in OB has paid insufficient attention to situations where employees use their voice to promote their own interests, which may conflict with those of management. Furthermore, the impact of formal and collective voice mechanisms on informal voice behavior has largely been overlooked (Morrison, 2023).

Prioritizing the needs and goals of others is an important aspect of discretionary and extra-role behavior in organizations (Morrison, 2011, 2014). Such behavior aims to improve the organization as a whole and bring about positive changes that benefit the collective, rather than providing direct benefits to individual employees. The concept of the collective differs in OB compared to HRM or ER. In OB, the collective refers to the majority of employees whose interests align with the unit or organization, while in HRM/ER, it refers to a group of employees with differing views and attitudes toward management and the organization (Mowbray et al., 2015). The HRM/ER definition of employee voice centers around employees engaging in upward problem-solving within the organization, which aligns closely with the definition given by Morrison (Mowbray et al., 2015).

Although voice in OB is generally seen as an extra-role behavior (Morrison, 2011, 2014), studies have challenged this notion by demonstrating that employees may view voice as an in-role behavior, particularly when they have a strong leader-member exchange relationship with their supervisor and perceive voice as an essential part of their role. Furthermore, employees with a strong duty orientation are more likely to perceive voice as an in-role behavior and engage in it (Mowbray et al., 2015). From an HRM/ER perspective, voice can be viewed as both in-role (e.g. task-based participation and quality circles) and extra-role (e.g. suggestion schemes), and both aspects should be included in the research (Mowbray et al., 2015).

To promote integration in the study of employee voice, it is important to recognize that voice can be analyzed at different levels: macro, meso, and micro. The macro level pertains to the regulatory framework and institutional mechanisms that shape organizational policies related to voice. Scholars in IR typically focus on this level of analysis. The meso level, where much research in HRM occurs, deals with the voice systems that organizations establish and how these systems are used in practice. In contrast, the micro level, which is the focus of OB research, examines individual-level motivators and inhibitors of voice, such as attitudes, dispositions, emotions, and beliefs (Wilkinson et al., 2019).

These levels of analysis complement each other and provide a comprehensive understanding of voice.

Integration can be facilitated by recognizing that IR and OB examine different categories of employees and types of voice messages. IR primarily focuses on lower-status workers expressing grievances and worker interests, while OB investigates a broader range of employees, such as managers and professionals, and their communication of ideas, suggestions, and concerns. Therefore, understanding the boundary conditions of each perspective and identifying areas for integration is crucial.

Building connections between the literature on voice and silence in OB could bridge the gap between IR and HRM, as both acknowledge factors that inhibit employees from speaking up. Strengthening these connections would enhance the understanding of employee voice (Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Bridging the gap between OB, ER, and HRM approaches to voice requires shifting the focus from pro-organizational voice to considering how formal voice channels impact informal voice behavior and cognitive processes (Morrison, 2023; Wilkinson et al., 2020). Recognizing voice as a collective-level behavior that requires group effort is also important (Morrison, 2023).

Previous attempts to integrate OB and ER/HRM voice literature have been limited, but the few empirical studies conducted emphasize the significance of formal voice channels and collective mechanisms in studying informal voice behavior (Bashshur and Oc, 2015; Mowbray et al., 2015). Overcoming disciplinary boundaries and adopting a more comprehensive and integrated approach will contribute to advancing the knowledge of employee voice (Morrison, 2023).

1.1.3 Employee Communication Behavior

Employees are considered crucial strategic actors who often act as representatives when interacting with people outside the organization (Kim and Rhee, 2011) such as friends or family members, and these conversations, known as employee communication behaviors (ECB), are being recognized as strategic by scholars and practitioners (Lee, 2020).

Scholars in the fields of public relations, organizational communication, and management recognize employee opinion as a valuable corporate asset that can significantly influence stakeholder relations and either enhance or damage the reputation of a company.

Consequently, research emphasizes the strategic importance of information sharing between employees, distinguishing between positive ECB (sharing company strengths) and negative ECB (sharing company weaknesses) (Lee, 2020).

While carrying out their work tasks, individuals actively seek, analyze, interpret, and disseminate information and knowledge. They express favorable viewpoints or offer critiques regarding their company and its management. Additionally, they share, safeguard, or reveal valuable information (Mazzei, 2018a). ECBs have a direct impact on the internal dynamics and on the perception that employees have of the organization, which makes them an important part of employee communication.

In contemporary organizational research, employee communication is increasingly viewed within a resource-based framework that goes beyond the traditional system-oriented view that locates communication strictly within the boundaries of the company (Mazzei 2010, 2014, 2025). This view, rooted in resource-based theory (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1996; Teece and Pisano, 1994), assumes that competitive advantage arises from intangible and firm-specific resources that are embedded in social relationships and shaped by communicative behavior (Coleman, 1988; Nonaka, 1991).

From a communicative point of view, it is possible to benefit from the adoption of a constitutive approach to communication, in order to better interpret this resource-based view of employee communication. This approach highlights that communication is not just instrumental, but constitutive: it is the process through which organizational roles, practices, and structures are enacted and reconstituted (Cooren et al., 2013; Putnam and Nicotera, 2009). This constitutive orientation emphasizes that interpretation of meanings and social interaction are central to the organization itself (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Craig, 1999).

Employee communication behaviors that support organizational goals emerge not through control or prescriptions, but through empowerment strategies that create conditions encouraging supportive attitudes and behaviors (Mazzei, 2014). This approach relies on building long-term, high-quality relationships characterized by satisfaction, trust, commitment, and mutual monitoring (Mazzei, 2025), maintained through inclusive employee relations, developmental human resource management, and fair organizational justice practices (Mazzei et al., 2019).

In this framework, employee communication is conceptualized as a series of interactive processes aimed at generating catalytic resources, knowledge and engagement that support organizational functioning (Mazzei, 2025). This shift transforms communication from a top-down transmission function into a distributed, enabling force driven by professional competencies of employees, behavioral intentions, and active participation (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2017). Organizations are therefore called to prioritize communication practices supporting information pull activities, employee-generated content, and strategic human resource management that promotes organizational well-being, professional development, and trust-based relationships (Mazzei, 2014; Grunig et al., 2002; Ki and Hon, 2007).

Communication professionals play a critical role in this enablement process by helping employees understand stakeholder expectations, providing training and creating the necessary communication conditions (Zerfass and Franke, 2013; Heide and Simonsson, 2011). They create holistic employee experiences that shape both perceptions and behaviors (Men, 2021; Men and Bowen, 2017).

These employee communication behaviors are strategically significant as employees often act as organizational representatives in external interactions with friends, family, and other stakeholders (Kim and Rhee, 2011; Lee, 2020). Through information seeking, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination, employees express favorable viewpoints or critiques about their company, sharing or protecting valuable information that can enhance or damage corporate reputation (Mazzei, 2018a; Lee, 2020). Enabled employees contribute to knowledge creation, stakeholder engagement, brand communication, and reputation building, while enablement strategies effectively balance desired communication behaviors with the avoidance of ineffective control mechanisms (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2017; Mazzei, 2025). These behaviors contribute to emerging ideas, suggestions, and concerns (Kassing et al., 2012; Morrison, 2011, 2014), creating and disseminating organizational value through enhanced intellectual and social capital (Mazzei, 2010).

The literature on employee communication behaviors has introduced several key concepts (Mazzei, 2025). These include “active communication behavior” (Mazzei, 2010), the relational nature of intangible resources that create a competitive advantage (Mazzei, 2010), “employee communicative actions” (Kim and Rhee, 2011), the post-bureaucratic

nature of modern organizations (Heide and Simonsson, 2011); the emergence of the communicative organization (Zerfass and Franke, 2013), “co-workers’ communicative role” (Heide and Simonsson, 2011), “employees functioning as both senders and receivers during crisis situations” (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011), and the rise of a more connected, digital and transparent world (Men, 2021)

Heide and Simonsson (2011) studied the role of co-workers as active individuals who construct messages, critically interpret information, and influence colleagues, managers, and customers. According to their perspective, employees play an active communication role, encompassing both internal and external aspects of communication. The authors emphasize the importance of providing training to co-workers to enhance their ability to influence upwards and encourage them to take a more active role in communicating with their managers.

Employees are then recognized as informal information gatherers and disseminators within the organization. In crisis communication, employees play an active role not only as receivers but also as senders of information (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011). As internal stakeholders, they have a profound connection with the organization, being in closer proximity to it. Hence, they can proactively engage in crisis situations, where their voices interact, compete, collaborate, or negotiate with other corporate and non-corporate voices. In fact, employees discuss their feelings and attitudes towards their workplace with colleagues, family, and friends during a crisis. Furthermore, some employees may even provide interviews or statements to the media or express their opinions through social media platforms. The impact of their actions, whether as negative or positive ambassadors, can be significantly influential on an organization during a crisis (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011).

During crises, they can act as advocates for the organization when engaging with external stakeholders. Hence, ECB is recognized by scholars and practitioners as a phenomenon with strategic importance for organizations (Kim and Rhee, 2011). Employees with positive relationships are more inclined to engage in communicative actions promoting *strategic opportunities* while reducing *strategic threats*. This means that these employees are likely to actively choose and share information about the positive aspects of their organization during their regular interactions with other important stakeholders. This phenomenon is known as the *positive megaphoning effect*. Furthermore, employees with

good relationships are more willing to voluntarily seek out, process, and share information about potential organizational problems (strategic threats). They are also adept at identifying and circulating information that supports the interests and objectives of the organization (strategic opportunities). Therefore, when employees have positive relationships, they tend to communicate in ways that amplify positive aspects of their organization and mitigate potential threats. They actively seek and share information that is beneficial to the organization, both in terms of addressing challenges and capitalizing on opportunities (Kim and Rhee, 2011).

A wide range of studies examines employee communication behaviors. Mazzei (2018) reports that these studies cover various aspects, including *exit*, *voice*, *loyalty* (Hirschmann, 1970), *neglect* (Farrell, 1983), focusing on employee behaviors when they are dissatisfied with their jobs. Additionally, distinctions are made between *active vs passive* and *constructive vs destructive voice* (Gorden, 1988); *proactive organizational behavior* (Crant, 2000; Grant and Ashford, 2008); *organizational citizenship behavior* (Mayer and Gavin, 2005); *quiescent and acquiescent silence* (Pinder and Harlos, 2001); *prosocial, defensive, and acquiescent voice and silence* (Van Dyne et al., 2003); *megaphoning* (Kim and Rhee, 2011); *dissent* (Kassing et al., 2012; Zaini et al., 2017); *formal vs informal voice, prosocial voice vs justice-oriented voice, anonymous voice vs identified voice* (Klaas et al., 2012; Ravazzani and Mazzei, 2017); and *prosocial voice and silence* (Morrison, 2011, 2014).

These aspects of employee communication behavior are analyzed in the following sections and provide insights for companies seeking to develop effective communication practices.

1.1.4 Employee dissent: Voices of disagreement in the workplace

After examining employee voice and silence as fundamental communication behaviors, attention now turns to a particular form of voice that has attracted considerable scholarly interest: employee dissent. Dissent refers to employees expressing disagreement, resistance, or objections to organizational policies, practices, decisions, or actions by

challenging established norms and the status quo (de Ruiter et al., 2015; Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007).

The concept of Principled Organizational Dissent (POD) emerged in the mid-1980s through the work of Graham (1986), building on earlier research that focused primarily on whistleblowing, which is the expression of dissent to external media or governing bodies on matters of principle. POD refers to the conscientious objection to legal or social norms within organizations and includes six different forms: two that involve silence (stay quiet or leave quietly) and four voice-based approaches that depend on whether employees stay in or leave the organization and whether they use internal or external channels for expression. Essentially, employees who are dissatisfied with workplace conditions can express their disagreement through dissent, by speaking out against organizational policies and practices (Kassing, 1997, 1998).

Employee dissent represents the primary response to events that trigger dissatisfaction in the workplace. There are different forms based on different personal, interpersonal, and organizational factors that make upward expression difficult or risky (Kassing and Armstrong, 2002). Kassing (1997) has distinguished three types of dissent based on the direction of communication: upward dissent (direct communication to influential members), lateral dissent (communication to ineffective audiences such as colleagues), and displaced dissent (external communication to friends or family or via social media). This perspective emphasizes dissent as a highly personal act that requires employees to evaluate their position in the organization (Kassing, 2008).

As anticipated, a key theme related to the concept of dissent is that of whistleblowing. Near and Miceli (1985, p. 4) define whistleblowing as “the disclosure by organizational members (former or current) of illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action”. This definition specifies that whistleblowing involves voluntarily reporting serious bad practices that are illegal, immoral, or illegitimate within or outside the organization (Miceli et al., 2008).

Whistleblowing is a challenging form of communication that requires special attention, as it involves expressing dissent after observing serious misconduct that violates ethical codes, organizational rules, or laws, and it is considered an act of dissent that touches on

issues such as freedom of expression, organizational resistance, and ethical dilemmas (Mazzei, 2015).

LePine and Van Dyne (1998) argue that voice and whistleblowing are distinct concepts. While whistleblowing is critical and aims to prevent negative activity, voice seeks to promote positive change. Furthermore, whistleblowing involves an ethical dimension related to serious transgressions, whereas employee voice is mainly concerned with expressing work-related ideas and opinions (Brinsfield et al., 2009). Thus, the two concepts differ in purpose, tone, and ethical implications.

According to Miceli and Near (2005), situational factors, such as the nature of the perceived misconduct and corporate culture, have a greater influence on whistleblowing than personal characteristics such as gender, age, and tenure. Employees are more likely to report when they perceive misconduct as significant and believe they can address it effectively. This aligns with the findings of Brinsfield et al. (2009) that whistleblowing is influenced by both the perceived seriousness of the misconduct and the likelihood of making a difference.

Whistleblowing can benefit companies by enabling early detection and resolution of harmful practices or preventing legal disputes when serious incidents are reported promptly. However, poorly managed or ignored reports can cause lasting organizational damage and reinforce negative practices (Mazzei, 2015).

Organizations should therefore prioritize effective whistleblowing management through systems that provide employees with direct, transparent internal and external reporting channels. This approach fosters a culture of trust and accountability where employees feel safe to raise concerns without fear of retaliation. Effective whistleblowing systems include both external and internal reporting mechanisms and emphasize the importance of structured internal programs that protect the entire reporting process and facilitate the resolution of critical issues (Mazzei, 2015; Morrison, 2014). Research shows that the most effective whistleblowing systems are those that aim to handle reports internally with management support, rather than those mandated by law and focus on facilitating external reports (Mazzei, 2015).

Although whistleblowing is a specific form of dissent triggered by serious misconduct, it illustrates the broader complexity of dissenting behaviors in organizational contexts.

Understanding these forms of dissent is critical for organizations seeking to balance employee voice with operational effectiveness. The complex relationships among voice, silence, and dissent, as well as the conditions that encourage or inhibit these behaviors, require deeper theoretical and empirical investigation.

Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive literature review of employee dissent and examines these theoretical developments and their organizational implications in detail, with particular attention to the mechanisms and contexts that shape dissenting behavior in modern workplaces.

1.2 Influencing factors and consequences of voice and silence

The topic of employee voice concerns the decisions of an individual to share or withhold important information, ideas, or concerns that could impact organizational results. Existing literature suggests that voice is a cooperative behavior intended to improve organizational performance and drive positive change, reflecting underlying prosocial motives. However, employees may choose to remain silent when other factors outweigh their motivation for improvement. This decision-making process involves weighing potential positive and negative consequences while maintaining a desire to behave prosocially and improve organizational performance (Morrison, 2011), although the impact may differ. To effectively raise concerns or remain silent, employees first need to recognize issues or have relevant ideas and information to share (Morrison, 2014).

While it is difficult to create a universal model that captures all the factors that influence employee voice and silence, previous research has proposed several models that help explain these behaviors. The following paragraphs will look at the factors that influence voice and silence in the workplace, focusing on these models that have attempted to integrate the multiple factors that play a role in these phenomena.

1.2.1 Factors influencing voice and silence

Much of the research on voice behavior in the workplace has focused primarily on identifying the factors that influence the extent to which employees speak up or choose

to remain silent. It is therefore crucial to distinguish between the factors that influence voice and silence, while looking for points of contact between the two concepts.

Voice

Concerning employee voice, the factors influencing these behaviors span from contextual to individual ones and can be classified into individual characteristics, attitudes and emotions, leadership style behavior and personality, and relational and contextual factors (Morrison, 2011, 2014, 2023).

Individual characteristics

Personal dispositions explain variations in employee voice behavior, such as personal initiative, extraversion, proactive personality, and conscientiousness and play a role in predicting those voicing behaviors (Chamberlin et al. 2017, Morrison 2014). *Personal initiative* refers to an individual tendency to act, that when is high is likely to make employees speak up and suggest new ideas. *Extraversion* is characterized by sociability, and it is linked to voice behavior as extroverts may be more comfortable with interpersonal communication and more willing to speak up in group settings. *Proactive personality* encompasses traits such as initiative, persistence, and a future-oriented mindset: it emerges as a strong predictor of voice behavior since proactive individuals are more likely to identify problems and opportunities for improvement, and they are more willing to take action to address these issues. *Conscientiousness* is characterized by being responsible, organized, and dependable, and it is associated with being more likely to make individuals voice their opinions if they believe that it is their responsibility to do so, and if they are confident in their ability to contribute to the organization (Morrison, 2014).

Individuals with high core self-evaluations have greater personal control and approach motivation, which both contribute to voice behavior. When people take personal initiative, they also develop a stronger sense of responsibility for implementing change. In a psychologically safe environment, this sense of responsibility increases the likelihood of expressing opinions or voicing concerns (Morrison, 2023). This supports the idea that employees are more inclined to speak up when they believe it is both safe and effective to do so (Morrison, 2014).

Research has also shown gender discrepancies in speaking up (Morrison, 2011, 2023), which require careful consideration and considering the specific contexts and issues. Morrison (2023) reports three studies related to this concept: Yan et al. (2022) discovered that women are more likely to experience lower self-efficacy in vocalizing their opinions than men, which may hinder their willingness to speak up; Eibl et al. (2020) found that women reported lower self-efficacy and therefore spoke up less frequently than men, but only in situations where supportive leadership was absent; Sherf et al. (2017) demonstrated that men are less likely to express their views on gender parity issues due to lower psychological confidence in such topics.

Attitudes and emotions

The importance of workplace attitudes toward one's job and organization has been a continuous focus in the voice literature. Negative emotions like fear and anger can affect whether employees speak up or remain silent. Fear can make employees withhold their voice, while anger may lead to whistleblowing and motivate employees to act and speak up (Morrison, 2014).

When an employee is faced with the decision of whether to speak up, they are likely considering the potential positive impact on their colleagues, as well as the potential personal benefits. This dual consideration of prosocial motivations is particularly important, as employees may be motivated to improve the overall situation to seek restitution for themselves (Klaas et al., 2012).

Morrison (2023) recalls a study by Ng et al. (2014), which affirms that employees are more likely to exhibit a constructive voice when they believe that their organization has fulfilled its promises. Moreover, research has shown that an individual perception of their job and how well they fit into the organization can affect their tendency to speak up and share their thoughts. For example, in cases of person-job mismatch, employees may be less likely to engage in proactive communication, unless they also feel a strong alignment between their personal values and the overall values and culture of the organization (person-organization fit).

Hence, employees are more likely to engage in voice behavior if they feel a sense of belonging and connection to their organization (Morrison, 2023). In fact, Heaphy et al. (2021) found that when employees experience prosocial emotions such as empathic

concern, empathic anger, or guilt in response to the suffering of another person, they are more likely to voice their opinions.

Leadership style behavior and personality

Studies in the voice literature have consistently shown the importance of supervisors in influencing employee voice. There is evidence to suggest that various styles of leadership, such as ethical and moral leadership, empowering leadership, transformational leadership, servant leadership, benevolent leadership, ambidextrous leadership, and authentic leadership, can all have a positive effect on employee voice (Morrison, 2023). Conversely, authoritarian leadership has been found to have a negative effect on employee voice (Morrison, 2023).

The relationship between leadership and voice is complex, and gaining a clear understanding proves challenging due to the numerous intervening variables and contextual factors that have been identified.

Research examined in Morrison (2023) review has shown that voice behavior is more pronounced when supervisors exhibit helping behaviors, which increases employee self-efficacy (Hu et al., 2018), and when they are responsive to input, especially for employees with high self-efficacy (Janssen and Gao, 2015). In addition, Weiss et al. (2018) found that the use of leaders of inclusive language increased the likelihood of voice behavior among employees. Furthermore, in addition to the managerial style and behavior, their dispositional characteristics also have an impact on voice behavior. Positive links have been observed between voice behavior and leader humility, integrity, learning goal orientation, and personal control (via voice solicitation). Conversely, negative associations have been reported between voice and leader narcissism (Helfrich and Dietl, 2019; Huang et al., 2019). In addition, the emotional state of the leader plays an important role in motivating and empowering employees to speak up.

Relational and contextual factors

Contextual factors significantly influence how easily employees can speak up, determining whether voicing concerns is encouraged or accepted within their organization or work group (Morrison, 2011).

Organizational context plays an important role in shaping employee voice behavior. Research has shown that employees use cues from their work context to determine whether or not it is a favorable environment for speaking up, and this can have a significant effect on how often they voice their opinions and concerns (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). Pinder and Harlos (2001) underlined that certain organizational settings create an atmosphere of intimidation and fear, which in turn dissuades employees from speaking up and seeking remedy. They underline the importance of cultivating a safe and supportive work environment that encourages open communication and empowers individuals to address issues of mistreatment and inequality. Also *perceived organizational support*, which reflects how much the organization values employees and cares about their well-being, can influence voice behavior (Ashford et al., 1998).

The *formal organizational structure* plays a crucial role in facilitating upward communication. Low bureaucracy and formal mechanisms make individuals more likely to voice their opinions. This is in line with the idea that individuals are more likely to voice their opinions when they perceive it as easy and when they believe that their input will be taken into consideration (Morrison, 2011).

Research has highlighted the importance of *hierarchy* in the upward communication process: when a hierarchical structure is introduced into a group, employees become less likely to voice their opinions to those in higher positions. Furthermore, individuals are often reluctant to share negative information with people of higher status (Morrison, 2011).

Organizational culture influences voice behavior. According to Dutton et al. (1997, 2001), employees are more likely to feel comfortable voicing their opinions when the organizational culture is supportive and top management is willing to listen. Conversely, when the culture is conservative, exclusive, or unsupportive, employees may feel discouraged from speaking up. Also Milliken et al. (2003) discovered that individuals often refrain from speaking up about their concerns due to the perception that the organizational culture or structure does not encourage upward communication. This decision is influenced by the context in which they find themselves, which can impact both upward communication and communication within work groups.

There are also cross-level theories in the literature that simultaneously consider the individual and group-related effects of voice and silence. Individuals are more likely to engage in voice behavior when they perceive a favorable *voice climate* within their work group, characterized by shared beliefs that it is safe and worthwhile to express suggestions, opinions, and concerns (Morrison, 2011).

Several studies explored by Morrison (2023) have investigated the impact of relationships and cues from coworkers on employee motivation to voice their opinions. Ng et al. (2021) found that employees who perceive respect from their coworkers tend to have stronger control beliefs, a positive mood, and higher motivation to express their thoughts. Similarly, Xie et al. (2015) discovered that when colleagues provide support, employees feel a greater sense of responsibility for positive change, which encourages them to voice their ideas. In addition, Subhakaran and Dyrum (2018) demonstrated that employees are more likely to feel psychologically safe and comfortable voicing their opinions when their managers display supportive behaviors and their coworkers engage in open communication.

A study conducted by Venkataramani et al. (2016) sheds light on the impact of relationships on an individual tendency to express their opinions. The study reveals that employees are more likely to voice their thoughts when they occupy a central position in their team's workflow network. This effect is further amplified when the team leader also holds a central position in the team's friendship network (Morrison, 2023).

Finally, some studies (e.g. Chan, 2020; Kwon and Farndale, 2020) stress the importance of investigating the national cultural context within which each company operates and analyzing the macro variables that impact the decision of employees to express their voice or remain silent. At the cultural level, it is appropriate to refer to the necessary change of the corporate culture and to the change in the style of leadership and management to understand how the climate of voice is promoted (e.g. Ejaz et al., 2022; Hao et al., 2022; Karabay et al., 2018; Zeng and Xu, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020).

Silence

The debate regarding the conceptualization of silence and voice as either opposite ends of the same continuum or distinct behaviors persists. This leads to the question of whether it is possible to make inferences about the predictors of silence based on studies of

predictors of voice (Morrison, 2023). Conceptually, these two constructs are at opposite ends of the same continuum, a perspective supported by research showing that both voice and silence function through similar underlying judgments (Morrison, 2014). Furthermore, in many studies, the term *voice* could easily be replaced with *silence*, and the logic and expected impacts would remain the same, albeit in the opposite direction (Morrison, 2023).

In light of these considerations, Morrison (2023) highlights a set of factors influencing silence, namely leader behaviors, work context, and individual-level predictors.

Leader behaviors

Research has repeatedly shown that positive forms of leadership can promote employee voice, while negative forms of leadership tend to favor silence. Abusive supervision, for example, is strongly associated with silence, although this link is often explained by factors such as emotional exhaustion and psychological distress (Morrison, 2023).

Other factors that have been found to increase employee silence include manager narcissism and knowledge hiding, leading to less trust and higher disengagement. Conversely, positive forms of leadership have been shown to encourage employee voice (Morrison, 2023). Hence, leadership plays a critical role in shaping employee behavior and promoting positive leadership behaviors can be an effective strategy for fostering greater employee engagement and voice.

Work context

Morrison and Milliken (2000) argued that silence could pervade an organization, indicating widespread beliefs that expressing concerns about certain matters is pointless or risky, resulting in a *climate of silence*. Managers who view employees as self-interested and poorly informed, and who are afraid of negative feedback, tend to exhibit behaviors and establish systems such as centralized decision-making that discourage employees from speaking up (Morrison, 2011).

When employees receive mixed messages about the prestige and support of the organization, they experience ambivalent identification, leading to increased levels of silence (Mignonac et al., 2018). Knoll et al. (2021) examined a complex set of contextual factors and collective-level beliefs that influence silence in the workplace.

Knoll and Redman (2016) found that employees who utilized formal mechanisms of voice, such as message forums, suggestion boxes, and meetings, reported a higher frequency of informal promotive voice. However, the same employees were also found to have a greater inclination to remain silent about issues that they believed could potentially disrupt group harmony. While employees may share beneficial suggestions, they may also withhold input that could be perceived as disruptive (Morrison, 2023).

Finally, when employees feel that they are treated fairly, they are more likely to feel valued by the organization and provide valuable information. Conversely, when exposed to unfair situations, employees lose confidence in their organization, causing them to withhold their suggestions and innovative ideas. Employee silence is one of the ways that individuals respond to perceived injustice in organizations (Pinder and Harlos, 2001).

The level of social support available to employees may influence their tendency toward silence. Research demonstrates that social support strengthens individual psychological resources, while empirical studies show that when employees perceive greater support from family members, supervisors, and colleagues, they are less likely to remain silent in workplace situations (Chen, 2018; Zhang et al., 2019).

Individual-level factors

In general, research on individual-level factors that lead to silence has been less extensive compared to research on individual-level factors that lead to speaking out. Nonetheless, there is evidence indicating that emotions can play a role in predicting silence (Morrison, 2023).

Silence in the workplace can often be attributed to automatic processes that occur without conscious consideration of the costs and benefits. This is especially evident in situations where employees are experiencing high levels of fear, as intense negative emotions such as depression, disappointment, or dejection can hinder systematic processing (Morrison, 2014, 2023) and make people remain silent (Morrison, 2023).

Additional research has explored the impact of individual-level factors on specific populations. Various socio-demographic factors that cause disadvantage, such as being female, having a lower level of education, depending on others, experiencing recent unemployment, and lacking a robust social network, may be predictors of silence (Morrison, 2023).

This section refers the reader to Chapter 2 for a more detailed analysis of the factors that influence silent behavior.

1.2.2 Impacts of voice and silence

This section examines the main effects of employee voice and silence on employees and the organization.

Voice

This paragraph illustrates the most prominent effects of voice, which include supervisor response, performance evaluation, other employee-level effects, effects on supervisors and coworkers, and team-level effects (Morrison, 2023).

Supervisor response

According to Morrison (2023), the disposition of a leader can significantly impact the way employees react to their voice. Managers are more likely to disregard voiced input when they are feeling mentally drained, which results in reduced cognitive processing of the message.

The characteristics of the voicer also play a role. Howell et al. (2015) discovered that supervisors are more likely to acknowledge and credit voiced input from employees with high ascribed or achieved status, which may be signaled by demographic variables, such as majority ethnicity, or by the individual prominence in informal social structures. This research implies that even if lower-status employees speak up more, they may not be able to counterbalance the negative influence of demographics on voice recognition.

Research suggests that the gender of an employee can have an impact on how their supervisors respond to their ideas. Specifically, studies have shown that when a female member is part of a mostly male team, their input is more likely to be acted upon than that of a male member in an all-male team (Morrison, 2023). Additionally, the likelihood that the voice of a female employee is taken into consideration is higher if the team leader has positive beliefs about abilities of women in the workplace (Morrison, 2023).

Moreover, managers who have a high social comparison orientation tend to respond more favorably to opposite-gender voices, while those with a low social comparison orientation

respond more positively to same-gender voices (Guarana et al. 2017). The type of voice used by female employees also appears to have an impact on how their ideas are received (McClean et al., 2021). Women who use an agentic voice (i.e., a voice that goes against gender stereotypes) are seen as more competent than those who use a communal voice. This, in turn, increases the likelihood that their ideas will be supported by their supervisors.

Performance evaluation

Dynamics of voice and silence of employees can impact company results in terms of brand loyalty, brand value, customer satisfaction and profitability of the company (Mazzei, 2015). In reference to the holistic model of the antecedents of the communication behaviors of collaborators in support of the brand (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015) such types of behavior can generate brand outcomes such as positive word of mouth and brand equity.

Previous research has shown that the willingness of employees to speak up has a significant impact on their performance evaluation, although this relationship depends on several contextual factors that can strengthen or weaken the connection. Building on this idea, Huang et al. (2018) proposed that the frequency and type of vocalization need to be taken into account. Their study found that employees who engaged in moderate levels of prohibitive voice received higher ratings of promotability, with a downturn in high-frequency vocalization more likely when the quality of their leader-member exchange (LMX) was low. In contrast, the use of promotive voice did not significantly relate to ratings of promotability. Moreover, a meta-analysis by Chamberlin et al. (2017) reported that prohibitive voice has a weaker association with job performance ratings than promotive voice, and that the impact of prohibitive voice on performance ratings becomes negative when task performance is controlled for (Morrison, 2023).

Other employee-level effects

At the individual level, the possible results for the employee are positive when they bring a greater perception of control of the work situation and a better attitude towards their work, recognition, appreciation, and a better personal image. Negative effects such as payback, social isolation, negative performance ratings, salary decrease and reputation loss are also possible (Mazzei, 2015; Morrison, 2011). Presumably, the propensity

towards positivity or negativity depends on the degree of similarity with which collaborators and managers perceive and evaluate the voice (Mazzei, 2015). Rallmann et al. (2021) found that having a voice can positively affect individual vigor but may also lead to increased fatigue when job insecurity is high (Morrison, 2023).

An individual voice can impact themselves and also their coworkers indirectly (Morrison, 2023). Previous research has demonstrated that voice can serve as a means of transmitting the effects of leadership style on various employee-level outcomes.

Effects on supervisors and coworkers

The average level of voice from members of a workgroup, known as group promotive voice, is positively evaluated by supervisors (Sessions et al., 2020). This, in turn, reduces the emotional exhaustion of the supervisor. However, group prohibitive voice was appraised negatively, leading to an increase in emotional exhaustion for supervisors, particularly those with a low sense of power.

Promoting ethical behavior in the workplace through promotive voice enhanced coworkers moral elevation, which resulted in verbal support for the voice behavior. Conversely, prohibitive ethical voice resulted in mixed coworker emotions. It sometimes elicited feelings of threat, which reduced coworker support, but it also sometimes enhanced moral elevation, which increased support (Morrison, 2023).

Team-level effects

At the team level, there is growing evidence that team voice has a positive impact on innovation, and several studies have identified different mechanisms and moderators that explain this relationship (Morrison, 2023). Research indicates that groups and organizations perform better when employees are encouraged to share their ideas and concerns, as this can lead to suggestions for improvement and more informed decision-making (Detert et al., 2013; Nemeth et al., 2001). Conversely, a high level of silence can lead to a decrease in performance (Perlow and Williams, 2003). However, it is important to note that there may be a point at which the positive effects of employee voice on unit-level performance begin to diminish.

Team voice enhances innovation by promoting the willingness to discuss ideas, especially when resources are substantial. Li et al. (2017) demonstrate a strong link between promotive voice and team productivity gains, which is mediated by team innovation.

They also found that prohibitive voice can contribute to improvements in team safety performance through team monitoring. Lastly, Li and Tangirala (2022) discovered that prohibitive voice is beneficial during the disruption phase of discontinuous change by enabling error management and reducing performance losses, while promotive voice enhances performance gains during the recovery phase (Morrison, 2023).

Voice and silence also affect the quality of the internal working climate: the theme is also more extensively linked to freedom of expression and speech (e.g. Zhan, 2020) and diversity management (e.g. Kwon and Farndale, 2020; Syed, 2014). The focus turns out to be the integration of diversity and the openness of corporate culture towards a climate of voice of all, to avoid the silence of minorities and the “missing voices” (Syed, 2014).

Silence

Despite the widespread recognition of the negative consequences of employee silence, empirical research on its individual and organizational effects remains limited. Existing studies indicate that silence can lead to negative emotional outcomes, such as anger, fear, and burnout. Research has shown reciprocal relationships between silence and burnout, as well as between abusive supervision, fear, and silence. Research has highlighted the dysfunctional effects of silence, demonstrating its impact on the relationship between authoritarian leadership and reduced creativity, as well as its role in the negative relationship between psychological contract breach and job satisfaction (Morrison, 2023).

Silence in organizational settings has profound consequences, affecting both individuals and the organization. Research indicates that voice plays a crucial role in organizational learning, facilitating the identification and rectification of unethical and illegal practices (Schlosser and Zolin, 2012). Conversely, silence hampers these vital processes and contributes to individual employees feeling disempowered and less content with their work environment (Milliken and Morrison, 2003).

Research shows that the reluctance of employees to voice concerns about work-related issues leads to significant consequences for both individuals and the organization (Brinsfield, 2012). These consequences include reduced innovation, overlooking ethical transgressions, heightened stress and depression, as well as diminished commitment and job satisfaction (Vakola and Bouradas, 2005; Brinsfield, 2012).

At the individual level, there may be psychological costs of silence (Perlow and Williams, 2003). When employees feel they cannot speak up, they may experience humiliation, especially when they have valuable contributions or concern they cannot express. Persistent silence can lead to deep-seated anger and resentment. Employees may become frustrated with both their inability to speak out and the organizational culture that enforces this silence (Perlow and Williams, 2003).

Employee silence can also affect interpersonal interactions (Perlow and Williams, 2003). The negative emotions resulting from silence can influence daily interactions, making them less effective and more strained. Moreover, when employees do not feel free to express their ideas or concerns, creativity is stifled. The lack of open communication can lead to a decline in productivity, as issues remain unaddressed and innovative ideas go unheard (Perlow and Williams, 2003).

Hence, silence can have a significant impact on employee well-being, job attitudes, and performance.

As discussed in the conceptualization of voice and silence, not all forms of employee silence are detrimental. One example is procompany silence, where information is intentionally withheld to protect the interests of the company, e.g. to protect confidential or potentially damaging information, avoid negative word of mouth and prevent internal conflict. Employees can engage in this form of silence if they are committed to and engaged with the organization and see their actions as a way to ensure the stability and long-term success of the organization. This form of silence can lead to several positive outcomes: it can help preserve the reputation of the company, maintain the trust of customers and stakeholders, and protect sensitive operations, especially in competitive or highly regulated environments.

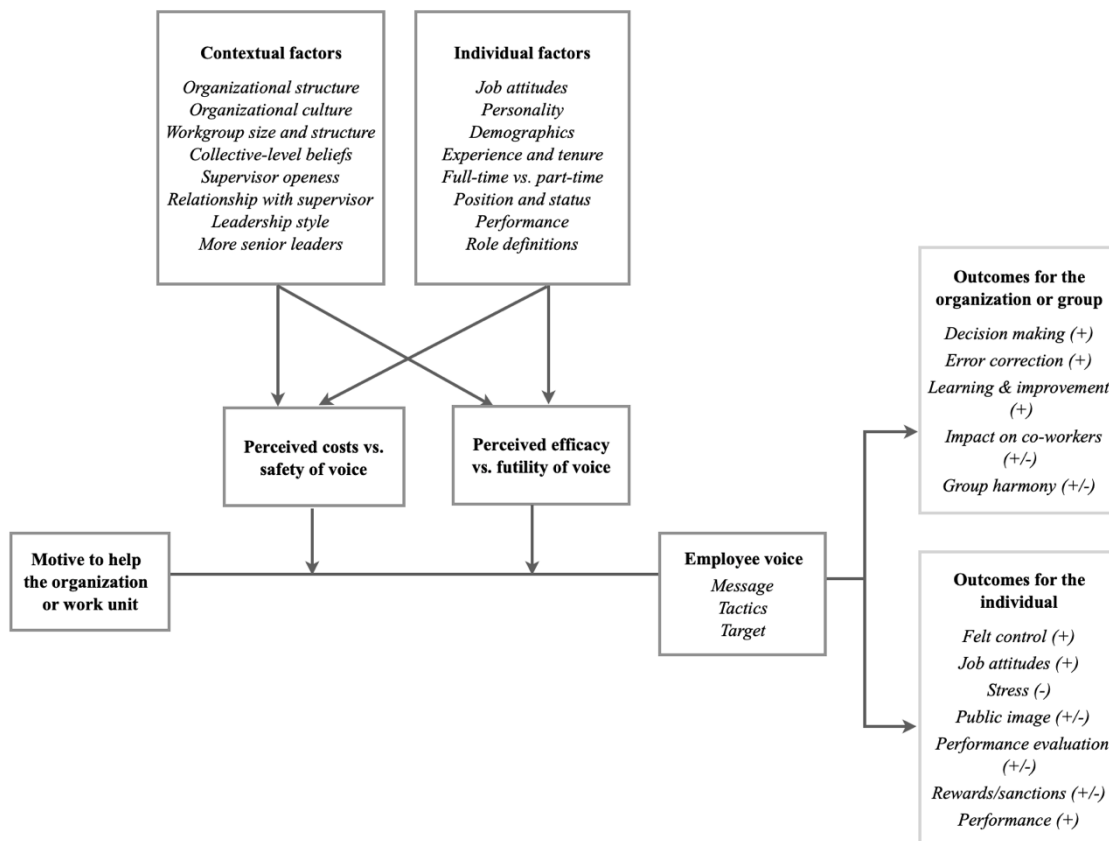
In Chapter 2, an extended analysis of the outcomes of employee silence will be presented using the model proposed by Hao et al. (2022). This model provides a systematic framework for understanding and categorizing the various consequences of employee silence in the workplace. By delving deeper into the examination of outcomes, the model seeks to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of silence on individuals and organizations.

1.2.3 A model of employee voice

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, when a collaborator feels the need to speak up, a series of contextual and individual factors intervene (Morrison, 2011), influencing the person to express his or her voice or to choose silence.

Figure 2 illustrates a model on employee voice developed by Morrison in 2011.

Figure 2. A model of employee voice



Source: own reproduction from Morrison, 2011

The main concern regarding employee voice is the reason why employees choose to speak up or remain silent when it comes to sharing valuable information, ideas, or concerns for the benefit of the organization. In the model presented in Figure 2, Morrison (2011) identifies a range of contextual and individual factors that underlie the decisions of a person to share their voice. These factors have been extensively discussed in the preceding paragraphs. With regards to contextual factors, they encompass organizational structure, organizational culture, workgroup size and structure, collective-level beliefs,

supervisor openness, relationship with supervisor, leadership style, and more senior leaders. On the other hand, individual factors include job attitudes, personality, demographics, experience, and tenure, full-time vs. part-time, position and status, performance, and role definitions.

The literature on employee voice assumes that this behavior is intended to be constructive and prosocial, meaning that the reason for speaking up is to enhance the performance of the work unit or organization and make a positive impact on the collective (Ashford et al., 2009; Grant and Ashford, 2008; Morrison, 2011; Van Dyne et al., 2003). When employees choose to remain silent, they often still have a desire to create positive change, but other competing motivations take precedence and prevent them from speaking up.

In addition to emphasizing organizational benefit as the primary motivation for employee voice, the literature highlights that the decision to speak up is a deliberate process that weighs both positive and negative consequences. This involves two key outcome-related considerations. First, individuals assess whether speaking up is likely to be effective, known as the *perceived efficacy of voice*. Second, they evaluate the potential risks or negative outcomes associated with speaking up, referred to as the *perceived safety of voice* (Morrison, 2011).

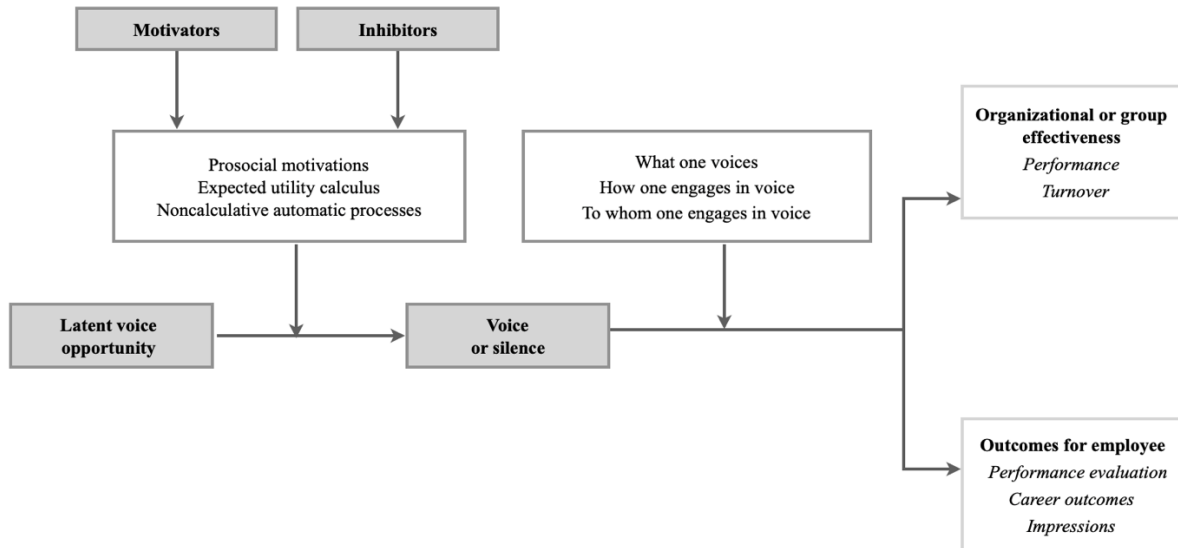
Regarding the outcomes of the model, voice provides significant advantages for organizations and work groups. Employee voice leads to better decision-making through error correction and learning opportunities, while also fostering group harmony and improved relationships among team members.

Finally, at the individual level, voice has positive effects by enhancing the sense of control of employees, resulting in increased satisfaction, motivation, and reduced stress. Moreover, it can foster positive attitudes by allowing individuals to express their views and concerns. However, potential negative outcomes may be associated with voice. Speaking up may result in a damaged public image, where an individual may be perceived as a complainer or a troublemaker or may lead to formal sanctions such as lower performance evaluations or unfavorable job assignments (Morrison, 2011).

1.2.4 A model of employee voice and silence

Based on her first model of 2011, in 2014 Morrison developed the model of motivating and inhibitory factors (Figure 3).

Figure 3. A model of employee voice and silence



Source: Own reproduction from Morrison, 2014

It is a comprehensive framework that explains various communication behaviors, including both verbal and non-verbal, regardless of the underlying intentions, whether they are aimed at benefiting others, protecting oneself, or harming others (Mazzei, 2018a).

The various motivators and inhibitors can operate through multiple mechanisms. Motivators can enhance prosocial motivation and impact the decision to engage in voice behavior, strengthening the desire to make a positive difference in the workplace. However, they can also influence the decision-making process of employees as to whether they speak up by making voice behavior appear more effective or by reducing concerns of employees about the potential negative impact of their comments (Morrison, 2014).

Voice motivators embrace dispositional factors such as extraversion, assertiveness, proactive personality, and customer orientation; attitudes towards one's organization and job, including identification, felt obligation for constructive change, satisfaction, and control; perceptions of supervisors or leaders, such as their openness, consultation, and

positive leader-member exchange; the perception of a safe environment for taking risks; and contextual factors such as group and organizational climate (Morrison, 2014).

Inhibiting factors hinder employees from speaking up. These factors can: a) diminish their drive and motivation to make a positive impact, resulting in apathy or resignation; b) affect their perception of their own capabilities, efficacy, and safety, altering their calculation of the utility of speaking up; c) impede action through automatic or non-conscious processes (Morrison, 2014).

Hence, concerning *individual dispositions*, motivators are extroversion, assertiveness, proactivity, conscientiousness, and customer orientation, while among inhibitors the orientation to achieve personal career goals.

The *attitudes and perceptions* related to role and organization can motivate through identification with the company or working groups, job satisfaction and organization support. On the other hand, detachment from one's work and a sense of impotence are inhibitory factors.

Emotions, beliefs, and cognitive patterns such as anger or psychological security are motivating factors, by triggering voice and overcoming silence; while emotions like fear inhibit and lead the individual to close in on himself for fear of the risk of personal image or career.

The *behavior of leaders and managers*, such as openness or consultation, the possibility of an exchange of views, the role of influential, ethical, and transformational leadership, are all motivating factors. Conversely, abusive, or offensive leadership leads to silence.

Finally, *other factors of organizational contexts*, such as the climate of voice and the presence of formal mechanisms for reporting act as motivators, while occupational and social stressors, a climate of fear and silence, a very hierarchical organizational structure, and a business culture resistant to change inhibit the will to express voice.

This leads to possible outcomes both at the organizational or group level and for the employee. Promoting the voice in organizations can bring positive and negative results for both the organization and individuals. Morrison (2014) mentions possible organizational outcomes in terms of performance and turnover, while at the individual level, identifies performance evaluation, career outcomes, and impressions.

1.3 Dynamics of voice and silence in the digital era

Digital transformation has fundamentally changed the way employees choose to speak up or remain silent in organizations. The challenge here is recognizing how specific work environments and modalities shape these new dynamics across different contexts (e.g. Mazzei et al., 2023; Kourgiannu and Holland, 2022; Wilkinson et al., 2022). This includes the emergence of hybrid work arrangements, the rise of new economies driven by technological advancement, as well as the different types of organizations, whether multinational corporations, public administrations, or family-run businesses.

This section first examines hybrid work environments and the flow of communication to explore how integrating remote and in-person work creates complex communication dynamics. Building on this, the analysis considers how the rise of the platform economy and new forms of work organization challenge traditional employment relationships. The discussion is further developed by examining mechanisms of voice and silence in the platform economy, which reshapes work through flexibility, precarity, and algorithmic control. Traditional channels of expression are often absent, pushing workers into informal or external spaces. This makes these contexts particularly interesting for observing how power asymmetries and vulnerability influence communication. This highlights how digital platforms create unique communication channels while introducing new forms of control. The section concludes by comparing the voice dynamics of gig workers with those of workers in traditional employment relationships.

1.3.1 Hybrid work environments and new communication flows

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed traditional work environments, shifting organizations towards remote work and hybrid work environments that have redefined the way voice and silence are expressed in organizational contexts. This shift has led to new communication dynamics, where physical distance and digital tools have become the key drivers of employee interaction and engagement.

Digital technologies have disrupted traditional organizational models by enabling unprecedented opportunities to build relationships and networks that transcend

hierarchical boundaries and physical office presence (Mazzei et al., 2023). At the same time, growing environmental awareness is driving organizations to reduce their carbon footprint by decreasing employee travel and commuting, while promoting individual sustainability that supports work-life balance, autonomy, and empowerment through flexible remote and hybrid working arrangements. This convergence of technological innovation, environmental responsibility, and individual well-being in the hybrid work context was dramatically accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced organizations worldwide to rapidly adopt and normalize these flexible working models, fundamentally changing how employees engage with their work in the modern era (Mazzei et al., 2023).

Hybrid work contexts are characterized by a blend of in-person and remote work environments that can lead to inconsistencies, especially in communication and collaboration. These contexts have increasingly highlighted the critical role of effective communicative behaviors in organizations. While this modality offers the flexibility and cost-optimization benefits of remote work alongside the coordination and cultural strengths of traditional office environments (Mortensen et al., 2021), it has also introduced significant communication complexities. Employees now navigate physical and digital spaces simultaneously and require adaptive communication strategies to maintain productivity, collaboration, and team cohesion across different technological platforms and varying levels of face-to-face interaction.

These hybrid environments require more than the simple transmission of information. They demand communication practices that promote transparency, maintain belonging, and preserve organizational culture despite physical separation (Butera, 2020). The increasing diversity in the workforce further complicates this challenge, as employees from different generations and cultural backgrounds bring varied communication preferences and approaches to these new work contexts (Men and Bowen, 2017). Therefore, organizations are called to develop adaptive strategies that consider these differences while ensuring all employees can engage effectively, regardless of their physical location.

However, hybrid work environments have revealed concerns regarding employee voice and silence behavior. Employees often show a greater willingness to speak up when physically present in the office but may withdraw into silence when working remotely

because they do not feel comfortable speaking up or fear being overlooked. Physical separation can increase isolation and marginalization, especially for those who work remotely more often. This leads employees to remain silent, withholding feedback, ideas, or concerns because they do not feel safe in virtual environments. The disruption of informal support networks that traditionally encourage open dialog in office environments further complicates efforts to maintain a consistent culture of transparency and engagement.

To overcome these challenges, Mazzei et al. (2023) identify three critical pillars for designing sustainable hybrid workplaces. First, organizations need to focus on competencies, leadership style, and organizational culture, and develop new skills for managers and employees while moving from command and control approaches to an empowerment-based leadership style supported by a culture based on purpose, inclusion and mutual trust. Second, they need to redesign physical spaces and working time to optimize individual and collaborative work balance through flexible configurations tailored to specific tasks and different team compositions. Third, they need to invest in technologies and communication processes that ensure digital integration while developing soft skills for effective virtual collaboration. In doing so, they need to recognize that digital tools can encourage employee voice and also challenge the traditional relationship building that is critical to organizational cohesion.

To summarize, this change is more than a simple shift in where people work, it is a fundamental reshaping of corporate communication that requires strategic attention. Organizations that fail to proactively address dynamics of voice and silence in the hybrid workplace risk systematically marginalizing remote employees, leading to a decline in innovation, lower employee engagement, and, ultimately, compromised business performance. To succeed in the hybrid era, organizations have to provide technological tools and actively cultivate an inclusive communication culture that ensures that all employees, regardless of location, have equal opportunities to contribute, be heard, and influence organizational outcomes.

1.3.2 The advent of the platform economy

In the new digital age, the nature of work has evolved with technological advancements, leading to the rise of the gig or platform economy. This new employment model uses online platforms to manage work and allows companies to hire workers as independent contractors instead of traditional employees (Kougiannou and Holland, 2022).

The platform economy has become a global phenomenon that is reshaping labor markets and employment practices in different geographic regions. With digital platforms operating on a global scale, gig work transcends traditional national and regulatory boundaries, creating a complex and interconnected labor market (Wilkinson et al., 2022). This global reach means that gig workers are all part of the same overarching economic system, hiding significant implications for the future of work, as it challenges existing labor laws and regulations designed for more localized and stable forms of employment (Wilkinson et al., 2022). Moreover, because digital platforms operate across national borders, new types of regulation are needed to deal with issues such as data privacy, algorithm transparency, and platform accountability. These measures should help ensure that the benefits of the gig economy are shared more fairly (Wilkinson et al., 2022). Regulation should also be flexible and able to keep pace with rapid technological change and the constantly evolving business models that define the gig economy (Wilkinson et al., 2022).

The platform economy is based on short, specific tasks or jobs that individuals are hired to complete (Tassinari and Maccarone, 2020). These tasks are typically temporary and managed through digital platforms. Companies in this economy use online technologies as intermediaries, matching the supply and demand for labor. Platforms organize and monitor work digitally, often through algorithmic management (Tassinari and Maccarone, 2020).

An increasing number of people now work outside traditional organizations, weakening classic forms of employment and raising questions about how much influence workers have over the organizations they work for (Bucher et al., 2023). Platforms connect workers and clients, allowing companies and individuals to outsource tasks to a global and often anonymous workforce (Bucher et al., 2023).

Platform capitalism refers to a new economic model in which digital platforms dominate the connection between service providers and consumers. These platforms use technology to build large, scalable markets that often bypass traditional business models and employment systems (Kougiannou and Mendonca, 2019). In recent years, platform capitalism has grown rapidly, prompting increased attention to its effects on work and employment practices. The competitive landscape of the gig economy forces organizations to cut costs by reducing their core workforce and substituting them with peripheral workers (Kougiannou and Mendonca, 2019). This sector encompasses both remote work and locally delivered services, such as food delivery, courier services, and other manual labor tasks (Kougiannou and Mendonca, 2019). Gig economy firms are identified as tech companies, enabling them to label workers in a way that offers financial flexibility and adaptability to changing demand (Kougiannou and Mendonca, 2019). They also employ algorithmic management to oversee their dispersed workforce, a practice that can undermine worker rights and the employment relationship. Defensive routines in organizations often stifle employee voice (Argyris, 1977), and managerial silencing can lead to a culture where employees avoid conflict by remaining silent (Redding, 1985; Sprague and Ruud, 1988; Kougiannou and Mendonca, 2019).

A key distinction is made between *crowdwork platforms*, where tasks are performed remotely online, and *gig work platforms*, where tasks require physical presence and are location-specific (Tassinari and Maccarone, 2020). Over the past decade, the use of digital platforms to outsource tasks to online crowds has become increasingly prevalent. Crowdwork platforms connect clients with a diverse, geographically dispersed workforce, coordinating labor markets on a global scale without being formally classified as employers. They significantly influence work relations by setting rights, obligations, and task distribution, and by controlling communication among workers. This form of labor, often termed *non-standard work*, is associated with issues such as low wages, insecurity, and lack of representation. Improving conditions for crowdworkers is suggested to revolve around enhancing worker representation and voice, which can increase motivation and reduce turnover. Despite some research on the role of regulators and trade unions in this context, there is limited research on how platforms themselves might integrate voice channels into their governance systems, focusing either on the absence of such opportunities on micro-task platforms or on strategies to motivate and

retain workers in macro-task contexts (Gegenhuber et al., 2020). Vandaele (2018) delves into the limitations and potential for collective action among digital platform workers within the platform economy. The author explains that this power of workers can be broken down into *marketplace bargaining power* and *workplace bargaining power*. Marketplace bargaining power involves the desirability of the skills of workers and their ability to live off non-wage income, while workplace bargaining power is derived from strategic positions of workers in production or distribution processes, enabling them to disrupt business operations. It is possible to categorize platform work into three types (Vandaele, 2018): *online micro crowdwork*, which consists of low-skilled, repetitive tasks with minimal bargaining power; *online macro crowdwork*, which involves high-skilled tasks with slightly better marketplace bargaining power; and *offline on-demand work*, such as food delivery, which, despite low marketplace bargaining power, can possess significant workplace bargaining power due to the potential for disruption in local markets.

As mentioned earlier, gig workers are often classified as independent contractors rather than employees, which significantly impacts their rights and protections, such as access to minimum wage, paid holidays, sick leave, and job security (Tassinari and Maccarone, 2020). This classification also means that gig workers are generally excluded from collective bargaining agreements and are not entitled to union representation, placing them in a precarious position without traditional labor protections (Tassinari and Maccarone, 2020). This diversity impacts the economic stability and job satisfaction of gig workers and also their opportunities for collective representation and voice, as traditional mechanisms of labor organization and advocacy are often inadequate or absent in this new employment paradigm (Wilkinson et al., 2022). As such, the gig economy necessitates a reevaluation of labor laws and protections to address the unique challenges faced by gig workers and ensure fair and equitable working conditions in this rapidly evolving sector (Wilkinson et al., 2022).

Gig work is typically managed through algorithms that allocate tasks and monitor performance, creating information asymmetries between the platform and the workers due to the opaque criteria for task allocation and performance metrics (Tassinari and Maccarone, 2020). The use of GPS technology and data analytics allows platforms to monitor movements and performance of workers, intensifying control over a

geographically dispersed workforce and reducing their autonomy (Tassinari and Maccarone, 2020). While platforms promote flexibility as a key advantage of gig work, this flexibility often translates into insecurity for workers, who may experience fluctuating income levels, lack of guaranteed work hours, and limited control over their work schedules (Tassinari and Maccarone, 2020). The shift from hourly wages to payment-by-delivery models further shifts the risk onto workers, who may not be compensated if there is no demand for their services, thus exacerbating their financial instability (Tassinari and Maccarone, 2020). Workers in this environment engage in *work-on-demand via app*, where they can log in to a mobile application to complete tasks, which offers perceived flexibility (Kougiannou and Holland, 2022). However, this flexibility is often limited by performance monitoring and surveillance embedded in these applications, which track and evaluate worker activities. The lack of clarity around employment contracts and the promised flexibility can lead to negative experiences, as organizations may still dictate work schedules and penalize workers for declining tasks. Algorithms are used to allocate tasks and monitor performance, creating new forms of control and surveillance, leading to stress and dissatisfaction among workers (Kougiannou and Holland, 2022).

Additionally, gig workers may be segmented based on their attachment to the job, with a core group relying on gig work as a primary income source and a larger margin participating sporadically (Tassinari and Maccarone, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2022). This segmentation can create divisions within the workforce, affecting shared interests and incentives to organize collectively (Tassinari and Maccarone, 2020). The fragmented nature of gig work, coupled with the varying levels of commitment and dependency on gig income, poses significant challenges to fostering a unified collective identity and solidarity among gig workers, further complicating efforts to improve their working conditions and protections (Tassinari and Maccarone, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2022).

1.3.2.1 Voice and silence mechanisms on the platform economy

Gegenhuber et al. (2020) explore the dynamics of the platform economy and gig workers, focusing on the voice systems on digital work platforms. The platform economy, relying

on digital platforms, mediates and organizes gig work, ranging from those offering simple microtasks to more complex macro tasks.

Scholars express concern that gig workers lack a voice because platforms reject traditional employment relationships, deny that workers are part of their organizations, and replace human managers with algorithms, which diminishes opportunities for workers to be heard (Bucher et al., 2023). This rejection leads to the absence of formal channels like union representation and informal channels such as direct communication with managers (Bashshur and Oc, 2015; Bucher et al., 2023). In response, research has explored whether gig workers can use online communities as alternative spaces for voice (Bucher et al., 2023). Recent studies have aimed to understand how digital voice channels, such as online forums and mobile chats, allow workers to express concerns (e.g. Gegenhuber et al., 2020; Kougianou and Mendonça, 2021; Martin et al., 2015; Bucher et al., 2023). This research primarily examines whether such communication leads to unionization or collective action.

Gegenhuber et al. (2020) revealed that all platforms establish varying regimes to manage crowdworker voice. These regimes involve both organizational decisions about platform governance and the deployment of technological building blocks. Governance decisions include defining membership, distributing tasks, and setting incentive mechanisms. Technological building blocks, such as message boxes and discussion forums, allow crowdworkers to provide feedback and interact with the platform (Gegenhuber et al., 2020). Platforms are motivated to enable worker voice to maintain a stable and motivated workforce, crucial for meeting client demand (Gegenhuber et al., 2020).

These regimes are primarily characterized by *communication and consultation*: *communication* channels enable crowdworkers to contact the platform, report issues, or ask questions; *consultation* involves platforms proactively seeking crowdworker input on task-related issues and, occasionally, platform-wide work organization. However, everything is predefined, not giving space for an organic voice. Hence, they enable crowdworkers to address task-related and some organizational issues but exclude matters of corporate development or strategy (Gegenhuber et al., 2020). Given this, Gegenhuber et al. (2020) affirm that platforms provide crowdworkers with “*microphones*”, which they define as limited input on pre-defined issues and that which can be silenced, but avoid relinquishing control by withholding “*megaphones*” that would allow crowdworkers to

speak up freely and co-determine the decision-making. In line with this literature, Kougiannou and Holland (2022) state that despite challenges, technology also provides new avenues for worker voice. Workers can use forums and social media to share information and organize collectively.

Gig workers often lack mechanisms to voice their concerns or influence organizational decisions due to their status as independent contractors rather than employees. This status limits their access to traditional forms of representation and collective bargaining (Wilkinson et al., 2022).

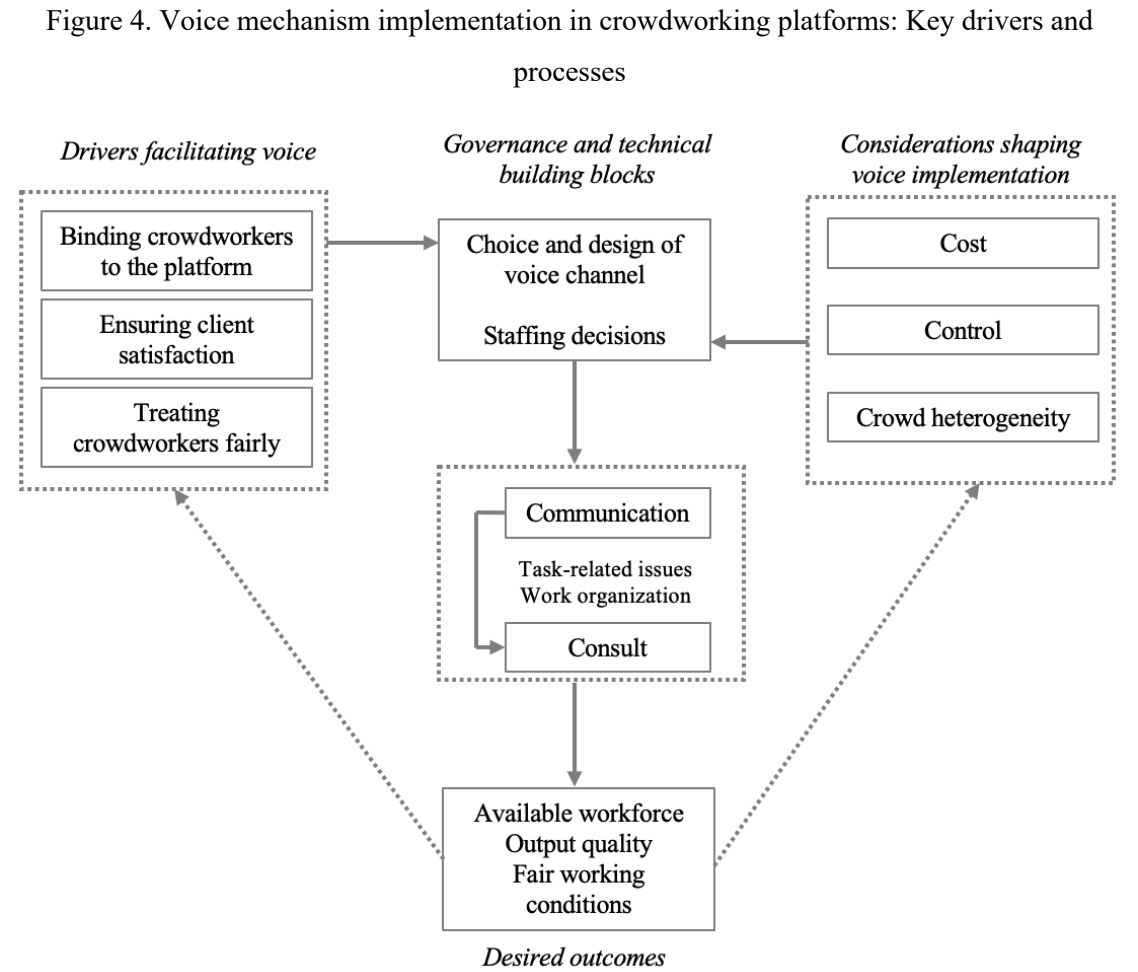
In the gig economy, the concept of worker voice and representation encounters significant challenges due to the non-traditional nature of employment relationships (Wilkinson et al., 2022). The algorithmic management systems employed by digital platforms further intensify this issue by controlling work processes, monitoring performance, and implementing reward or penalty structures without direct human interaction, which significantly diminishes the capacity of workers to negotiate or resist unfavorable conditions (Wilkinson et al., 2022). As a result, formal avenues for voice, such as unions and employee representative bodies, are largely inaccessible to gig workers. Instead, they often rely on informal networks and digital communication channels, including social media platforms, to share experiences, organize collectively, and advocate for their rights. While these informal channels can facilitate peer-to-peer support and grassroots mobilization, they frequently lack the structural power and legitimacy to effect meaningful changes in platform policies or labor regulations. Moreover, the efficacy of these informal networks is often hindered by issues of trust, coordination, and the transitory nature of gig work (Wilkinson et al., 2022).

In some regions, there have been efforts to bridge this gap through innovative approaches, such as forming new types of unions specifically for gig workers or leveraging legal battles to reclassify gig workers as employees with full labor rights. Nevertheless, these efforts face considerable resistance from platform companies and varying levels of legal and regulatory support across different jurisdictions (Wilkinson et al., 2022).

Therefore, enhancing worker voice and representation in the gig economy requires an approach, including legal reforms to recognize rights of gig workers, the development of new forms of collective representation suited to the digital age, and the strengthening of

both formal and informal mechanisms to ensure that the voices of gig workers are heard and addressed effectively (Wilkinson et al., 2022).

Figure 4 illustrates Gegenhuber et al. (2020) process and factors involved in implementing voice mechanisms within a crowdworking platform. It highlights key drivers, such as binding crowdworkers to the platform, ensuring client satisfaction, and treating workers fairly, which motivate the platform to create channels for worker feedback.



Source: own reproduction from Gegenhuber et al., 2020

Research indicates that platforms offering both micro and macro tasks are aware of the critical challenge of retaining crowdworkers. The flexibility of crowdsourcing means that platforms consistently mobilize a sufficient number of workers who may only be available during their “idle capacities”. Consequently, maintaining open communication is essential for ensuring that the supply side of the business model of a platform functions

smoothly. This involves keeping crowdworkers engaged even during periods when work opportunities are scarce, thereby sustaining a reliable workforce for future tasks. Platforms face the dual challenge of retaining both core and peripheral workers to ensure task availability and completion. However, competition intensifies this difficulty by increasing worker turnover, as crowdworkers have the flexibility to switch between different platforms or work on multiple platforms concurrently. This fluidity in the workforce demands that platforms develop strategies to maintain worker engagement and loyalty amidst a competitive landscape (Gegenhuber et al., 2020). Hence, platforms are keen on implementing voice channels to better engage crowdworkers, aiming to boost worker retention and enhance the quality of their work.

Client satisfaction is crucial for platforms, as their business model relies on crowdworkers completing tasks and performing them proficiently. To ensure high-quality work, platforms implement various mechanisms: assessment tests for vetting skills, career systems offering more lucrative tasks to professional users, rating mechanisms for client feedback (e.g. Designer), feedback polls, and input controls that invite only skilled workers for specific projects. These strategies help maintain a high standard of work, enhancing client satisfaction and the overall success of the platform (Gegenhuber et al., 2020).

While all platforms are motivated to use voice channels to tie crowdworkers and ensure client satisfaction, their commitment to fair treatment of workers varies. Platforms that prioritize fair work standards engage more extensively with crowdworkers, either by soliciting feedback on broad platform issues or by utilizing a dedicated support crowd (Gegenhuber et al., 2020).

Moreover, the governance and technical aspects involve making decisions about the design of these channels and staffing them appropriately. Effective communication and consultation between the platform and workers are central to addressing task-related issues and improving work organization. However, the implementation is shaped by considerations like cost, control, and the heterogeneity of the workforce. The ultimate goals of these efforts are to maintain an available and satisfied workforce, ensure high-quality output, and promote fair working conditions, which benefit both the workers and the platform.

1.3.2.2 Gig workers vs. traditional organizational workers voice dynamics

Existing theories of organizational voice cannot be easily transferred to the context of gig workers (Bucher et al., 2023). Voice behavior of gig workers is distinct from that of traditional workers due to several key factors. Unlike traditional employees, gig workers lack direct access to managers and are a heterogeneous group with significant income disparities (Bucher et al., 2023). Additionally, the digital channels through which gig workers voice their concerns have unique properties, possibilities, and limitations compared to traditional communication methods (Wilkinson et al., 2021). In digital contexts, voice becomes a collective, interactional phenomenon where public expression allows other actors to influence the reception and promotion of ideas or complaints (Bucher et al., 2023). This contrasts with traditional settings where voice is typically exercised in private meetings between employees or union representatives and managers (Detert and Burris, 2007).

There are two main differences. First, the voice channels utilized by gig workers differ significantly from those in traditional organizations. In traditional settings, voice is often facilitated through informal conversations, management meetings, or unions. However, gig workers, especially those in a fully digitalized work environment, lack these traditional channels due to the dispersed, global, and automated nature of their work (Bucher et al., 2023). Physical interactions are rare, with exceptions like food delivery riders or Uber drivers who might meet in physical spaces. For most gig workers on digital platforms, voice channels are confined to digital spaces such as online forums or WhatsApp groups (Bucher et al., 2021; Gegenhuber et al., 2020; Bucher et al., 2023).

Second, voice research typically assumes the presence of a visible organizational hierarchy, providing a clear target for voicing concerns, such as a supervisor (Detert and Burris, 2007; Morrison, 2011). Gig workers, however, are not part of a traditional organizational hierarchy and often lack a clear target for their voice. Instead, they frequently turn to their peers to discuss new ideas and develop solutions (Bucher et al., 2023).

In the absence of traditional voice channels, gig workers increasingly rely on digital voice channels such as online communities to organize and express their concerns (Bucher et

al., 2023). These online communities (e.g. Upwork or Reddit), defined as social media forums where individuals with shared interests or activities congregate, serve as pivotal spaces for gig workers to challenge platform policies and foster solidarity (Bucher et al., 2023). Research has documented instances such as Uber drivers and food couriers using these communities to oppose company practices and rally collective action (Bucher et al., 2023).

Bucher et al. (2023) highlight that these communities are vital for gig workers to express their voices and organize against platform policies. However, platforms also use these communities strategically to manage and control worker voice, often through moderation and the design of the communication channels. Moreover, these digital voice channels allow workers to exchange practical advice, from navigating platform rules to tips on improving their skills and increasing their marketability (Bucher et al., 2023). This exchange of knowledge helps gig workers feel less isolated and more empowered, as they learn from the experiences of others facing similar challenges (Bucher et al., 2023). Thus, digital voice channels serve as outlets for expressing dissatisfaction and also as vital resources for personal and professional growth, fostering a collaborative environment where gig workers can support each other in the absence of traditional support systems (Bucher et al., 2023).

Bucher et al. (2023) identified two main voice behaviors in these digital communities: *voice framing* and *voice modulation*. *Voice framing* involves workers signaling their status and group membership, while *voice modulation* involves amplifying in-group voices and muting out-group voices. This dynamic creates factions within communities and affects how voice is organized and expressed (Bucher et al., 2023). However, digital platforms are not passive observers; they strategically employ online communities to manage worker dissent (Bucher et al., 2023). Platforms can use these spaces to provide controlled outlets for grievances or to utilize worker input for platform initiatives. The dual use of online communities by platforms, both to provide the appearance of voice and to direct it, highlights a tension in the digital mechanisms of worker participation (Bucher et al., 2023).

On platforms like Upwork, official forums are moderated by the platform itself, which allows workers to give feedback directly to the platform, albeit in a controlled environment (Bucher et al., 2023). On Reddit and other unofficial forums, workers can

speak more freely, sharing opinions and discussing issues without the oversight of platform administrators (Bucher et al., 2023). These unofficial communities often become hubs for organizing collective actions, such as petitions or social media campaigns, aimed at addressing grievances or pushing for changes in platform policies (Bucher et al., 2023).

Despite the valuable insights from existing literature, significant gaps remain. Firstly, while it is known that platforms attempt to control digital voice channels, the impact of these attempts on voice behaviors of gig workers is underexplored. Some studies indicate silencing effects, while others suggest the emergence of new voice modalities (Bucher et al., 2023). Secondly, there is a lack of detailed understanding of the actual voice behaviors of gig workers within these communities. Existing research has focused more on the content and reasons behind voiced issues of workers rather than on the dynamics of how they express themselves and how their voices are potentially constrained or facilitated. This is crucial because voice in online communities is publicly broadcast, which can influence the development of allyship among coworkers. Thirdly, there is a dichotomy in the focus of studies on either official or unofficial online communities. Official communities, controlled by organizations, function as quasi-formal voice channels, whereas unofficial communities emerge spontaneously and offer informal spaces for voice development. The differences between these types of communities as voice channels are not well understood, limiting the broader comprehension of gig worker voice. Addressing these gaps is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of how gig workers navigate and utilize digital voice channels in the evolving gig economy landscape (Bucher et al., 2023).

1.4 Research gaps and future research directions

Chapter 1 showed that employee behavior is a critical factor in the success of any business, regardless of industry or sector. As such, it has become a growing concern for organizations. Employee voice and silence emerged as overarching concepts that are used in various disciplines such as corporate communication, internal communication, crisis management, marketing, and organizational communication (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015).

The traditional boundaries between internal and external relationships are becoming increasingly blurred due to various trends. These include increasing networking, outsourcing, and the internationalization of business processes, all of which promote greater interaction between organizational members and people who were previously considered “outsiders”, such as customers. In addition, the widespread use of social networks exposes employees to interactions with stakeholders that often take place without any control by the organization (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015).

This section raises several important issues related to employee voice and silence that merit further investigation. The first two main gaps identified are those related to employee activism and toxic work environments. Moreover, other gaps emerged. These include the critical role of internal stakeholders; well-being; crisis and risk management; voice on social media; voice for workplace inclusion; Employee Resource Groups; whistleblowing; employee silence as a form of dissenting expression; and voice and silence across different work environments.

Employee activism

A major gap in the literature concerns the emerging phenomenon of employee activism and its relationship to traditional frameworks of voice and silence. A growing number of employees are taking a public stand on social issues, addressing not only workplace concerns but also broader political, environmental, and social issues (Miles et al., 2021). In this context, employees act as insider activists, putting pressure on organizations and managers by advocating for change through walkouts, whistleblowing, open letters, or social media campaigns, especially when they disagree with actions of their employers (Li and Soule, 2021; Wowak et al., 2022). Despite its increasing visibility and potential impact on organizational dynamics, employee activism remains significantly under-researched in academic research. This represents a critical gap, as employee activism fundamentally challenges traditional conceptualizations of employee voice, and goes beyond internal organizational channels to advocate for employee concerns in the public sphere, which can have immediate reputational and operational implications.

Toxic work environments

The second primary gap regards toxic work environments. TWEs have become increasingly important but are still under-researched. The increasing focus on

“meaningful work”, i.e., work that aligns individual purpose with organizational and societal values (Chamberlain and Hodson, 2010), and attention to workplace well-being make the persistence of toxic workplaces particularly problematic, as they undermine both personal fulfillment and organizational legitimacy. Research in organizational psychology and management shows that TWEs severely affect employee well-being, job satisfaction, and performance (Einarsen et al., 2016). However, attributing toxicity solely to individual “bad apples” such as abusive managers or unethical colleagues, oversimplifies the phenomenon and obscures systemic problems. Toxic behaviors are often due to latent organizational conditions, such as conflicting goals, production pressures, inadequate oversight, or flawed systems, that allow harmful practices to become normalized (Love et al., 2011). A particularly unexplored aspect links TWEs to employee communicative responses.

Other gaps

Apart from these two primary gaps, several other ones are identified in the literature.

The first gap regards *the critical role of internal stakeholders*. While numerous studies have consistently emphasized its critical role in shaping organizational effectiveness and excellence (Men and Bowen, 2017), there remains a significant gap in understanding how employee voice and silence behavior relate to employees functioning as organizational communication agents and assets that build external reputation and relationships from within (Kim and Rhee, 2011). This internal influence manifests itself through two key concepts. First, behavioral branding that refers to “employee behaviors that convey brand consistent meaning during the interaction with customers and contribute to generating valuable positive outcomes in terms of brand experience, customer brand engagement, and customer experience in shopping and service encounters” (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015, p. 240). Second, internal branding involves the communication and support of the brand by employees to align internal and external messages (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015). The gap becomes clear when examining brand building programs, employer branding, employee advocacy, and brand ambassador initiatives that are becoming increasingly popular in organizations (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015). Employee advocacy, which is an extended behavioral outcome of internal communication (Thelen and Men, 2020), is closely linked to increasing brand awareness, reputation, growth, and

revenue (Thelen et al., 2022). However, the factors that influence whether employees choose to advocate for their company or remain silent in brand building contexts have not yet been sufficiently researched. This research gap is particularly relevant to internal and corporate communication in the digital age, as social media amplifies the impact of employee voice and silence on organizational reputation. In order to understand how organizations manage both their own and their employees' social media presence, the intersection of the dynamics of voice and silence with brand communication strategies needs to be explored.

The second gap is that of employee *well-being*. Some scholars have begun to examine employee voice in relation to well-being, and how individual employees, managers, and HR departments can contribute to organizations that use voice as a mechanism to ensure employee well-being and community health (Brooks and Wilkinson, 2022). However, this area is still significantly underdeveloped in the literature. The relationship between voice and silent behavior and its wider impact on both individual and organizational well-being requires more comprehensive theoretical and empirical consideration. This research gap has become particularly pronounced following the Covid-19 pandemic, which has accelerated change in the workplace and has led to organizations recognizing that work should evolve to become “wise” (Quaratino et al., 2022). In this changing landscape, well-being has emerged as a key organizational priority. Companies have introduced comprehensive initiatives that include healthy workplaces, personal growth opportunities, good nutrition programs, and connections to nature. However, the role that employee voice and silence play in the success or failure of these well-being initiatives remains largely unexplored. The WISE approach, which prioritizes well-being by recognizing that the physical, emotional, and mental health of employees is fundamental to organizational success (Quaratino et al., 2022), is an example of this shift in organizational thinking. This approach is based on the realization that the quality of work has a significant impact on the willingness of employees to invest their energy, creating belonging and reciprocity that lead to positive engagement cycles that drive organizational results. However, current research lacks a deeper understanding of how the dynamics of voice and silence interact with these well-being-focused organizational strategies.

The third gap related to *crisis and risk management*. Although voice and silence are clearly related to crisis and risk management (Mazzei et al., 2019), the theoretical understanding of these relationships remains fragmented and underdeveloped. Current research has found that employee voice can manifest itself in the form of positive employee voice that supports the organization during a crisis, and anticompany voice that goes beyond the boundaries of the organization, in both named and anonymous forms (Ravazzani and Mazzei, 2018). However, the mechanisms underlying these different voice outcomes and their implications for strategic management need to be further explored. Although effective voice management is recognized as a proactive risk mitigation strategy that enables organizations to identify potential problems before they escalate into crises, further research is needed to understand how organizations can cultivate and maintain such communication channels. This gap is particularly significant as anticompany statements are increasingly expressed on social media platforms, creating new communication arenas that challenge traditional organizational control (Mazzei, 2018a). According to Mazzei et al. (2019), authentic organizational behaviors, employee engagement, and empowerment increase the likelihood of positive megaphoning during a crisis, i.e. the voluntary tendency to spread positive information about the company, and decrease the intentions of negative megaphoning, i.e. the voluntary spread of criticism about the company. Employees therefore play a mediating role in times of crisis. For this reason, companies should invest in interpersonal levers, relationships, empowerment, and authenticity to create a positive organizational climate in normal times that encourages employees to actively speak up and defend the company in a crisis. The research gap lies in linking voice and silence behaviors to crisis preparedness, risk identification, and crisis response effectiveness.

The fourth gap is that of *voice on social media*. As previously mentioned, *social media* is increasingly taking up space among the communication tools available to companies and employees. With its continuous growth and evolution, social media has become a platform where employees can express their opinions, share their experiences, and engage with others. Employee voice and silence on social media can have significant implications for organizations, as it impacts their reputation, brand image, and employee relations. Holland et al. (2016) highlight the concept of “wisdom of crowds” to indicate the importance of using these tools to improve the relationship between managers and

employees, as a sign of total quality management, and as an opportunity to identify opinions and information in real-time. Social media offers employees the platform to express their opinions, share experiences, and engage with others, making it an opportunity for brand building. However, it also poses potential risks, such as employees spreading inappropriate messages or breaching rules. To address these concerns, companies have adopted *social media policies (SMP)*, providing employees with guidelines and codes of conduct (Mazzei and Butera, 2016). Risks on social media are particularly relevant as online contents requires real-time reactions (Dreher, 2014). SMP helps shape employee behavior on social media, influencing reputation, brand image, and stakeholder relations. These policies deal with legal, productivity and security, as well as ethical and reputational risks. While some SMPs focus on avoiding risks, many companies recognize the value of enabling employees to participate in online contexts, encouraging authenticity and a multi-voice dialogue with stakeholders. SMPs are seen as part of corporate governance (Johnston, 2015; Spaulding, 2010) and contribute to the sense-making process surrounding the role of employees as brand supporters in the online environment. Integrating SMP with internal branding efforts is crucial to foster consistent and authentic employee behavior online for effective brand-building strategies (Mazzei and Butera, 2016). Despite this growing recognition of the importance of social media, current research needs further investigation to explain how traditional mechanisms of voice and silence change in digital environments, how SMPs influence the decisions of employees to speak up or remain silent online, and how organizations can strategically balance risk mitigation and authentic employee engagement.

The fifth gap is the *voice for workplace inclusion*. Employee voice and silence also overlap with the area of study of *diversity and inclusion management*. Companies today can leverage the multiple diversities within their teams to obtain numerous benefits in terms of efficiency, productivity, and well-being, and to gain a competitive advantage. However, diversity management programs are not well integrated into the organizational culture of all companies. Much of the literature on voice and silence assumes that employees are homogeneous and does not specifically address issues related to diversity and inclusion (Syed, 2014). However, workers are diverse, and their opportunity and propensity to voice can vary, for example, based on gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. These voices in the workplace may remain latent or manifest in different

ways. Furthermore, depending on the national or organizational context, some voices may not be heard, or situations may arise where the diverse perspectives and insights of employees are ignored or suppressed in the decision-making process within organizations (Syed, 2014). In this regard, Syed (2014) refers to this phenomenon talking about “missing voices” and “silence of minorities”. Nonetheless, establishing a culture that embraces Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) cannot be solely dictated by upper management. It requires a collective endeavor throughout the organization. In order to accomplish this objective, it is crucial to actively listen to employees and guarantee their perspectives are acknowledged and valued. Despite the clear overlap between diversity dynamics and voice and silence behaviors, current research lacks explanations of how demographic characteristics influence voice mechanisms, how organizational DEI initiatives can address barriers to minority voice, and how inclusive voice systems can be designed to capture and value all employee perspectives in diverse organizational contexts.

The sixth gap relates to *Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)*. ERGs are employee-led organizational movements that address various social issues, particularly diversity and inclusion initiatives. These groups serve several strategic functions, including providing mentoring and networking opportunities, influencing organizational strategies, building robust internal relationships, and advising senior leadership on key organizational issues (Byrd, 2022; Krishna et al., 2023; Maks-Solomon and Drewry, 2021).

These groups fulfill several functions. They play an important role in fostering innovation and facilitating transformative organizational change (Welbourne et al., 2017). Employee resource groups offer employees who share common identities, experiences, or interests the opportunity to connect and support each other. Through these platforms, individuals can express their views and concerns, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment. Beyond their support function, ERGs play an important role in shaping inclusive policies and initiatives that benefit the wider workforce. Krishna et al (2023) refer to Employee Resource Groups as strategic, employee-led platforms that enable organizations to actively listen to their workforce and proactively anticipate potential issues. This dual function demonstrates how ERGs combine individual voice with institutional responsiveness.

The seventh gap is that of *whistleblowing*. As reported in the chapter, *whistleblowing* has been consistently involved in the dynamics of voice and silence. Whistleblowing is the phenomenon in which employees report immoral, illegal, and illicit activities inside or outside the organization (Miceli et al., 2008). The phenomenon includes both external and internal reporting acts, highlighting the importance of establishing internal reporting programs that provide for and protect the entire process, while preventing and resolving critical issues (Mazzei, 2015; Morrison, 2014). Although whistleblowing is inherently a communicative phenomenon that is shaped by organizational climate, leadership, and internal communication practices, it is still under-researched in communication research (Greenwood, 2021).

The eighth gap is *employee silence as a form of dissent*. While employee dissent traditionally consists of employees openly expressing their disagreements and dissenting opinions about workplace policies and practices, the relationship between silence and dissent is under-researched in the literature. Scholars studying employee voice recognize silence as a form of employee communication (Kang and Moon, 2024), but the literature on dissent has not extensively discussed whether silence is a form of dissent. The prevailing view of dissent emphasizes the transparent expression of viewpoints (Kassing, 1997), with silence not formally recognized as a mechanism of dissent. Although disagreement or dissatisfaction is commonplace in the workplace, dissenting voices often remain unspoken due to potential consequences, including retaliation by colleagues and superiors (Rahmani et al., 2023). In this context, silence may represent a strategic choice that employees make in an active decision-making process, by weighing the costs and benefits of voicing concerns versus remaining silent (Milliken et al., 2003).

The last gap identified is that of *voice and silence across different work environments*. Employee voice and the silence of employees differ considerably from one organization to another. In multinational companies, cross-cultural dynamics and hierarchical structures influence communication. Family-run businesses are characterized by an informal, relational tone but have concentrated decision-making that often discourages dissent. In public administrations, marked by bureaucratic rigidity, it is difficult to escalate dissent because employees remain silent due to risk aversion and the perceived ineffectiveness of formal channels. The platform economy presents a particular challenge, as workers lack formal employment relationships and face algorithmic management,

leading many to externalize their concerns or remain silent. Remote and hybrid work environments reduce spontaneous expression through limited face-to-face interaction and make it difficult to build trust, while digital tools support structured communication but discourage informal dissent. These contextual differences demonstrate how the organizational environment shapes the opportunities and risks associated with speaking up or remaining silent, underscoring the need for context-specific approaches to workplace communication dynamics. Despite valuable insights from existing literature, significant gaps remain. First, while it is known that platforms attempt to control digital voice channels, the impact of these attempts on the voice behaviors of gig workers is underexplored. Some studies indicate silencing effects, while others suggest the emergence of new voice modalities (Bucher et al., 2023). Second, there is a lack of understanding of the voice behaviors of gig workers within these communities. Existing research has focused more on the content and reasons behind workers' voiced issues rather than on the dynamics of how they express themselves and how their voices are potentially constrained or facilitated.

In light of the gaps identified, two main considerations guide the empirical focus of this dissertation. First, research on employee voice, silence and dissent is increasingly linked to broader social, political and economic transformations and to workplaces impacted by geopolitical and socio-political challenges. Second, the changing nature of work, in which long-term exposure to toxicity such as incivility, burnout, and poor leadership threatens employee well-being, engagement, and retention, is reinforced by debates about mental health, work-life balance, and purposeful work. This is why the empirical research of this dissertation examines employee activism and toxic work environments.

Specifically, Chapter 5 presents the first empirical study that approaches employee activism. It presents a qualitative, cross-national study based on interviews with managers and communication professionals in Italy and the United States, examining how they interpret and respond to employee activism. This study is the result of an international collaboration anticipated earlier and that will be extensively described later in the chapter.

Chapter 6 presents the second empirical study on employee activism. This is a quantitative survey study that examines activism intentions from the perspective of employees and analyzes how individual and organizational factors influence their willingness to engage within or on behalf of their organization. This study is also the

result of an international collaboration introduced earlier and described in detail later in the chapter.

Finally, Chapter 7 focuses on the second main gap identified in toxic work environments, examining how employees experience and respond to such contexts. Using survey data and qualitative content analysis, the study identifies the nature and triggers of toxicity and examines the communicative strategies that employees employ and how managers respond to these behaviors.

2 Employee silence

Chapter 1 introduced employee silence as a key aspect of organizational life, showing how it interplays with voice and dissent. Silence matters because it affects both individual well-being and organizational functioning. To support open communication, foster engagement, and ensure effectiveness, it is important to understand why employees sometimes choose not to share their views.

Based on this premise, this chapter deepens the analysis developed in Chapter 1 by examining the theoretical foundation of employee silence. As per the methodology, the sources used in Chapter 2 also build on the literature review presented in Chapter 1. This Chapter is based on 82 selected articles examining key dimensions of the phenomenon, including leadership, organizational climate and culture, social support, minority silence, sensemaking processes, and antisocial communication behaviors. Therefore, it provides an overview of its conceptualization, the mechanisms and factors that shape silence in different organizational contexts, and its forms and related strategies.

2.1 Conceptualization of silence

A comprehensive understanding of employee silence requires an examination of its definitional boundaries, its various forms, and its theoretical foundations. The following sections examine the definitions, forms, and strategies of employee silence.

2.1.1 Definitions of employee silence

The theoretical foundations of employee silence can be traced back to Hirschman (1970), with the seminal work on exit, voice, and loyalty. While Hirschman did not explicitly theorize silence as a specific response, later scholars have recognized that silence occurs within his framework when employees perceive their voice as ineffective or risky, but do not choose to exit. In this context, loyalty may discourage exit, while at the same time not providing sufficient confidence in voice, making silence the remaining option.

In 2000, Morrison and Milliken (p.707) coined the term *organizational silence* to describe the “collective-level phenomenon where employees withhold information, opinions, or concerns about work-related problems or issues”. Organizational silence is thus a significant barrier to organizational change and development and has the potential to become a dangerous barrier. It is likely to pose a significant challenge to the creation of a diverse organization characterized by the appreciation and recognition of differences among employees, allowing for the expression of diverse perspectives and opinions (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). Although employees may have a range of different values, beliefs, priorities and experiences, the potential benefits of this diversity may be lost if their viewpoints remain predominantly uniform. Therefore, organizations can benefit from fostering an environment that encourages and values the expression of differing viewpoints. In this way, they can leverage the collective knowledge and experience of their employees, leading to more creative and effective solutions (Morrison and Milliken, 2000).

Morrison and Milliken (2000, p. 708) argued that a *climate of silence*, i.e. the “widely shared perceptions among employees that speaking up about problems or issues” causes organizational silence and identified two common beliefs that characterize this climate: raising issues is not worth the effort, and expressing opinions and beliefs is risky due to possible retaliation. They suggested several organizational and contextual factors that can lead to the development and maintenance of a climate of silence. These include managerial fear of negative feedback, management team characteristics, organizational structures, policies and communication practices, employee and manager demographics, and the creation of shared perceptions through collective sense-making processes (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). Silence is a communication issue that also impacts broader organizational interactions and limits knowledge sharing and innovation when employees experience negative affective states due to high job demands (Adamska and Jurek, 2017).

Following Morrison and Milliken (2000) foundational research on organizational silence, the concept of employee silence gained prominence in organizational studies, with scholars gradually refining its definition and scope. Pinder and Harlos (2001, p. 334) provided one of the first comprehensive definitions, characterizing employee silence as “the withholding of any form of genuine expression about the individual’s behavioral,

cognitive and or affective evaluations of his or her organizational circumstance to persons who are perceived to be capable of effecting change or redress”. This definition established three key elements that would influence subsequent conceptualizations: the comprehensive nature of withheld expressions (i.e., behavioral, cognitive, and affective), the intentional aspect of withholding, and the strategic consideration of the ability of the recipient to effect change. Van Dyne et al. (2003, p. 1360) refined this conceptualization by defining employee silence as “intentionally withholding of ideas, information, and opinions with relevance to work improvement and work organizations”. This definition retains the emphasis on intentionality but narrows the scope by focusing specifically on content relevant to organizational improvement.

Building on Pinder and Harlos (2001), Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008, p. 41) further specified that employee silence represents “employees’ intentional withholding of critical work-related information from other members of their workgroup”. This definition introduced two important refinements: the emphasis on “critical” information and the specification of workgroup members as recipients, moving beyond the traditional focus on upward communication to supervisors.

Brinsfield et al. (2009) contributed to this broader understanding by drawing on Bowen and Blackmon (2003) research on “vertical spirals of silence”, highlighting how silence on multiple issues can be self-perpetuating within organizations, particularly when employees fear that disclosing information could disrupt social cohesion and lead to exclusion or rejection.

To further advance the conceptualization of silence, it is worth recalling Morrison (2011, p. 375) definition of employee voice, as the “discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organizational or unit functioning”. However, often employees choose silence because expressing their voice is based on their perception of the effectiveness and safety of the act (Morrison, 2011, 2014). Adhering to the definition of Morrison (2011, p. 377), *silence* is the “conscious withholding of information, suggestions, ideas, questions, or concerns about potentially important work- or organization-related issues from persons who might be able to take action to address those issues”.

According to Singh and Srivastava (2023a), employee silence is the deliberate withholding of opinions, questions, issues, or concerns related to organizational matters. This behavior occurs when employees choose not to share their insights or feedback, which can be crucial for the organization's growth and problem-solving processes.

Table 2 recalls the definitions of employee silence explored in these paragraphs.

Table 2. Definitions of employee silence

Author(s)	Definition
Morrison and Milliken (2000, p. 707) <i>organizational silence</i>	Collective-level phenomenon where employees withhold information, opinions, or concerns about work-related problems or issues
Morrison and Milliken (2000, p. 708) <i>climate of silence</i>	Widely shared perceptions among employees that speaking up about problems or issues is futile and/or dangerous
Pinder and Harlos (2001, p. 334) <i>employee silence</i>	The withholding of any form of genuine expression about the individual's behavioral, cognitive, and/or affective evaluations of his or her organizational circumstances to persons who are perceived to be capable of effecting change
Van Dyne, Ang, and Botero (2003, p. 1360) <i>employee silence</i>	Intentionally withholding ideas, information and opinions with relevance to improvements in work and work organizations
Morrison (2011, p. 377) <i>employee silence</i>	Conscious withholding of information, suggestions, ideas, questions, or concerns about potentially important work- or organization-related issues from persons who might be able to take action to address those issues
Singh and Srivastava (2023a)	The deliberate withholding of opinions, questions, issues, or concerns related to organizational matters
Tangirala and Ramanujan (2008, p. 41)	Employees' intentional withholding of critical work-related information from other members of their workgroup

Source: own elaboration

To summarize, several key characteristics of employee silence emerge from these definitions. Employee silence is a deliberate and conscious decision in which individuals refrain from sharing potentially important information about work or the organization that involves behavioral, cognitive, or affective content. Silence is usually intentional, as

employees carefully consider how important the withheld information is and whether the potential recipients, such as supervisors, colleagues, or other stakeholders in the company, can react to it in a meaningful way. Silence also embodies a strategic risk-benefit trade-off that is influenced by perceptions of employees of safety, effectiveness and potential social or professional impact. The definitions also differ in scope: some are broad and include any kind of genuine expression that is withheld from the organization, while others focus more narrowly on information that is aimed at improvement or is considered critically important. The elements of the various definitions show that employee silence is a complex behavior, that involves thought, strategy, and awareness of context, not just passivity or disengagement.

The next paragraph explores some aspects of these definitions in greater depth and analyzes the forms that silence can take.

2.1.2 Forms of employee silence

Pinder and Harlos (2001) underlined that silence is a form of communication that involves a range of behaviors, emotions, and intentions and that it can have different meanings depending on its underlying motive. They presented two types of employee silence that they believed were crucial variations of silence in unfair workplace environments: employee quiescence and acquiescence. They differentiated between these two types of employee silence based on eight different factors: voluntariness, consciousness, acceptance, stress level, awareness of alternatives, propensity to speak up, propensity to leave, and dominant emotions.

Quiescent silence involves actively, consciously and purposefully withholding concerns, information, or opinions due to fear of personal negative consequences, aiming to protect themselves, while *acquiescent silence* reflects employees passively withholding information due to disengagement or a lack of motivation to speak up (Chou and Chang, 2017; Pinder and Harlos, 2001).

Hence, *quiescent or defensive silence* is the deliberate withholding of information due to fear of negative consequences: employees hold back proactively to protect themselves, considering speaking up personally risky (Pinder and Harlos, 2001; Van Dyne et al.,

2003). While quiescent silence can be an automatic response in high-fear situations, such as challenging authority, it does not always require conscious deliberation (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009; Adamska and Jurel, 2017). Otherwise called the *deaf effect* or the *mum effect* (Smith et al., 2001), defensive silence is self-protection at its most detrimental, and akin to “fiddling while Rome burns” (Schlosser and Zolin, 2012). The “mum effect” refers to people’s tendency to stay silent about their concerns, often due to discomfort associated with conveying negative information (Milliken et al., 2003). This concept highlights the essence of quiescent silence (Van Dyne et al., 2003; Lee, 1993). Van Dyne et al. (2003: 1367) propose that defensive silence is motivated by fear and self-protection and defined as “intentional and proactive behavior that is intended to protect the self from external threats”.

Acquiescent silence refers to passive conformity to others motivated by resignation or the belief that speaking up would be futile: employees feel they cannot make a difference and are not willing to make efforts to actively contribute ideas or suggestions (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Acquiescent silence is a passive and generalized form of silence rooted in the core concept of organizational membership. It stems from the belief that personal efforts to improve productivity and morale are futile due to the perception that constructive voices go unheard (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). This leads to the maintenance of the status quo, where alternatives are not recognized, and there is no intention to change the situation. This belief that speaking up is pointless is often based on past experiences where attempts to address substantive issues were ignored; therefore, breaking this form of silence requires extensive support (Adamska and Jurel, 2017).

As outlined in Chapter 1, there is an ongoing debate about whether silence and voice represent opposite ends of a continuum or distinct behavioral constructs (e.g. Morrison, 2023). This conceptual distinction has led researchers to differentiate between behaviors based on their underlying intentions, categorizing them as either prosocial (functional and cooperative) or antisocial (dysfunctional and potentially harmful) (Van Dyne et al., 2003; Dalton, 2010).

Van Dyne et al. (2003) expanded the concept of employee silence by including *prosocial silence*. Prosocial silence involves intentionally withholding information to benefit the organization and its members, such as keeping confidential information secret to protect the organization’s competitiveness (Chou and Chang, 2017). Hence, it is the “withholding

of work-related ideas, information, or opinions to benefit other people or the organization based on altruism or cooperative motives” (Van Dyne et al., 2003, p. 1368). It is a discretionary behavior that an organization cannot enforce. It involves the awareness and availability of options and the conscious decision to withhold ideas, information, and opinions. It is driven by a sense of care for others, rather than a fear of potential personal repercussions for speaking up, and individuals choose to remain quiet out of consideration for the well-being of those around them (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Prosocial silence is driven by altruism and cooperative motives, benefiting other individuals or the entire organization (Adamska and Jurel, 2017). It is associated with organizational citizenship behavior, which involves discretionary actions not mandated by the organization (Adamska and Jurel, 2017). Employees demonstrating prosocial silence might withhold confidential information to cooperate, protect proprietary information for organizational benefit, or resist pressure to reveal organizational secrets (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Prosocial silence is intentional and proactive and can be related to employees consciously break organizational rules to complete tasks effectively or maintain positive client relations (Adamska and Jurel, 2017).

Building on this, researchers have further refined these categories to distinguish between procompany behaviors that benefit the organization and anticompany behaviors that potentially damage it (Mazzei, 2018). This intentionality-based classification system forms the basis for understanding different forms of employee silence, including prosocial silence, which protects the interests of the organization, and antisocial silence, which withholds useful information from the organization.

Knoll and Van Dick (2013) proposed another classification of silence, defined as *opportunistic silence*, which represents the strategic withholding of work-related ideas, information, or opinions to gain an advantage for oneself while accepting the likelihood of harming others. This type of silence includes actions such as delivering incomplete or distorted information to maintain power and status when threatened by changes or to avoid additional workload through misleading others (Adamska and Jurel, 2017). The authors refer to it as *deviant silence*, highlighting the employee’s awareness of the potential harm to others (Adamska and Jurel, 2017).

Starting from the motives underlying employee silence that will be explained in the next paragraphs, Brinsfield (2012) identified six forms and dimensions of employee silence,

namely *ineffectual silence*, *relational silence*, *defensive silence*, *diffident silence*, *disengaged silence*, and *deviant silence* (Brinsfield, 2012; Chou and Chang, 2017). Some of them partially overlap with the forms just discussed, while others complement or expand on the conceptualization.

Ineffectual silence refers to situations where employees choose to remain silent because they believe that speaking up will not lead to any meaningful change or improvement. Employees may feel that their input will not be valued or acted upon, leading them to stay silent. It arises from a perception of futility or ineffectiveness associated with vocalizing concerns or opinions, leading individuals to remain silent due to a belief that their contributions will not yield any meaningful impact or change. This dimension of employee silence is consistent with Morrison and Milliken (2000), who describe it as a shared belief that speaking up is not worth, and with the acquiescent form of employee silence (Pinder and Harlos, 2001; Van Dyne et al., 2003).

Relational silence occurs when employees remain silent to maintain positive relationships with colleagues or superiors. They may avoid speaking up to avoid conflict, maintain harmony, or protect relationships within the organization. It emerges as a strategy to maintain good relationships, avoid conflict or protect the feelings of colleagues by prioritizing the preservation of harmony over the expression of concerns or opinions. This dimension is partially consistent with prosocial silence (Van Dyne et al., 2003), which is characterized as proactive and other-oriented and based on altruism and cooperation, although the underlying motives may reflect self-interest rather than pure altruism.

In contrast, *defensive silence* involves employees choosing not to speak up due to fear of negative consequences or retaliation. This dimension of employee silence aligns with the definition of quiescent silence (Pinder and Harlos, 2001), and with the self-protective and fear-based dimension of employee silence (Morrison and Milliken; Van Dyne et al., 2003). This fear may stem from concerns about retribution, criticism, or other adverse outcomes associated with voicing their opinions or concerns. It arises from a strong fear of negative repercussions or undesirable outcomes after speaking up. This fear has a strong deterrent effect and leads individuals to remain silent as a way to protect themselves within the organization.

Employees exhibiting *diffident silence* may stay silent due to feelings of inadequacy, low self-confidence, or a lack of assertiveness. They may refrain from speaking up because they doubt the value of their contributions or feel uncomfortable expressing their thoughts. It is a manifestation of individual insecurity, lack of confidence, and feelings of embarrassment or inadequacy, which hinder individuals from expressing themselves openly in professional settings.

Disengaged silence relates to employees who are emotionally detached or disengaged from their work or the organization. They may choose to remain silent because they feel apathetic, disconnected, or uninterested in participating in discussions or sharing their perspectives. It is characterized by a state of fundamental disengagement and apathy towards one's work environment, in which the individual sees his silence as an expression of his lack of commitment and involvement in organizational matters. This dimension partially overlaps with the concept of acquiescent silence.

Lastly, *deviant silence* involves employees withholding information or feedback intentionally for personal gain or to undermine others. This dimension represents a more deliberate and potentially harmful form of silence, where employees choose not to speak up for misleading or manipulative reasons. It manifests as a deliberate act of withholding crucial information to impede or harm the performance or effectiveness of others within the organization.

Moreover, Chou and Chang (2017) argue that understanding different forms of employee silence necessitates considering both the employee and the target. This raises the question of whether the factors that lead to silence can be derived from studies that focus on why employees choose to speak up. Employees may choose to remain silent for various reasons (Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008), and the theoretical perspectives used in prior studies to explain this silence often reflect the theoretical interests of researchers, leading to potential contradictions. For example, the self-protective or risk avoidance perspective (e.g. Brinsfield, 2012; Milliken et al., 2003) contrasts with the prosocial or other-oriented perspective (e.g. Van Dyne et al., 2003). As a result, there is no overarching theoretical conclusion on why employees engage in silence. To address these research gaps, Chou and Chang (2017) propose a classification of employee silence based on the explicit behaviors of the employee and the target and discuss how existing theoretical perspectives can be used to identify the antecedents of silence (Figure 5).

Figure 5. A theoretical classification of employee silence

	Forms of employee silence		
	Unsolicited predetermined employee silence	Unsolicited issue-based employee silence	Solicited target-based employee silence
Conceptual definition	An employee's predetermined motivation to consistently withhold important information to an organizational target when the target does not solicit expression of voice.	An employee's intentional withholding of important information due to the employee's assessment of an organizational issue when the target does not solicit expression of voice.	An employee's intentional withholding of important information due to the employee's assessment of the target's characteristics when the target solicits expression of voice.
Trigger	None	Perception of an emerging organizational issue or presence of an organizational issue	Presence of the target's request for expression
Silence antecedents	Personality traits	Functional motives	Social relationship and relational experiences

Source: own reproduction from Chou and Chang, 2017

Employee silence often occurs in face-to-face interactions with supervisors, peers, or subordinates, highlighting its dyadic nature where both the employee and the target of the silence influence this behavior (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Pinder and Harlos (2001) noted that employee silence is typically directed at someone in the organization who has the power to change a situation. Studies have shown that managerial behaviors such as seeking employee input and listening to their suggestions and concerns are crucial in determining whether employees feel they have direct access to managers, which affects their willingness to speak up (Ashford et al., 2009; Detert and Burris, 2007; Detert and Trevino, 2010; Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2012). Building on this research, the target of employee silence significantly influences the form of silence exhibited. Specifically, the solicitation of opinions, concerns, suggestions, and/or constructive criticism by the target is a key factor in classifying employee silence. Employee silence can be categorized into

unsolicited and solicited silence. Unsolicited employee silence occurs when an employee intentionally withholds genuine expressions about organizational conditions to a capable target who has not solicited their input. In contrast, solicited employee silence happens when an employee intentionally withholds such expressions despite the target's solicitation of their voice.

Moreover, employees may choose to remain silent despite solicitation due to their subjective assessments. Prior research indicates that employees might withhold their concerns, suggestions, or criticisms because they fear negative consequences, such as retaliation. The decision to remain silent can be influenced by the basis on which the decision is made, especially in the absence of or prior to solicitation. Employees use a subjective cost-benefit analysis, which may not be based on objective data. There are three decision bases for employee silence: individual-based, issue-based, and target-based.

Individual-based silence occurs when an employee makes a predetermined decision that remaining silent is appropriate and desirable regardless of the nature of organizational issues. This decision is proactive and does not rely on the presence of any specific organizational issue or solicitation.

Issue-based silence occurs when the decision to remain silent is triggered by the employee's subjective assessment of an organizational issue. The cost-benefit calculation process is initiated only when an actual or potential issue is perceived. This form of silence is reactive to the emergence of specific organizational issues.

Finally, *target-based silence* is when an employee decides to remain silent based on their assessment of the characteristics of the person soliciting their input. The cost-benefit analysis begins when there is an explicit solicitation, and the outcome depends on the employee's view of the solicitor. This decision is made in response to solicitation rather than preventively.

These decision bases illustrate that employees may engage in risk calculations to determine whether to speak up or remain silent, with each basis being triggered by different factors and at different times.

Hence, according to Chou and Chang (2017), employee silence can be classified using two dimensions: whether the target solicits information and the basis for the employee's

decision to remain silent. This classification results in three distinct forms (Figure 5). First, *unsolicited predetermined employee silence*: an employee consistently withholds important information from an organizational target without being asked for input, driven by a predetermined motivation. Second, *unsolicited issue-based employee silence*: an employee intentionally withholds important information based on their assessment of an organizational issue, without the target soliciting their input. Third, *solicited target-based employee silence*: an employee withholds important information after being asked for input, based on their assessment of the target's characteristics.

The variety of forms and classifications of employee silence illustrates that silence is not a uniform or passive behavior, but a complex and conscious decision that is shaped by motives, contexts, and relationships. Distinguishing all forms of silence is critical, as each form has different implications for organizational outcomes, employee well-being, and management interventions. While some forms of silence are based on fear, futility, or disengagement, others arise from altruism, strategic considerations, or relational interests. Recognizing this complexity helps scholars to treat silence as a communicative act with different functions and consequences.

2.1.3 Theoretical perspectives of silence

Employee silence can be examined through various theoretical lenses that provide insight into the underlying motivations and impacts of this behavior. Social Exchange Theory (SET) posits that employee attitudes and behaviors are influenced by social exchanges, which rely on trust and the expectation of reciprocity. Unspecified exchanges of socio-emotional resources foster strong relationships, but negative emotions, such as those resulting from types of antisocial communication, can disrupt these exchanges and undermine trust, leading to affective detachment and increased employee silence. When the norm of reciprocity is violated, employees may feel unsupported and isolated, further maintaining silence as a response to protect themselves from further emotional harm (Krishna et al., 2024).

Similarly, the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory emphasizes that individuals strive to acquire, retain, and protect valuable resources. The theory emphasizes that losing

resources is more mentally distressing than gaining them, causing significant stress when individuals perceive their resources are being threatened or are running low. This intense stress response occurs because the fear of loss triggers stronger emotional reactions than the prospect of gain, making resource depletion particularly demanding on psychological well-being. In this context, employees may choose silence as a strategic behavior to conserve their remaining resources, particularly in environments where job demands are high, or support is insufficient (Rai and Agarwal, 2017; Wang et al., 2020a). By not voicing concerns or issues, employees avoid potential conflicts and additional stress, thereby preserving their psychological and emotional resources.

The Theory of Effort–Reward Imbalance (ERI) and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) also contribute to understanding employee silence. ERI suggests that an imbalance between the effort expended, and the rewards received can lead to stress and dissatisfaction. When employees perceive that their efforts are not adequately rewarded, they may become demotivated and choose silence as a form of coping. Social Cognitive Theory further explains that behaviors of employees are influenced by observing others and the outcomes of their actions. If speaking up leads to negative consequences for others, employees may learn to remain silent to avoid similar outcomes (Fan and Wang, 2022; Knapp et al., 2020).

Collectively, these theories illustrate that employee silence is a complex behavior driven by the need to maintain social exchange dynamics, conserve resources, and manage effort-reward imbalances. Understanding these motivations helps organizations recognize the importance of creating supportive environments where employees feel safe to voice their concerns without fear of negative repercussions.

2.2 Motives of employee silence

As mentioned earlier, understanding the nature and underlying causes of employee silence is essential, as this behavior can lead to detrimental implications such as reduced commitment, motivation, job satisfaction, and innovation, while also fostering cynicism and obstructing timely problem identification and resolution within organizations (e.g. Rai and Agarwal, 2017).

Milliken and Morrison (2003) conducted interviews with employees to better understand the underlying reasons for their silent behaviors and found that respondents expressed concerns spanning from doubts about competence of coworkers to suggestions for enhancing core business aspects. A common thread among these issues was the fear that expressing these concerns upward could be viewed as negativity or criticism toward management. They found that most employees had been in situations where, although they were concerned about something, they were afraid to speak up and that there was a wide range of issues about which they preferred not to discuss (Schlosser and Zolin, 2012). The most frequently mentioned reason for remaining silent was the fear of being viewed or labeled negatively: employees were afraid they might damage a valued relationship or their professional reputation (Schlosser and Zolin, 2012). They were also concerned that their future in their organizations might be affected (Schlosser and Zolin, 2012). Silence can stem from diverse motives such as fear of repercussions, desire to avoid conflict, or strategic image management (Milliken and Morrison, 2003). Interpreting silence accurately is challenging due to its intricate nature, leading to potential miscommunication (Milliken and Morrison, 2003). Cultural and social factors heavily influence whether individuals choose to speak up or remain silent, highlighting the importance of organizational support and peer acceptance (Milliken and Morrison, 2003).

According to Haskins and Freeman (2015), three factors may be causing many employees to adopt a low-profile approach, avoiding drawing attention, and conforming to workplace norms: prolonged economic difficulties, or the possibility of another downturn, persistent reduced job security, and growing demands to increase productivity with fewer resources.

Brinsfield (2012) found various types of incidents to which respondents reported remaining silent, spanning from being treated unfairly by co-workers, disagreement with business decisions, witnessing sexual harassment, co-workers not doing their fair share, and ideas for process improvement.

The direct examination of silence motives enhances understanding of situations where employees have something meaningful to say but remain silent. Silence motives represent a way to quantify different forms of silence and should serve as a catalyst toward the examination of silence for a wider range of reasons than typically has been the case.

Research shows individuals are reluctant to deliver bad news, and this leads to silence (Milliken et al., 2003). In organizational settings, this effect is heightened, particularly when subordinates hesitate to communicate potential issues to superiors, emphasizing the impact of hierarchical relationships (Milliken et al., 2003). Some scholars highlight that organizations can be resistant to criticism and dissent, leading employees to withhold information to avoid conflict or disruption (Milliken et al., 2003). Many employees hesitate to bring up important work-related issues with their superiors due to fear of repercussions or futility (Milliken et al., 2003). This reluctance stems from the perception that discussing such matters is risky and often unwelcome, fostering a culture where dissent is discouraged.

According to Brinsfield (2012), individuals may choose to remain silent in various workplace contexts, driven by a multitude of underlying motivations. These motivations encompass a spectrum of *interpersonal, psychological, and organizational dynamics*. Silence motives represent the forces that provide the impulse for intentional silence (Brinsfield, 2012). The form is the underlying reason (e.g. to protect oneself, acquiescence), and the direction is toward intentional silence (Brinsfield, 2012). Moreover, the motives themselves are not necessarily unique to silence (Brinsfield, 2012). For instance, the same motive could be an encouragement for silence or voice. For example, a person could be motivated to remain silent or speak up based on a desire to defend oneself. Rather, it is when a specific motive is coupled to remain silent that it represents the real experience of employee silence.

2.2.1 Topics related to employee silence

The employee silence literature encompasses diverse related themes that can be organized across *individual, interpersonal, and organizational-societal* levels of analysis (Chou and Chang, 2017).

At the *individual level*, research themes include personality traits, individual dispositions, demographic characteristics, cognitive sense-making processes, perceptions of supervisor support, psychological safety, and employee overqualification.

Interpersonal themes focus on the quality of workplace relationships and the availability of communication opportunities within organizations.

At the *organizational and societal level*, themes encompass organizational structure, organizational climate, and broader societal cultural values that shape silence behaviors.

The following sections examine each of these themes in detail.

2.2.1.1 Individual-level themes

Individual-level themes in research on employee silence examine how personal characteristics, psychological processes, and perceptions influence decisions of employees to withhold their voices. Since silence and voice behaviors are not formally mandated but discretionary, individual differences play a critical role in determining whether employees speak up or remain silent (Chou and Chang, 2017).

Therefore, this section explores personality dispositions and attitudes, emotional responses, minority status, demographic characteristics, sensemaking processes, perceptions of supervisor support, psychological safety, and employee overqualification.

Traits, attitudes and emotions

Employee silence is closely linked to personal traits, perceptions, and emotions that determine how it is lived and understood in the workplace. It can be related to personality factors such as extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, or proactivity, which influence how employees decide whether to remain silent or speak up (Le Pine and Van Dyne, 2001; Maynes and Podsakoff, 2014; Chou and Chang, 2017; Morrison, 2023). Silence is also related to broader attitudes towards one's role, team, or organization, including identification, job satisfaction, or detachment (Morrison, 2023). Emotions such as fear, anger, or discouragement show the emotional side of silence and remind that silence is often not a conscious decision but the result of automatic reactions and thoughts (Morrison, 2014, 2023). In this sense, silence is not just a behavior, but a complex phenomenon that includes personality, identity, and emotional experiences in the workplace.

Minorities

Research has also examined how employee silence works within specific populations. Various socio-demographic factors that cause disadvantage, such as being female, having a lower level of education, depending on others, experiencing recent unemployment, and lacking a robust social network, may lead to increased likelihood of remaining silent (Morrison, 2023).

Employee silence, particularly among minority groups, poses a critical issue in organizational settings (Syed, 2014). The author (2014) argues that traditional employee voice mechanisms often overlook the unique challenges faced by minority employees, encompassing aspects of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. The literature reveals that organizational structures and top management frequently fail to mirror the diverse demographics of society, resulting in the suppression or neglect of minority voices in decision-making processes. Ethnic minority employees often find it difficult to voice concerns due to limited representation and non-inclusive workplace culture, which are further intensified by discrimination and a lack of support (Syed, 2014).

Demographic dissimilarities and generational differences

The demographic dissimilarity between different levels of an organization can impact social cohesion and communication. Research indicates that diverse groups may experience lower social cohesion and perceived psychological safety, leading to reluctance to voice minority opinions. In organizations with noticeable demographic differences between top and bottom levels, lower-level employees may feel less safe about speaking up compared to organizations with less noticeable demographic gaps. The lack of cohesion and the perceived risk of speaking up can become more pronounced in groups with differing levels of hierarchy. Studies suggest that demographic similarity, especially in boards of directors, can lead to a better perception of concerns and issues among members, highlighting the importance of both demographic similarity and friendship ties in fostering a sense of safety and openness in communication (Milliken and Lam, 2009).

Long-tenured employees tend to conform to organizational norms over time, making them less likely to notice or report issues. Organizations with a high proportion of long-

tenured employees may foster climates that discourage upward communication of problems (Milliken and Lam, 2009).

Employee silence can be significantly influenced by generational differences in the workplace. Each generation, whether Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, or Gen Z, carries distinct attitudes towards communication and authority shaped by their unique socio-economic backgrounds and technological exposures. Baby Boomers, who often value loyalty and hierarchy, might remain silent to avoid conflict or out of respect for seniority. In contrast, Gen Xers, who are known for their independence and skepticism, may stay silent due to disillusionment or a belief that speaking up would not lead to change. Millennials and Gen Z, who have grown up in the digital age and are typically more accustomed to collaborative environments and open communication, may respond to silence norms in different ways. They might challenge these norms by speaking up and voicing their opinions, or they could choose to remain silent if they perceive a lack of genuine engagement from leadership (Tan et al., 2023; Dong et al., 2023).

Sensemaking

Sensemaking refers to the structured ways individuals interpret their world (Weick, 1995). According to Morrison and Milliken (2000), employee silence arises from collective sensemaking, where employees collaboratively understand their workplace, its demands, constraints, and outcomes. They also highlight that power imbalances and certain managerial practices contribute to creating the conditions for silence to develop. These conditions foster a subjective sensemaking process, leading to climates of silence (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). Employees engage in sensemaking when their assumptions about the predictability of their work environment are disrupted (Weick, 1995). Providing negative feedback to a supervisor, a reversal of expected communication flow, exemplifies a situation deemed intrinsically risky, necessitating sensemaking (Bisel and Arterburn, 2012).

Perceived supervisor support

Perceived supervisor support refers to perceptions of employees of the beneficial treatment they receive from their supervisors, which enhances perceived organizational support when attributed to the organization's policies, procedures, or culture, thereby positively influencing affective commitment to the organization (Rhoades et al., 2001).

This concept aligns with perceived organizational support, where employees believe their superiors care about their well-being, value their contributions, and provide support (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Kurtessis et al., 2017). Supervisors play a crucial role in supporting competence and autonomy needs of employees by offering knowledge, feedback, and influencing work assignments and goals (Ashforth et al., 2007; Chong et al., 2021). They also act as role models and influence political knowledge within the organization, reducing turnover risk (Kammeyer-Mueller and Wanberg, 2003).

In organizations, employee voice is encouraged through both formal and informal channels. However, common mechanisms like open-door policies and suggestion boxes often fall short. The relationship between supervisors and employees heavily influences voicing decisions. Research indicates that when employees perceive their supervisors as supportive and approachable, they are more likely to express novel ideas and speak up. This perceived support increases the occurrence of voicing episodes and enhances the quality of suggestions (Milliken and Lam, 2009).

Perceived psychological safety

Perceived psychological safety refers to the extent to which individuals feel able to express themselves without fear of negative consequences. A higher level of psychological safety reduces the likelihood of silence, and in such an environment, collective silence is also less common. Psychological safety also influences the decision to speak up or remain silent in situations influenced by power dynamics.

At the same time, silence is not always interpreted negatively. Perlow and Williams (2003) note that silence is often seen as a virtue, associated with modesty, respect, prudence, and propriety. Silence can therefore serve to maintain self-control and appropriate behavior. Employees can remain silent to avoid mistakes, disruptions, embarrassment, or conflict. In this sense, silence acts as a protective mechanism that helps individuals to maintain their personal dignity, professional decorum, and social standing. It is reinforced by both survival instincts and social norms that encourage people to avoid risks that could jeopardize their reputation or relationships within a group.

Overqualification

Overqualification plays a major role in contributing to employee silence (Fan and Wang, 2022). The research examines how psychological contract breach, work alienation, and

justice sensitivity influence the relationship between overqualification and silence behavior. With the rise in higher education levels, economic downturns, and intense labor market competition, more individuals find themselves employed in roles for which they are overqualified. While overqualified employees have the potential to boost organizational performance and identify overlooked issues, empirical evidence indicates that they often choose silence instead. This phenomenon arises from the discrepancy between their qualifications and the job's skill requirements, leading to inefficient human resource allocation. Fan and Wang (2022) discovered a strong positive relation between overqualification and silence behavior, noting that these employees often refrain from voicing their opinions to maintain harmonious workplace relationships, despite recognizing organizational issues. This silence is amplified when psychological contracts are breached, violating norms of reciprocity and leading to diminished satisfaction and organizational identification. Furthermore, work alienation, arising from perceived unfair treatment and the resulting negative emotions, plays a significant role in this dynamic, as alienated employee often resort to silence to disengage from their work and the organization. Justice sensitivity also shapes this relationship, emphasizing the complex factors that lead overqualified employees to adopt silent behaviors.

2.2.1.2 Interpersonal-level themes

Interpersonal themes of employee silence focus on the quality and nature of relationships between employees and their supervisors, peers, and broader networks within the organization (Chou and Chang, 2017). Key interpersonal topics include leadership styles, trust relationships, and antisocial communicative behaviors that shape the relational context in which silence decisions occur.

Type of leadership

Leadership style influences employee silence behavior. Research shows that constructive leadership approaches reduce silence, while destructive leadership styles encourage it. Transformational leadership, which is characterized by individual consideration and inspirational motivation (Bass, 1985), and ethical leadership, which emphasizes bidirectional communication and moral behavior (Walumbwa and Schaubroeck, 2009),

have been empirically linked to reduced employee silence and improved voice behavior (Detert and Burris, 2007; Chen and Hou, 2016).

Conversely, negative leadership behaviors create conditions that promote silence. Abusive supervision shows a particularly strong association with employee silence, with this relationship often influenced by emotional exhaustion and psychological distress (Morrison, 2023). Other leadership characteristics that promote silence include narcissistic tendencies and knowledge-hiding behaviors, which undermine trust and increase employee disengagement.

Leadership plays a central role in shaping the communication climate in organizations. Leaders who take supportive, ethical, and transformational approaches create interpersonal conditions that encourage speaking up, while those who engage in abusive or self-serving behaviors create relationship dynamics that promote silence as a protective response.

Managerial trust

Trust in relationships between superiors and subordinates determines communicative behavior in organizations. Chory and Hubbell (2008) argue that trust exerts an unparalleled influence on interpersonal and group dynamics, with managers carrying the primary responsibility for initiating trust-building behaviors that encourage reciprocal responses from subordinates. Trust in this relational context is understood as the willingness to accept vulnerability based on the confidence that the other party will do no harm (Chory and Hubbell, 2008). Key trust-promoting behaviors include demonstrated integrity, predictable behaviors, and consistent honesty.

The critical role of supervisor trust in preventing silence is well established in the literature. Supervisors act as the organization's primary gatekeepers between cultures of silence and openness (Schlosser and Zolin, 2012). Vakola and Bouradas (2005) found that attitudes of supervisors toward silence are the strongest predictor of employee silence behavior, surpassing even top management attitudes and communication options in explanatory power.

This underscores the central responsibility of supervisors in recognizing and responding to their employees. Effective supervision requires awareness of when employees are contributing to organizational dialog with their voice and when with their silence, as this

awareness allows for targeted interventions to promote a more open communication climate (Schlosser and Zolin, 2012).

Antisocial communicative behaviors

Employee silence extends beyond supervisor-subordinate relationships to encompass interactions with peers, customers, and other organizational stakeholders (Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008). This broader relational scope suggests that managers can reduce silence by fostering supportive interpersonal relationships, enabling employees to feel secure expressing concerns and suggestions across various organizational contexts (Chou and Chang, 2017).

Workplace incivility represents a major cause of employee silence. Singh and Srivastava (2023) characterize workplace incivility as low-intensity deviant behaviors with unclear harmful intent, including offensive comments, exclusionary practices, and dismissive attitudes. Such behaviors create an environment in which employees perceive communication as risky, leading to withdrawal and silence as protective responses. The relationship between incivility and silence is often reinforced by organizational cynicism, where employees develop a negative attitude characterized by mistrust and a perception of the company's dishonesty.

Workplace bullying is a more serious form of antisocial behavior that promotes silence. Krishna et al. (2024) define workplace bullying as repeated harassment, exclusion, or offensive behavior that occurs regularly over extended periods, of time and typically involves an imbalance of power between perpetrators and victims. Both peer-to-peer and hierarchical bullying contribute to an organizational climate in which silence becomes a survival mechanism for the affected employees.

Together, these antisocial communicative behaviors create an interpersonal context that discourages voice and normalizes silence as a protective strategy. This demonstrates the importance of promoting respectful communication norms to encourage open organizational dialog.

2.2.1.3 Organizational-level themes

Organizational-level topics show how several themes within organizations influence employee silence behaviors. These address the broader organizational context that shapes communication norms and creates conditions that either encourage or discourage employee voice. Key organizational issues include the climate of silence, organizational culture, organizational justice, and organizational structure and power distribution.

Climate of silence

As found earlier, a central theme in the literature is the climate of silence, defined as the shared perception among employees that speaking up is either futile or risky (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). Such a climate is created by collective awareness and is reinforced by managerial attitudes, hierarchical structures, and communication practices that discourage speaking up (Morrison, 2011; Milliken and Lam, 2009; Bisel and Arterburn, 2012). Research shows that this climate influences employees' assessment of the risks and benefits of speaking up, with a supportive climate encouraging open communication and a weak or instrumental climate reinforcing silence (Wang and Hsieh, 2013; Krishna et al., 2024). In this way, silence becomes embedded at the collective level and limits upward communication and participation throughout the organization.

Organizational culture

Organizational culture shapes communication norms by setting implicit and explicit expectations for employee voice and silence. Many organizational cultures send out clear signals through formal and informal channels that silence is the safer career strategy, creating an environment in which employees view speaking up as a potential threat to their job security or advancement opportunities. These cultural norms encourage conformity and risk avoidance, framing voice behaviors as potentially disruptive or attention-seeking (Perlow and Williams, 2003).

The cultural pressure to remain silent intensifies in times of organizational instability. Economic uncertainty and periods of restructuring reinforce the cultural message that quiet conformity is preferable to potentially problematic vocal behavior. In such contexts, organizational culture emphasizes survival through invisibility, with employees

interpreting silence as protection from being perceived as a disadvantage to the organization (Perlow and Williams, 2003).

The cultural influence on silence also extends to formal organizational mechanisms and structures. Policies that discourage or punish voice behaviors become embedded in organizational culture, and institutionalize silence as normative behavior, while cultures that encourage participatory decision making and open feedback create different communication expectations (Huang et al., 2005). The presence of unions can counteract silence cultures by creating alternative cultural norms that protect vocal behavior (Schlosser and Zolin, 2012).

Organizational culture creates a complex dynamic around employee identification and voice. When organizational cultures send mixed messages about employee value and support, they foster ambivalent identification with the organization that reinforces silencing behaviors (Mignonac et al., 2018). Paradoxically, cultures that provide formal voice mechanisms can simultaneously discourage speaking up on potentially disruptive issues. This creates selective silence, where employees make useful suggestions while withholding concerns that could jeopardize group harmony (Knoll and Redman, 2016; Morrison, 2023).

Organizational justice

When employees feel that they are treated fairly, they are more likely to feel valued by the organization and provide valuable information. Conversely, when exposed to unfair situations, employees lose confidence in their organization, causing them to withhold their suggestions and innovative ideas. Employee silence is one of the ways that individuals respond to perceived injustice in organizations (Pinder and Harlos, 2001).

Employees with high justice sensitivity tend to perceive their inferior status, accumulate negative emotions, and strongly respond to unfair treatment (Liu and Wang, 2012; Schmitt et al. 2010). When managing difficult situations, they often resort to silence to maintain psychological equilibrium. Conversely, those with low justice sensitivity are less affected by unfair environments and are unlikely to seek psychological balance through silence when overqualified (Fan and Wang, 2022). Organizational justice encompasses perceptions of fairness and evaluations regarding the appropriateness of workplace outcomes and processes (Chory and Hubbell, 2008). Performance evaluations,

as a component of organizational justice, can act as an indicator of an employee's self-worth, value, and career potential (Chory and Hubbell, 2008). These evaluations can be assessed in terms of distributive justice, which refers to the perceived fairness of the outcomes received in a transaction, typically judged by the rule of equity, though other rules such as need or equality may also apply (Chory and Hubbell, 2008). Individuals evaluate and compare their received outcomes to a standard or the outcomes received by referents (Chory and Hubbell, 2008).

While distributive justice focuses on the fairness of outcomes, procedural justice concerns the fairness of the processes used to determine these outcomes (Chory and Hubbell, 2008). Procedural justice is evaluated based on the consistency, ethical standards, bias, accuracy, correctability, and representativeness of the procedures (Chory and Hubbell, 2008). Additionally, interactional justice pertains to the fairness and quality of interpersonal treatment during the implementation of procedures (Chory and Hubbell, 2008). Fair communication, characterized by sensitivity, respect, politeness, and dignity, enhances perceptions of interactional justice (Chory and Hubbell, 2008). Research indicates that interactional justice positively influences employee performance, supervisor-directed citizenship behaviors, and job satisfaction (Chory and Hubbell, 2008).

Organizational structure and power distribution

Morrison and Milliken (2000) argue that hierarchical arrangements can inhibit employees from speaking up. These structures can limit communication with managers, and certain organizational climates, like centralized decision-making and poor feedback systems, further discourage upward communication (Park and Keil, 2009).

In centralized organizations, employees may withhold information due to feeling undervalued, leading to a lack of diverse perspectives. Managers may reject discordant information, fostering homogeneity of beliefs. This can result in inaccurate perceptions of environmental changes at the top level. More horizontal structures facilitate information flow as there are fewer barriers to upward communication, increasing the likelihood of reaching decision-makers for implementation (Milliken and Lam, 2009).

In organizations, power distribution affects employee silence. When employees feel powerless, they are more likely to stay silent about issues. Factors like centralized

decision-making and a perception of limited job options contribute to this feeling. Educational disparities and a lack of internal promotion can widen the power gap between employees and managers, fostering silence. However, the prospect of promotion can also deter employees from speaking up due to fear of jeopardizing their chances (Milliken and Lam, 2009).

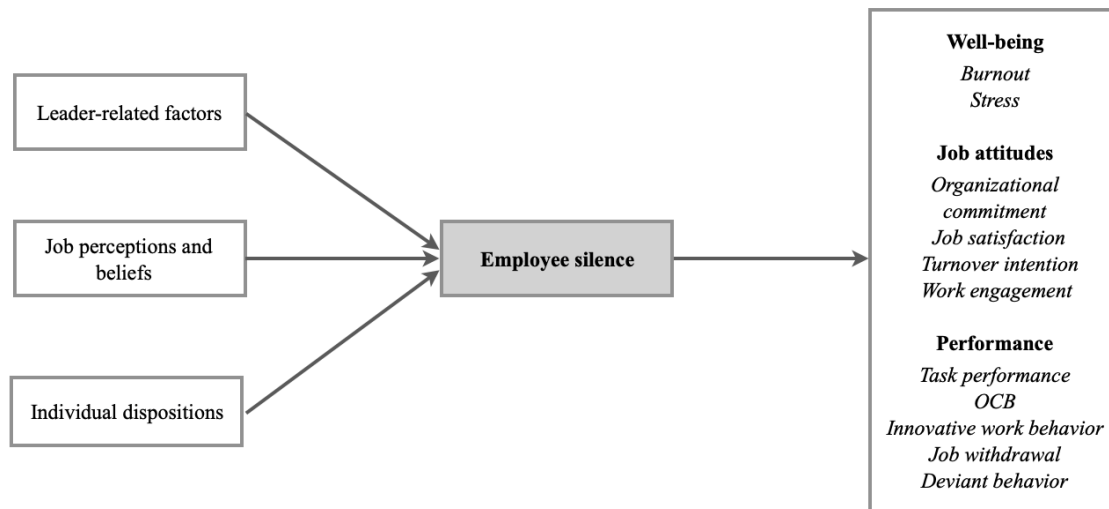
High-power distance cultures, where unequal power distribution is accepted, see higher levels of employee silence (e.g. Kwon et al., 2016). Individualism versus collectivism also affects silence, with mixed results: some studies suggest collectivistic cultures discourage dissenting opinions to maintain harmony, while others indicate these cultures promote voice behavior to enhance collective performance. Additionally, values like masculinity and high-context communication orientation can enhance the willingness of employees to speak up.

2.2.2 A model of employee silence

The debate regarding the conceptualization of silence and voice as either opposite ends of the same continuum or distinct behaviors persist. In line with the factors influencing employee silence reported by Morrison (2023) (see chapter 1), Hao et al. (2022) propose a model that studies all factors that impact the choice of an employee to remain silent and the consequences of this behavior.

Figure 6 shows the model proposed by Hao et al (2022), which includes both the antecedents and outcomes of employee silence.

Figure 6. Antecedents and outcomes of employee silence



Source: own reproduction from Hao et al., 2022

Leader-related factors

The antecedents of silence have been extensively studied, focusing in particular on leadership-related factors. Research has consistently shown that positive forms of leadership can promote employee voice, while negative forms of leadership tend to foster silence.

Expressing constructive ideas can be a challenging and risky endeavor, as it may come at a personal cost (Hao et al., 2022). Employees may feel hesitant to confront their abusive supervisors directly, as they fear losing valuable resources. As a result, they may resort to subtle expressions of discontent, such as remaining silent or finding ways to spite their supervisors. Additionally, authoritarian leaders tend to prioritize their absolute authority and expect unquestioning obedience from their subordinates, which can create a climate of fear that causes employees to withhold valuable ideas and information as a coping mechanism (Hao et al., 2022). Conversely, an empowering leader fosters employee independence in handling work-related issues, instilling confidence, and trust (Hassan et al., 2019). Similarly, transformational leaders encourage their employees to exceed expectations and cultivate a sense of trust, which may encourage employees to voice their opinions or concerns about the organization (Hao et al., 2022).

Moreover, leaders who practice ethical leadership can cultivate ethical conduct and influence the ethical behavior of their employees by rewarding morally commendable actions and disciplining inappropriate behavior. Consequently, employees who have experienced ethical leadership are more likely to have faith in their supervisors, leading to a reduced inclination to withhold work-related opinions (Hao et al., 2022).

Finally, the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory emphasizes the importance of the relationship between a leader and their followers. When these relationships are strong, they can help reduce negative expectations among employees. On the other hand, employees in low-quality LMX relationships may feel like outsiders and may only have limited interactions with their supervisors, limited to meeting the minimum requirements outlined in their employment contract (Hao et al., 2022).

Job perceptions and beliefs

Organizational identification is a key factor in predicting employee silence. When employees feel a strong connection to their organization, they are more committed and engaged at work. They also take greater responsibility for helping the organization solve problems. Employees with high levels of identification are more likely to see organizational issues as their own and believe that their ideas will be valued. Studies have shown that there is a negative relationship between organizational identification and employee silence (Hao et al., 2022).

Also, psychological safety has been found to have an impact. When a work environment is relatively safe, employees feel more comfortable engaging in open communication with their colleagues, expressing their viewpoints, and seeking feedback from their supervisors. Conversely, individuals who experience low levels of psychological safety tend to avoid risk-taking behaviors to prevent negative consequences. In essence, psychological safety can reduce the perceived risks associated with deciding to voice or remain silent, as it helps individuals conduct a cost-benefit analysis (Hao et al., 2022).

Finally, when employees feel that they are treated fairly, they are more likely to feel valued by the organization and provide valuable information. Conversely, when exposed to unfair situations, employees lose confidence in their organization, causing them to withhold their suggestions and innovative ideas. Employee silence is one of the ways that individuals respond to perceived injustice in organizations (Pinder and Harlos, 2001).

Employee silence may be predicted by the level of social support available to them. Social support has been shown to have a positive effect on individual resources and previous studies have found that individual-perceived social support from family, supervisors, and coworkers has a negative correlation with employee silence (Chen, 2018; Zhang et al., 2019). This indicates that employees who feel supported by their colleagues, supervisors, and family are less likely to remain silent at work (Hao et al., 2022).

Individual dispositions

Hao et al. (2022) report that the *Big Five personality traits* are often used to predict organizational behavior, with some traits being associated with employee silence. Extraverted individuals value their social connections, and as a result, they are more likely to engage with coworkers and supervisors by sharing their perspectives. On the other hand, conscientious individuals prioritize their duties and hard work, and they are willing to make suggestions and come up with innovative ideas to improve work situations. However, highly agreeable individuals tend to conform to group norms and prioritize cooperation and harmony in their interpersonal relationships. This makes them more likely to remain silent at work to avoid potential conflicts that could harm their relationships.

Several other variables are associated with employee silence. *Assertiveness* is a crucial factor that can impact an employee's tendency to engage in silence. Assertive individuals are more inclined to assert their interests and opinions and are less hesitant to speak up for themselves. On the other hand, employees who lack assertiveness may feel apprehensive about speaking up as they fear that doing so may harm their existing relationships (Hao et al., 2022).

Research has shown that having a proactive personality is a strong indicator of whether an employee will stay silent or speak up (Chamberlin et al., 2017).

Positive affect refers to a consistent tendency to experience positive emotions and is associated with proactive behaviors among employees. People with high positive affect tend to experience positive emotions in a variety of situations, which can lead to them taking initiative and being proactive. Moreover, prior studies have demonstrated that there is an inverse relationship between positive affect and employee silence (Detert and Edmondson, 2011; Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008). Conversely, *negative affect* is the

persistent inclination to respond negatively in various situations, which makes it more difficult for employees to engage with others and express their opinions. This is particularly relevant for employees with high levels of power distance and negative affect (Hao et al., 2022).

Power distance, which refers to the uneven distribution of power within an organization (Hofstede, 1991), is considered one of the factors that can lead to employee silence (Hao et al., 2022). In situations where power distance is high, employees often limit their verbal and behavioral expressions to avoid conflicts with their supervisors and colleagues (Hao et al., 2022).

Concerning the outcomes of silence, Hao et al. (2022) identify three types of outcomes, as reported in Figure xx well-being-related outcomes, job attitudes outcomes, and performance outcomes.

Well-being-related outcomes

The negative impact of employee silence on employee well-being is well documented in the literature since employee silence has been found positively related to *burnout* and *stress*.

Burnout is caused by prolonged exposure to chronic work-related stressors and it can be identified through symptoms such as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Hao et al., 2022). According to the authors, employee silence has a positive correlation with burnout and its three dimensions.

Previous research has found a positive association between employee silence and *stress* levels (Hao et al., 2022). According to the cognitive dissonance theory, individuals have a natural inclination to maintain consistency in their beliefs to avoid dissonance. When faced with conflicting attitudes or beliefs, people may experience the stress of being in an unpleasant motivational state. Consequently, silence can contribute to stress by causing employees to refrain from expressing their thoughts or sharing pertinent information (Morrison and Milliken, 2000).

Job attitudes

Employee silence can lead to negative attitudinal outcomes such as *reduced job satisfaction*, *organizational commitment*, *work engagement*, and *increased turnover*

intention. The fear or threat of speaking up can cause employees to remain silent, which in turn can lead to dissatisfaction and a lack of commitment to the organization. Employees may even consider leaving their current job due to these circumstances, which can lead to increased turnover rates. Additionally, when suggestions of employees are not valued, it can cause them to detach from their work, weakening their work engagement (Hao et al., 2022).

Performance outcomes

The reluctance of employees to express their thoughts and opinions in the workplace can have negative consequences on *task performance* (Morrison, 2011). Therefore, to avoid this problem, it is essential for employees to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and concerns in the workplace (Hao et al., 2022).

Silence can lead to a decrease in extra-role performance, which encompasses various positive work behaviors. For instance, engaging in Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) requires employees to go above and beyond their prescribed job responsibilities. Similarly, exhibiting creativity necessitates that employees step out of their comfort zones, explore new ways of working, and generate fresh ideas. When employees decide to remain silent, they display a negative response to the existence of a problem within the organization (Hao et al., 2022).

Remaining silent in the workplace can have a negative impact on employees, leading to *job withdrawal* and *deviant behavior*. *Job withdrawal* occurs when employees try to distance themselves from their work situation and roles, which can manifest in behaviors like leaving work early.

Additionally, withholding ideas can cause stress and discomfort, which can accumulate and result in *deviant behaviors* at work as a coping mechanism (Hao et al., 2022).

The model provides a structured overview of the key antecedents and outcomes of employee silence. While the factors, themes, and impacts identified in this framework are not exhaustive, the previous sections and chapter have attempted to cover them as comprehensively as possible.

2.3 Managerial approaches to employee silence

Managers often fail to notice and address employee silence due to several factors. The fast pace of business can limit the time for interpersonal interactions necessary to build trusted relationships, which are crucial for employees to feel their voices are valued (Haskins and Freeman, 2015). Managers may unintentionally silence dissenting voices by trying to build consensus or focusing on the “fit” during hiring processes. Whatever the reason, silence can quickly and subtly become ingrained in the organization (Haskins and Freeman, 2015).

Managers and organizations thrive on input from all employees, including constructive ideas, suggestions, cautions, recommendations, alerts, views, and dissents. Negative forms of silence can hinder the collaborative process crucial for organizational well-being and stakeholder benefit (Haskins and Freeman, 2015).

Managers generally understand the importance of being good listeners and many excel in this area. However, a notable managerial weakness is “listening for the silence”.

According to Haskins and Freeman (2015), silence within an organization often signifies underlying problems that require attention. This silence can come from fears of reprisals, concerns about damaging one’s reputation, or worries about seeming foolish or being seen as part of a marginalized minority. Additionally, apathy towards the issue, the employer, or the anticipated outcomes can lead employees to withhold their opinions. A lack of confidence in their understanding or reasoning, or simply feeling uninformed, further contributes to this phenomenon. Addressing these causes is essential for fostering an open and communicative organizational culture. To address this unwanted silence, it is crucial to acknowledge that these factors likely affect at least some employees. Recognizing this precludes the need for extensive diagnostics to determine the presence and reasons for silence, as these underlying factors are well-documented (see Van Dyne et al., 2003; Brinsfield, 2012; Milliken et al., 2003). If these four factors significantly contribute to silence, a continuous effort to mitigate them is necessary.

In line with this, Haskins and Freeman (2015) identified several key actions to mitigate fear, apathy, lack of confidence, and lack of information.

To mitigate *fear in the workplace*, managers should take several key actions. First, they should promptly provide information about any personnel-related uncertainties, such as downsizing, workforce realignment, pay cuts, hiring freezes, or early retirements. Feedback and criticism should always be given privately, and any necessary public feedback should be anonymous to avoid public reprisals. Managers should also actively work to reduce the perceived distance between themselves and employees by engaging in regular, personal interactions. Empowering employees by providing them with the necessary resources and authorization to complete their tasks is crucial. Finally, managers should encourage open communication by directly asking in meetings what is not being said and offering to leave the room if their presence is inhibiting honest discussion. This approach fosters a culture of openness and trust.

Apathy undermines optimal performance and erodes engagement, leading to complacency and possibly passive aggression. This often stems from the monotony of daily routines and the disregard for concerns and suggestions of employees. To counteract this, managers should focus on instilling a sense of stewardship and significance among employees. This can be achieved by regularly sharing stories that celebrate the organization's history and contributions and actively listening to and implementing employee suggestions. Publicly acknowledging and rewarding various forms of contributions, framing resource constraints positively, and clearly articulating the organization's mission to highlight each employee's role in it are also important. Additionally, managers should strive to reduce the rigidity of organizational silos to enhance collaboration and seek opportunities to make the work environment more enjoyable. These strategies can help combat apathy, leading to a more engaged and motivated workforce.

Addressing the *lack of confidence* in employees is not effectively achieved through mere words or encouragement to abandon such feelings. Instead, it requires an experiential journey that cannot be resolved with a single managerial intervention. Effective strategies for fostering employee confidence include assigning employees to meaningful special projects that allow them to make visible, successful contributions; implementing a process for recognizing and honoring individual achievements without creating an impression of an ever-rising standard; soliciting input of employees on their professional development desires and providing corresponding opportunities; and periodically

including selected employees in management work groups as ad hoc members to expose them to healthy managerial deliberations and discussions.

When employees feel uninformed or under-informed, they are less likely to engage and may hesitate to ask questions or share ideas. To *lack of information*, the authors recommend several key steps: review information needs against existing communication systems, ensuring alignment; evaluate physical proximity of key personnel to facilitate regular, meaningful communication; provide regular updates on business unit and enterprise activities, addressing management priorities; conduct internal social network analysis to leverage effective communication channels and mitigate negative ones; gather feedback through internal surveys to identify information gaps and address them promptly; share information proactively and creatively using engaging formats like podcasts or animated presentations; and organize regular town-hall meetings with approachable executives to foster open dialogue and transparency.

2.4 Unresolved gaps in silence research

Significant gaps in the understanding of employee silence at various levels of analysis, reveal that despite the extensive research done during the decades, further research on these topics is still needed and is relevant (Morrison, 2023). At the individual level, further research is needed on how employee silence affects job performance and turnover, two important organizational metrics that influence both individual career development and organizational effectiveness.

The gaps in knowledge become even more clear when examining the broader organizational impact of silence. Research is still needed to examine how silence affects work teams and entire organizations, despite the clear importance of contributions of employees to team dynamics, innovation, and organizational learning. This is a significant gap, as silence is likely to have effects far beyond the individual who does not speak up, potentially hindering collective problem solving and organizational adaptation.

Particularly under-researched in this organizational dynamic is how toxic work environments influence choices of employees between voice and silence. Research is still needed to explore how specifically toxic conditions, including problematic relationships

with colleagues and supervisors, dysfunctional organizational cultures, and hostile workplace climates influence employee responses. This gap proves particularly critical, as toxic environments can fundamentally alter the risk-benefit calculations employees make when deciding whether to speak up or remain silent, and can have negative individual and work-related consequences on employees.

There is also little research on the social and relational dynamics associated with silence. While research shows that relationships with colleagues strongly influence voice behaviors, scholars have not determined whether these relational effects also apply to silence or how silence spreads through social networks in organizations. This gap is particularly concerning because silence can spread. If employees observe others remaining silent, they are more likely to do so themselves.

The contextual factors that influence silence represent another important area of research. There is limited evidence on how macro factors, such as economic conditions, cultural contexts and increasingly relevant workplace arrangements like remote work influence when and why employees choose to remain silent. This limitation is particularly problematic in today's rapidly evolving workplace, where traditional assumptions about workplace communication no longer apply.

Finally, research lacks insight into how the characteristics of messages influence the decision to remain silent. Aside from the uniqueness of the information, further research is needed on how factors such as the seriousness of the problem, urgency, feasibility of solutions, or perceived novelty influence the decisions of employees to speak up or remain silent. This represents a critical gap, as these message characteristics are likely to determine whether silence is protective or harmful to both the individual and the organization.

3 Employee dissent

Building on the foundational understanding of employee communicative behavior in Chapter 1 and the examination of silence in Chapter 2, this chapter shifts the focus to the active expression of disagreement through employee dissent.

Concerning the methodology, the sources for this Chapter derive from the literature review of Chapter 1. It incorporates 50 sources to explore dissent, related themes, research gaps, and potential risks for organizations.

This chapter provides a theoretical framework for employee voiced dissent in organizations. It begins with an examination of the various definitions of employee dissent and the extent to which this form of expression constitutes disagreement or conflict of opinion with respect to organizational policies, practices, and management. The chapter then categorizes the different types of voiced dissent, namely upward, lateral, and displaced dissent, depending on to whom the dissent is directed. It also looks at the strategies employees use to express their dissent.

In addition, the chapter defines the factors that influence the expression of dissent, including individual, organizational, relational and cross-cultural dynamics, and the perceived risks of expressing dissent. The chapter highlights the importance of understanding and managing dissent as a constructive form of communication that can contribute to organizational improvement. At the same time, it warns of the potential risks and negative consequences that may arise when dissent is suppressed or not well managed. Through this overview, the chapter underlines the need to develop a corporate culture where dissent becomes an essential element of effective decision-making and sustainable business growth, thus completing the theoretical framework on employee communicative behavior of voice, silence, and dissent.

3.1 Overview of employee voiced dissent

Organizational dissent is the expression of disagreement or conflicting opinions regarding organizational practices, policies, or decisions (Hamid and Othman, 2015). This concept

includes the act of expressing disagreement and the issues about which employees voice concerns (Hamid and Othman, 2015; Kassing, 2009). Employee voiced dissent can be expressed through various channels, including feedback to management or colleagues, concerns shared with external networks such as friends and family outside the workplace (Kassing, 2009), internal communication mechanisms, or external disclosures and whistleblowing (Avtgis et al., 2007).

Despite the common understanding that dissent is disruptive or threatening to organizational harmony, the academic literature emphasizes the importance of understanding and managing dissent as a co-constructive form of communication that can play an essential role in improving and innovating an organization (Garner, 2013). However, despite its proven potential to improve decision-making processes, employee well-being, and trust, dissent is often suppressed by the prevailing belief that *management knows best* and that dissent is unnecessary. This dynamic recalls the urgency of changing the organizational perception of dissent from a disruptive force that should be suppressed to a valuable resource for organizational learning and continuous improvement.

When managed effectively, dissent can turn potential organizational conflict into strategic opportunities to early detect potential problems keeping them small, act as a protective function against wrongdoings (Bisel et al., 2024). At the same time, it is important to note that the expression of dissent also poses risks to employees and organizations, which are explored in more detail later in this chapter.

The following sections explore the definitions, forms, and strategies of employee dissent, including whistleblowing, in order to understand how organizations can effectively manage this communicative behavior.

3.1.1 Definitions of employee voiced dissent

The first studies of employee dissent emerged in the mid-1980s when Graham (1986) introduced the concept of Principled Organizational Dissent (POD), extending earlier research on whistleblowing. POD encompassed conscientious objections to legal or social norms within an organization and categorizes dissent into six forms: two are silent objections and four are vocal protests. These forms are differentiated according to

whether the dissent is expressed internally or externally and whether the dissenter remains in the organization or leaves it. Vocal forms of dissent include internal change efforts, exit interviews and public protests, with the latter two being a type of whistleblowing.

Building on this foundation, Kassing (1997, 1998) refined the conceptualization by defining employee dissent as the expression of disagreement or contradictory opinions about organizational policies and practices, essentially, the communication of views that challenge prevailing workplace norms and expectations. Dissent refers to a particular form of expression by employees in which they express their dissatisfaction or differing viewpoints about organizational practices and policies (Kassing, 1997).

Graham (1986) defines principled organizational dissent as the efforts of individuals to protest or change the organizational status quo because they have conscientious objections to current policies or practices, emphasizing the moral and ethical dimensions that are often the cause of dissent. Kassing (1997) describes dissent as a developmental process that occurs when an organizational member identifies a mismatch between their expectations and the reality of the organization, leading to the expression of disagreement or conflicting opinions.

Similarly, Kassing (1998, p.183) defines dissent as “disagreement or contradictory opinions about organizational practices, policies, and operations”, which the author later (2002, p. 189) defines as “a particular form of employee voice that involves the expression of disagreement or contradictory opinions about organizational practices and policies”. This highlights that dissent is an act of employee voice, where employees communicate their concerns about organizational matters.

Edmondson and Munchus (2007) also conceptualize dissent to be the expression of disagreement, conflicting opinions, or divergent views regarding organizational practices and policies, aligning with the view of Kassing. Kassing (2011) further narrows the definition to upward organizational dissent, where employees direct their disagreements or concerns specifically to management, and emphasizes the hierarchical nature of such interactions.

Garner (2012, p. 226) expands the concept by defining dissent as “interactions in which one or more organizational members explicitly disagree, offer suggestions, or in some other way provide feedback that they perceive as orthogonal to managerial imperatives”.

This definition emphasizes that dissent is a form of feedback that can challenge management decisions or current policies (Kassing, 1997, 2002), and practices may be shared with superiors, colleagues, or even external parties such as friends and family (Kassing, 1997). In this sense, unlike general complaints or criticism, dissent specifically targets dissatisfaction with management constraints and excludes issues that managers already agree with (Garner, 2012). Garner (2013) further describes dissent as an interactive phenomenon and argues for a process-oriented approach that considers the roles of all organizational members involved in the co-construction of dissent, thus acknowledging the collaborative aspect of how dissent emerges and is expressed in the organizational context.

Table 3 reports all the definitions of employee dissent reported in the paragraph.

Table 3. Definitions of employee dissent

Author(s)	Definition
Graham (1986, p. 2) Principled organizational dissent	"...the effort by individuals in the workplace to protest and/or to change the organizational status quo because of their conscientious objection to current policy or practice"
Kassing (1997) in Payne (2007, p. 236)	a developmental process where an organization member experiences incongruence between his/her expectations and organizational reality and ultimately expresses disagreement or conflicting opinions.
Kassing (1998, p. 183)	"disagreement or contradictory opinions about organizational practices, policies, and operations"
Kassing (2002, p. 189)	"a particular form of employee voice that involves the expression of disagreement or contradictory opinions about organizational practices and policies"
Edmondson and Munchus (2007)	the expression of disagreement, contradictory opinions, and/or divergent view about organizational practices and policies
Kassing (2011) (Upward organizational dissent)	expressions of disagreements or concerns by organizational members to management
Garner (2012, p. 226)	"interactions in which one or more organizational members explicitly disagree, offer suggestions, or in some other way communicate feedback that they perceive as orthogonal to managerial imperatives"
Garner (2013) in De Ruiter et al 2015 (employee dissent)	an "interactional phenomenon" and advocated a process approach that considers the role of the organizational members affected by the dissent (i.e., managers and colleagues) in the co-construction of dissent

Source: own elaboration

Taken together, these definitions underscore the complexity of employee voiced dissent and highlight it as a process that involves individual, moral and ethical considerations and the co-construction of meanings.

3.1.2 Forms of employee voiced dissent

Dissent in organizations is characterized by several main features (Kassing, 1998). It occurs when an employee is unhappy with the current situation and decides to challenge norms or practices of the organization. This may signify expressing disagreement and advocating for change, making dissent a confrontational act. Although originally the concept of dissent has been associated with ethical issues, it has evolved to encompass a broader range of concerns, including those driven by personal motives (Kassing, 2009). In fact, dissent can be driven by personal dissatisfaction or a strong sense of principled loyalty when the employee feels morally or ethically obligated to speak out against perceived injustices. In addition, dissent in the workplace occurs when employees openly express dissatisfaction or provide feedback that challenges policies or directives set by management (Garner, 2009; Kassing, 1997, 2002). This type of communication directly challenges the status quo, whether to superiors, colleagues or even people outside the organization, such as friends and family (Kassing, 1997).

Dissent is a particular form of verbal resistance that differs from general complaints or grievances because it focuses on dissatisfaction with managerial actions and decisions. Unlike complaints about issues such as customer behavior or competitor actions, dissent actively challenges the decisions and practices of management (Garner, 2012).

Research has examined the various audiences to whom employees express dissent, including managers and supervisors, colleagues, and external contacts such as family and friends (Kassing, 1997, 1998). Research has categorized dissent in the organization into three types depending on the target group: upward (to superiors), lateral (among colleagues) and displaced (to external parties). Dissent can also be categorized by topic: self-interest, coworker interest, and organizational interest (Kassing and Armstrong, 2002). This suggests that employees often turn to external dissent when they find it ineffective or too risky to voice their concerns internally (Madsen, 2020).

According to initial conceptualizations, dissent can be categorized into three different types depending on its nature (De Ruiter et al., 2015): personal-advantage dissent, principled dissent and other-focused dissent.

Personal-advantage dissent aims at improving the situation of an employee in the organization. This type of dissent includes objections or disagreements regarding personal working conditions or other aspects that directly affect the job; *Principled dissent*, on the other hand, involves speaking up with the aim of improving the organization. This type of dissent is not motivated by personal reasons, but by a desire to address broader issues within the organization; *Other-focused dissent* aims to improve conditions for co-workers rather than for the individual or the organization. It is important to notice that these forms of dissent are often intertwined.

Among the various forms of dissent examined in this section, this study focuses in particular on upward, lateral, and displaced dissent, as these forms represent the primary directions of expressing dissent based on their specific recipients, and directly suggest the strategic approaches that collaborators choose when they decide to express their dissenting opinions. The following section (3.1.3) presents a detailed examination of these three forms of dissent and their implementation.

3.1.2.1 Upward dissent

Upward dissent is a form of communication that can be categorized as upward communication. Upward dissent means that employees voice their concerns to higher management, believing their superiors have the power to address and rectify the situation (Hamid and Othman, 2015). It is also referred to as articulated dissent as it is directed at individuals in the organization who can effect change (Avtgis et al., 2007; Kassing, 1997, 1998). This process helps organization in identifying and solving operational and ethical problems (Bisel et al., 2024). Research shows that employees are more likely to utilize upward dissent if they are in a managerial position, are highly argumentative, have close relationships with their supervisors, and perceive a high degree of freedom of speech in the workplace (Kassing and Armstrong, 2002).

In Chapter 1, employee voice has been conceptualized as the practice of employees sharing their ideas, concerns or feedback directly with higher management to contribute to decision-making processes and organizational improvement. It is an essential mechanism for encouraging innovation and solving problems in the workplace, as it allows employees to actively shape the direction of the organization. When employees feel that their input is valued and that management is open to it, upward voice fosters a culture of transparency, trust and mutual respect. Unlike general feedback or suggestions, upward dissent is more critical and in most cases the concerns raised are aimed at challenging the status quo. Although both voice and dissent directed upwards aim to improve the organization, upward dissent tends to occur when employees perceive a significant gap between their expectations and the actions of the organization. Both forms of communication require a similar level of trust, as employees need the confidence that management will take note of their feedback and respond to it in a constructive way. Thus, upward dissent is an integral part of expressing opinions upward and provides a more critical but valuable opportunity for promoting positive organizational change (Edmondson and Munchus, 2007; Hamid and Othman, 2015).

Furthermore, by encouraging dissent, organizations have access to wider perspectives and insights, which can significantly improve decision-making processes. When employees trust that their input will be valued, they are more willing to raise concerns that would otherwise go unheard (Edmondson and Munchus, 2007). In this way, smaller problems are immediately addressed and the organizational ability to learn and adapt is strengthened, promoting a culture of continuous improvement.

Research shows that employees who participate in upward dissent are more engaged and satisfied with their organization, feel influential and have better relationships with their superiors (Kassing, 1998, 2000a, 2000b; Avtgis et al., 2007). Kassing and Avtgis (1999) found that employees who use argumentativeness (i.e., rational disagreement) tend to express upward dissent, while those who use verbal aggression (i.e., non rational responses) are more likely to engage in lateral dissent. Moreover, employees who disagree with decisions tend to go directly to their supervisors but express ethical concerns externally (Kassing and Armstrong, 2002). Employees who lack the motivation to voice their dissent to superiors and who feel alienated from the organization and their colleagues often have a negative perception of organizational practices (Kassing, 1998).

Upward dissent is often seen as proactive and socially acceptable as it provides valuable feedback to improve organizational practices (Hamid and Othman, 2015). It is generally viewed more positively than lateral dissent, because of the perceived legitimacy of raising concerns to higher levels of the organizational hierarchy (Kassing, 2009).

According to Kassing and Armstrong (2002), dissent can be an activity of impression management. According to impression management theory (Leary and Kowalski, 1990), employees are motivated to appear constructive, by focusing on organizational success and cooperative goals. In this sense, functional disagreements allow employees to show their intention to benefit the organization and their commitment to teamwork.

3.1.2.2 Lateral dissent

Lateral dissent occurs among colleagues of similar rank and involves the sharing of complaints about problems in the workplace (Hamid and Othman, 2015). This form of dissent occurs when employees feel that internal reporting channels are ineffective or inaccessible, leading them to voice their dissent to colleagues when there is no productive opportunity for upward communication (Avtgis et al., 2007; Kassing, 1997, 1998). According to Kassing and Armstrong (2002), lateral dissent occurs when employees express their dissent to colleagues rather than supervisors, especially when management or supervisors are perceived as unresponsive to suggestions.

Employees interact more frequently with peers, i.e. those who are at the same hierarchical level and have no formal authority over each other, than with other organizational members because they are more numerous compared to supervisors. These peer relationships have several important functions, including providing technical and social information, facilitating organizational adaptation, reducing uncertainty and role ambiguity, offering emotional support, and maintaining connections in technologically mediated work environments (Sollitto and Myers, 2014).

Organizational members opt for lateral dissent with colleagues as a means of expressing frustrations, especially when they are unsure whether authority figures are willing to address unsatisfactory circumstances. The frequency, proximity, and shared experiences of colleagues make them valuable recipients who can both voice complaints about the

organization and collaboratively develop solutions to workplace problems (Sollitto and Myers, 2014). In addition, lateral dissent can provide cathartic benefits and emotional support from colleagues (Sollitto and Myers, 2014).

Research shows that lateral dissent is more common under certain conditions. Employees tend to use lateral channels when upward channels are unavailable or blocked, and this is especially true for employees who are not managers. Consequently, lateral dissent is more common among non-managers, for employees with poorer relationships with supervisors, and for employees who perceive less freedom of speech in the workplace (Kassing and Armstrong, 2002). When employees want to express their opinions but feel they do not have an appropriate channel to do so, this leads to frustration and aggressive expression of dissent either to ineffective audiences within the organization or with other frustrated employees (Kassing, 2000a).

In addition, the organizational climate, especially openness to dissent, has a stronger influence on the expression of dissent than the specific issues that trigger it. Higher employee satisfaction, greater commitment, and a sense of personal influence tend to promote upward dissent while decreasing the likelihood of lateral dissent (Kassing and Armstrong, 2002).

3.1.2.3 Displaced dissent

Displaced dissent refers to expressing concerns to external parties such as family and friends, who are primarily chosen for emotional support and advice and are perceived as a safer option without organizational repercussions (Hamid and Othman, 2015). Displaced dissent is expressed to external audiences as an emotional outlet rather than as an attempt to drive change (Avtgis et al., 2007; Kassing, 1997, 1998).

According to Kassing and Armstrong (2002), employees express their dissenting opinions to a non-work audience without caring about the impression they leave, in contrast to the risks they take when expressing their dissenting opinions to managers or colleagues. In fact, sharing concerns with an external audience provides more emotional support and reduces the risk of retaliation. However, this practice reduces valuable feedback from employees within the organization, especially on critical issues such as harm and ethics,

which can give the false impression that there is less dissent and can lead to organizational inaction on these issues.

With the advent of new communication technologies, counter-institutional websites have been introduced as additional platforms for the expression of dissent (Kassing, 2009). Scholars studying dissent in organizations have found that employees increasingly express dissent through computer-mediated communication and social media, which provide anonymity and safety and reduce risk and retaliation (Chen, 2022; Kassing, 2011). Compared to face-to-face dissent, online platforms allow employees to better manage their desired impression (Chen, 2022). Early research has shown that employees use online dissent to overcome communication barriers, especially when they are concerned (Chen, 2022; Gossett and Kilker, 2006). Email has been shown to allow for more controlled messages, whether they are positive or conflictual, and the status of the exchange between leader and member influences the decision of employees to voice their dissent via email or face-to-face (Chen, 2022). Employees with lower organizational assimilation tend to articulate their dissent via email, while employees with higher organizational assimilation prefer face-to-face conversations (Chen, 2022; Hastings and Payne, 2013). In addition, dissenting posts intended for public consumption are often published anonymously or under fictitious names (Chen, 2022). Computer-mediated communication and social media blur the line between internal and external dissent, since external expressions can also reach management (Chen, 2022; Kassing, 2011). Media coverage of dissenting opinions affects the public perception of their safety. Computer-mediated communication and social media can change the psychological state of a person, as they encourage more open sharing and less socially acceptable messages compared to face-to-face interactions (Chen, 2022).

Furthermore, internal social media are user-friendly and visible web-based communication platforms within organizations where employees and managers can communicate, interact, and make sense of their work and organizational life (Madsen, 2017, 2020). This definition emphasizes the visibility of communication, interaction between organizational members and sensemaking (Madsen 2020). The affordance perspective, which examines the relationship between users and technology, identifies four important affordances of internal social media: visibility, editability, persistence and association (Madsen, 2020). These affordances, particularly visibility and persistence,

determine how internal social media influences dissent in the organization by making actions and communications of employees visible to all members and prompting them to behave strategically in what they share (Madsen, 2020).

Organizations use internal social media to improve knowledge sharing, engagement and participative communication (Madsen 2020). The efforts of managers to engage employees through internal social media can also counteract potential dissent that may arise when employees communicate through these platforms (Madsen 2020). According to Kassing (1997), involvement and participation are linked to dissent. By involving their employees, companies implicitly encourage them to question and criticize the practices and decisions of the company (Madsen 2020).

Employees use internal social media to express their dissent to both management and peers, simultaneously (Madsen, 2020). Thus, internal social media can transform how organizational dissent is handled in organizations by creating a direct communication link between frontline employees and top managers (Liu et al., 2010; Madsen, 2020).

Madsen and Verhoeven (2016) have shown that employees in internal social media pay attention to risks such as damage to reputation or violation of norms, which has an impact on their willingness to dissent (Madsen, 2020).

Finally, research by Thompson et al. (2020) shows a complex and evolving relationship between online dissent and workplace discipline. A significant number of employees either make or witness critical comments about their employers online. Although these actions are only made by a minority, they are significant enough to trigger management responses, including monitoring and disciplinary action. Employees show mixed and sometimes contradictory views on the rights of the employer to monitor and discipline versus their rights to online expression and privacy. This tension is especially noticeable in workplaces that rely heavily on technology and show the need for more transparent and fair social media policies. The findings increasingly that as social media continues to blur the boundaries between private and professional lives, more research is needed to understand and handle these emerging conflicts in labor relations.

3.1.3 Strategies of employee dissent

While the previous forms of dissent are defined by their audience and the direction they take, the strategies of dissent focus on the specific tactical approaches and communication methods that employees use when expressing their dissatisfaction. These strategies may work within specific directional forms across multiple categories, which reflect the ways that organizational members may choose to articulate their concerns.

Starting with a foundational model of employee dissent that has guided the understanding of dissenting strategy selection, these paragraphs explore key strategic dimensions, including the decision-making processes that precede dissent expression, silence as a deliberate strategic choice, upward communication tactics, lateral organizational rumbling techniques, and whistleblowing.

3.1.3.1 A foundational model of employee dissent

In developing this model, Kassing (1998) drew on several definitions of dissent proposed by scholars, which collectively emphasize several key elements. First, dissent is the result of dissatisfaction with existing conditions. Second, it means supporting ideas that are contrary to what the group normally does. Third, dissent involves openly voicing objections. Fourth, it creates dynamics of tension. And finally, dissent is primarily about matters of principle.

Kassing (1998) proposes to redefine the concept of dissent in order to address the existing confusion and contradictions related to organizational dissent. The author proposes a multi-step process for this redefinition that includes two key elements: first, the feeling of being disconnected or distanced from the organization, referred to as the experience of dissent, and second, the expression of disagreement or contradictory opinions about that organization, referred to as the expression of dissent. By distinguishing between the experience and expression of dissent, it becomes possible to examine the various behaviors associated with employee dissent.

In the organizational context, dissent refers to a sense of detachment or separation from the organization. A look at the etymology of the word shows that dissent is not necessarily

associated with conflict but can be limited to a feeling of detachment. This non-adversarial nature of dissent highlights the need to consider the different strategies that employees use when expressing their dissent.

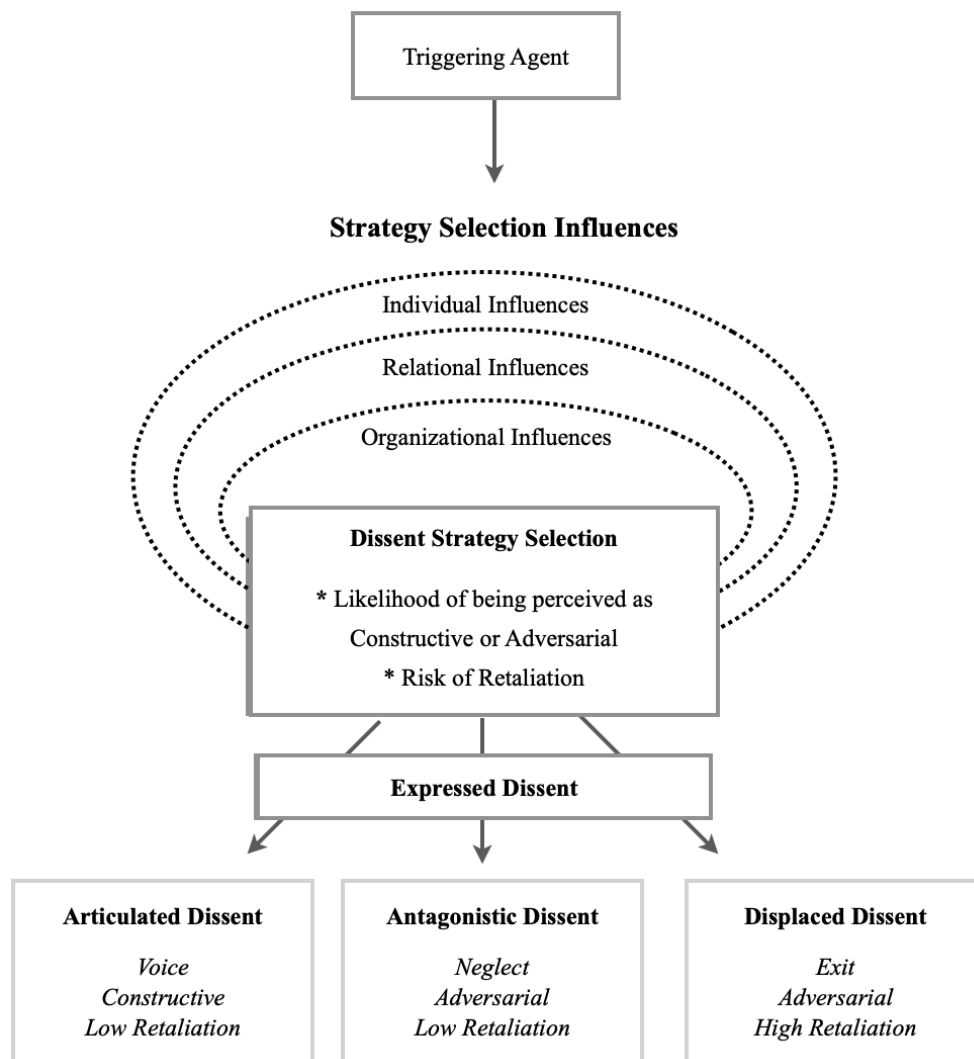
An employee can feel disconnected from his or her organization without openly expressing or demonstrating it within the organization. Thus, as Kassing (1998) argues, employees may have a dissenting opinion but choose not to express it within the organization. Instead, they direct their dissent to external audiences or express it to internal audiences who may not be able to effectively address their concerns.

Through practices such as organizational democracy, employee empowerment and employee participation, organizational members have become more involved in the decision-making process of their organizations. These practices show the importance of keeping employees engaged, as engaged employees tend to be more satisfied and committed to their company (Kassing, 1998).

The more engaged employees are in their role in the organization and the more say they are given in decision-making processes, the more disagreements and conflicting opinions they are likely to express. This can be attributed to three factors. First, employees want opportunities to express their opinions at work, and in some organizations, dissent is seen as a legitimate form of participation. Secondly, dissent may arise when employees perceive limited spaces offered by managers to speak up or that their feedback is not taken seriously. Finally, frustration may lead employees to disagree when they find themselves in organizational structures that either allow or restrict dissenting opinions (Kassing, 1998).

The conceptual model of dissent proposed by Kassing (1998) incorporates existing concepts of dissent while expanding previous understanding by emphasizing variations in employee dissent. The model (Figure 7) emphasizes how employees express their dissent and consists of four components: triggering agent, strategy selection influences, strategy selection, and expressed dissent.

Figure 7. A conceptual model of employee dissent



Source: own reproduction from Kassing (1998)

The first phase of the dissent process begins with a trigger that exceeds individual tolerance for dissent, such as ethical concerns, the importance of the issue or possible harm to oneself or others. Individual tolerance for these triggers is determined by three factors: the risk of retaliation, the seriousness of the issue, and the likelihood that it will be raised. The fear of possible retaliation primarily influences the degree of tolerance for dissenting opinions. Consequently, when a triggering factor exceeds the tolerance level, employees choose a specific strategy to express their dissent (Kassing, 2011).

The decision of employees to express their dissent is influenced by perceived quality of their arguments, resistance to change, harm to stakeholders, and personal attitudes towards the organization (Kassing, 1998). Moreover, in choosing a dissent strategy, employees are influenced by various factors at the individual, relational and

organizational levels. Individual influences include behaviors, values and expectations brought in from outside the organization, as well as individual communication behavior and behaviors within the organization. Factors such as powerlessness, conflict avoidance preferences and a sense of right and wrong affect the willingness of employees to disagree. Relational influences often depend on the type and quality of relationships fostered within the organization, especially personal interactions with superiors and the immediate workgroup climate and concern for colleagues play a key role. Organizational influences vary depending on how employees perceive the company, namely their participation in the communication network, perception of the organizational climate and identification with the organization, the perception of organizational tolerance of dissent and the influence of organizational culture on engagement with management (Kassing, 1998). Also, workplace freedom of speech policies shape beliefs of employees about the consequences of expressing dissenting opinions (Chen, 2022).

When choosing a strategy of dissent, employees consider how their dissent will be perceived, whether constructive or hostile, and the potential risk of retaliation (Chen, 2022). The backdrop of individual, relational, and organizational influences shapes considerations of employees in this decision-making process. Ultimately, employees are likely to choose one of three strategies of dissent: articulate, antagonistic, or displaced (Kassing, 1998).

Employees may choose to express their dissent directly, aggressively or passively (Kassing, 1998). Therefore, three forms of dissent are distinguished based on the choice of audience: *articulated dissent*, *antagonistic dissent* and *displaced dissent*.

Articulated dissent occurs when employees express their dissent directly within the organization to an audience that can effectively address their concerns. This is based on the belief that dissent has a corrective feedback function within organizations (Kassing, 1998). It involves open and direct communication with influential members of the organization when employees believe they will be perceived as constructive without fear of retaliation (Chen, 2022).

Antagonistic dissent occurs when employees expect to be perceived as adversarial but have some protection from retaliation (Kassing, 1998), leading them to express their

opinions to colleagues rather than superiors (Chen, 2022). They dissent primarily on issues of personal gain and directly challenge their organizations (Kassing, 1998).

Displaced dissent occurs when employees fear being perceived as adversaries and facing severe retaliation, prompting them to voice their criticism to external audiences such as friends, family, and significant others (Kassing, 1997). Displaced dissent anticipates adversary perceptions and potential retaliation, and employees voice their dissent to external or ineffective internal audiences or as part of collective action. This form of dissent is similar to neglect and exit, as employees avoid addressing their dissent directly within the organization (Kassing, 1998).

The model proposed by Kassing (1998) builds on the Exit, Voice, Loyalty (EVL) model of employee dissatisfaction proposed by Hirschman in 1970. This model provides a clear framework for understanding how employees express dissent and the different dynamics of employee dissatisfaction in organizations.

Given the complexity of dissent behavior and the recognition that existing theoretical models cannot capture all possible strategic variants, the following paragraphs examine additional approaches that employees can use when deciding whether and how to express their dissent.

3.1.3.2 Evolving dissenting strategies in the decision-making process

Garner (2013) redefines organizational dissent by emphasizing the interactive process involving dissenters, managers and employees. The author reconceptualizes dissent as a co-constructed process that involves interactions over time, rather than a one-time event.

It is a dynamic and interactive process that involves multiple phases and the participation of dissenters, managers and employees. It begins with the precipitation phase, in which an employee notices a gap between their own goals and those of management, which creates the urge to express dissent. This phase is about the internal reflections of the dissenter and the influence of previous interactions and the expected reactions of managers and colleagues who help shape the environment and expectations of the dissenter. In the first phase of the conversation, the employee voices his or her dissent, chooses the audience, usually their manager or peers, and communicate the message

based on past experiences and perceived effectiveness. The immediate reactions of the audience are critical, as managers and peers judge the dissent, which sets the tone of the conversation and affects how effective it seems. This effectiveness can be measured in a number of ways: resolution of the issue, achievement of the goals of the dissenter, or even just the opportunity to speak up. Following this, the process moves to the residual communication phase, where the effects of the initial conversation continue to resonate within the organization. Stories and labels are exchanged about the dissent that shape the organizational culture and influence future expressions of dissent. These stories, in which the dissenter is portrayed as hero, villain, or victim, are decisive for whether dissenting opinions are supported or discouraged in the future.

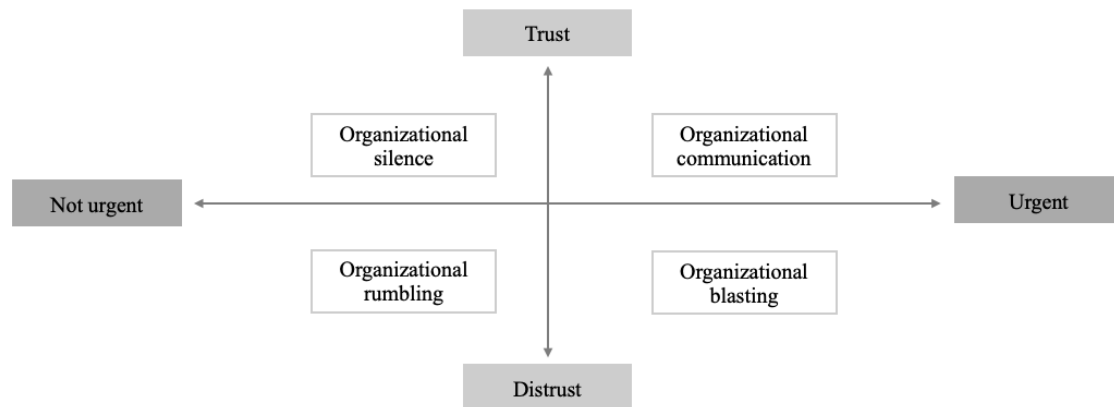
Organizations that encourage employee open participation should be aware that this invites employees to question and criticize organizational practices and decisions and thus express their dissent (Madsen, 2020). In line with the typologies of dissent, there are several strategies that employees may use.

Figure 8 shows different strategies of dissent in the decision phase of organizational change, along two key dimensions: trust and urgency. The vertical axis represents trust and ranges from high trust at the top to low trust or distrust at the bottom. The horizontal axis reflects the urgency of the situation. It ranges from not urgent on the left to urgent on the right.

According to Edmondson and Munchus (2007), the upper right quadrant (high trust, high urgency), is that of organizational communication, where there is open and constructive dialogue. Employees feel safe to share concerns and take part in decisions because they trust the organization and see the need for quick action. This reflects *upward communication*, where employee input is welcomed and valued. In the upper left quadrant (high trust, low urgency), there is *organizational silence*. Employees keep a low profile and trust that problems will be resolved over time without immediate intervention. The lower left quadrant (low trust, low urgency) shows *organizational rumbling*. Here, dissatisfaction is expressed in indirect or informal ways. Employees distrust the organization, but the lack of urgency keeps them from addressing the issue directly. Finally, the lower right quadrant (low trust, high urgency) represents the *organizational blasting*. Employees voice dissent strongly and often confrontationally because they do not trust management and believe quick action is needed. Overall, the model shows that

how employees express dissent depends largely on the level of trust and urgency in the organization.

Figure 8. Dissent strategies in the decision-making phase of change



Source: own elaboration from Edmondson and Munchus (2007)

Strategies of silence

When employees remain silent, they withhold information about potential problems because they fear negative consequences or believe their concerns will not be taken seriously (Hamid and Othman, 2015). As recalled in chapters 1 and 2, silence is likely to occur when an issue does not seem serious enough to justify personal risk. In these cases, since no open dissent occurs, there is no disruption in the organization, and sometimes problems are resolved independently by decision makers who reach the same conclusions as employees (Edmondson and Munchus, 2007).

While some researchers do not view silence as a type of dissent, it is still a common way employees respond to dissatisfaction. Even when they disagree, many employees stay quiet because they fear punishment or believe speaking up will not make a difference (Kang, 2025). In such cases, silence becomes a deliberate choice in which employees weigh the risks and benefits of expressing their dissent or remaining silent (Rahmani et al., 2023; Milliken et al., 2003). This intentional silence reflects an active decision to protect oneself or avoid wasting efforts, even when disagreement exists.

According to Bisel et al. (2024), both organizational dissent and employee silence are communication processes that are shaped by individual assessment of potential costs and benefits. Defensive silence is a type of unspoken dissent where employees withhold their objections for fear of retaliation (Morrison, 2014). This type of silence is especially

concerning in ethical issues as it allows wrongdoing to go unchecked, leading to what Bisel (2018) refers to as “organizational moral ignorance”. This occurs when companies fail to align their practices with moral values of employees. Employees may choose to remain silent for a variety of reasons, such as fear of retaliation, blaming their managers for problems, doubting their understanding of situations, or expecting management to ignore their concerns (Bisel and Arterburn, 2012). Defensive silence can help preserve relationships and prevent conflict, but it harms work goals in the long run because important problems remain unresolved (Bisel et al., 2024).

The decision-making process in which employees choose between upward dissent or defensive silence is characterized by a complex communication process (Bisel et al., 2024; Garner, 2013; Kassing, 1997). It begins with a dissent-triggering event in which employees recognize that they disagree with company policy or practice (Kassing and Armstrong, 2002). Recognize it often causes anxiety and slows the sensemaking, especially when dissent goes against company norms. At this point, employees consider whether to voice their dissenting opinion or remain silent, based on the pre-existing trust in management (Okafor et al., 2021; Zanin et al., 2016) and past experiences (Kassing, 2011; Detert and Edmondson, 2011). The final stage of this process, in which dissent is either expressed or withheld, depends largely on managerial response, which in turn influences future decisions to dissent or remain silent, creating a cycle in employee communication behavior (Garner, 2013; Tourish and Robson, 2003).

Bisel and Arterburn (2012) investigated the reasons why employees prefer to remain silent rather than give negative feedback to their managers and identified two important resources for raising awareness: expectations and identities. Employees often expect negative consequences, such as losing their job or facing retaliation, or they believe that their feedback will be ignored, so speaking up feels useless, or they may also feel that giving feedback is not their responsibility. Furthermore, some employees doubt their competence due to their personal identity and do not feel qualified to contribute. Silence in organizations is influenced by how risky employees think it is to speak up and by their position in the hierarchy, creating a climate in which feedback is withheld. This harms both the individual and the organization, since useful ideas and input are lost. To avoid this, organizations should build an environment that encourages open communication and

supports transparency and constructive feedback, which is essential for organizational improvement and success (Bisel and Arterburn, 2012).

Strategies of upward employee dissenting expression

Research has identified different tactics that employees use in their communication with supervisors (Kassing, 2002): (a) informal and personal communication (personal tactics), (b) talking about and conforming to role requirements and job expectations (contractual tactics), (c) regulation and careful impression management (regulative tactics), and (d) direct negotiation and explicit discussion (direct tactics). These tactics show how employees balance relational or contextual factors when dealing with their superiors. Personal and direct tactics focus on the relationship itself, while regulative and contractual tactics focus on expectations tied to the job and work environment (Kassing, 2002).

Kassing (2002) identifies five different categories that describe the various methods employees strategically use to express upward disapproval. These categories include the *direct-factual appeal*, *repetition*, *solution presentation*, *circumvention*, and *threatening resignation* and are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Typologies of upward dissent strategies

Strategy	Definition
Direct-factual appeal	Supporting one's dissent claim with factual information derived from some combination of physical evidence, knowledge of organizational policies and practices, and personal work experience
Repetition	Continuing to draw attention to one's dissent across time—either verbally or behaviorally and often collectively with other employees
Solution presentation	Providing solutions to address the dissent-triggering issue rather than or in addition to evidence
Circumvention	Expressing one's dissent to someone higher in the chain of command than one's immediate supervisor
Threatening resignation	Using the threat of resignation as a form of leverage for obtaining responsiveness and action from supervisors and management

Source: own reproduction from Kassing, 2002

Employees utilize the to support their dissenting statements with factual information derived from physical evidence, organizational policies and practices, and personal work

experiences. This approach is consistent with the concept of active-constructive voice as employees actively gather evidence, draw on their experiences and articulate their assertions. It is considered constructive because employees show cooperation by basing their assertions on facts, evidence and workplace experiences rather than relying on unfounded opinions, aggressive attacks or misdirected complaints (Kassing, 2002).

Repetition is about repeatedly expressing a dissenting opinion on a particular issue in order to eventually gain acceptance for the dissenting opinion. However, excessive, repeated dissent within a short period of time can be perceived as mere complaining and negative criticism, like an active-destructive voice. Conversely, consistent and repeated expression of dissent over an extended period of time can remind managers and supervisors of the commitment and conviction of the dissenter, which is similar to an active-constructive voice. The timing and frequency of repetition can shape how managers view dissent and influence how open they are to it (Kassing, 2002). Bringing up the same issue multiple times may start as a constructive approach, but if the problem is never solved, it can turn into a less effective form of dissent (Bisel et al., 2024).

The *solution presentation strategy* differs from the direct-factual appeal strategy in that employees offer solutions in addition to or instead of evidence when expressing dissent. In this strategy, employees give detailed solutions to specific problems where they disagree. By doing so, they offer managers a clear way to address the concerns raised through dissent. The forms and feasibility of solutions may vary and range from written letters to work group discussions or direct conversations with line managers. This approach is consistent with the concept of active-constructive voice, in which employees express their opinions constructively and allow managers and supervisors to address employee dissent in meaningful and specific ways (Kassing, 2002).

When employees do not respond to dissenting opinions from their immediate supervisors, they strategically choose to voice their disagreements to higher-level audiences within the organization. This approach is referred to as *circumvention* and it occurs when the immediate supervisor is not receptive, when the employee expects that he or she will not be receptive, and/or when the issue of dissent directly affects the immediate supervisor. Hence, taking dissent to someone higher in the hierarchy instead of addressing it with the immediate supervisor. This strategy can disrupt the goals of relationship management (Bisel et al., 2024). The nature of circumvention appears to be shaped by contextual and

relational factors. When employees use circumvention to challenge unethical practices or unresponsive supervisors, they show an active and constructive form of voice. In such cases, circumvention is motivated by specific issues and allows employees to position themselves as cooperative rather than adversarial. However, when employees bypass supervisors without giving them the opportunity to address their concerns, circumvention assumes an adversarial role, like the active-destructive voice (Kassing, 2002).

In some cases, employees expressed dissent to higher authorities, *threatening resignation*. With this strategy, employees wanted to utilize the possibility of resignation as leverage to get supervisors and management to act. When health and safety issues are urgent and pressing, they provide an opportunity for workers to present their dissent as principled and their voice as constructive. However, assessing how urgent and serious the issue is can shape whether the threat of resignation is seen as a constructive or a destructive response. When employees frame their resignation as a principled stand against unsafe and intolerable working conditions, they are demonstrating an active and constructive voice. In contrast, when supervisors and managers view threatening resignation as antagonistic and unprincipled, dissent may be perceived as destructive (Kassing, 2002). Issuing an ultimatum to resign if concerns are not addressed is the most threatening and least effective strategy of dissent (Bisel et al., 2024).

Garner (2009) has integrated the concepts of dissent and upward influence and identified eleven types of dissent messages: *solution presentation, pressure, coalitions, direct-factual appeals, venting, circumvention, exchange, inspiration, humor, repetition, and ingratiation*. The author notes that employees often voice their dissent to seek advice, obtain information or provide guidance, with obtaining information and advice being the most common primary goals. Secondary goals, such as managing identity and conversations, actively determine how employees choose their dissent strategies. The goals behind dissent influence the types of messages. For example, solution presentations and direct-factual appeals are linked to goals such as counseling and changing opinions. Emotional support and coalition building are common when seeking support and expressing frustrations. The effectiveness of dissent should be measured by the extent to which the goals of the dissenter are achieved, not just the change in the organization. Managers should understand the strategic reasons behind dissent and promote open communication to address employee concerns effectively (Garner, 2009).

Prosocial dissent means voicing concerns openly, actively and constructively. It is perceived as the most competent form of dissent because it is the least threatening to the social face of the participants (Bisel et al., 2024). According to Bisel et al. (2024, p. 1), prosocial “implies socially skillful and not necessarily beneficial to society”. Furthermore, Kassing (2005) found that working adults perceive prosocial dissent, where concerns are expressed openly, actively and constructively, as the most competent form of dissent compared to repetition, avoidance and threatening resignation. Kassing (2005, 2011) explained that these upward dissent strategies lie on a continuum of face threat, with prosocial dissent being the least face threatening and most competent communicatively, while threatening resignation is the most face threatening and least competent. Repetition and circumvention occupy a middle, with repetition being considered more competent than circumvention because early repetition often begins as prosocial dissent and only becomes less competent if it is not resolved. Conversely, circumvention tends to disrupt ongoing relationship management goals with managers.

Strategies of organizational rumbling

In organizations, there are often situations where employees disagree with policies, strategies or decisions. Some employees voice their concerns openly by going to top management, while others use less direct ways to express dissent. One of these indirect forms is organizational rumbling.

Organizational rumbling refers to situations where employees express their dissatisfaction by discussing issues with like-minded colleagues without formally bringing them to the attention of decision makers (Hamid and Othman, 2015). This type of dissent is characterized by widespread complaints and the creation of subgroups where employees privately discuss problems but avoid raising them with superiors. For example, employees may criticize a manager in informal conversations but stay silent in formal meetings, especially if the issue does not seem worth the personal risk. This behavior is similar to organizational silence, where dissent is present but not expressed in official settings. Despite the lack of direct communication with senior leadership, some concerns may still be raised when decision makers independently recognize the same issues (Edmondson and Munchus, 2007). Organizational rumbling, therefore, is a form

of dissent that may indirectly influence change but lacks the transparency and openness of formal dissent.

Strategies of organizational blasting

Organizational blasting is a powerful and often disruptive form of dissent in which employees bypass their direct supervisors to take their concerns directly to higher authorities or stakeholders who are in a position to effect change. This form of dissent arises in situations where employees feel that their immediate decision makers are either unresponsive or unable to address urgent issues. It is often compared to internal whistleblowing and involves employees sharing their negative feedback and criticism with superiors or external stakeholders in order to correct what they perceive as urgent and unresolved issues (Edmondson and Munchus, 2007).

The decision to engage in organizational blasting usually arises from a breach of trust between employees and their direct supervisors. Employees distrust their direct supervisors or account them as responsible for the problematic decisions, leaving them powerless to speak up through normal channels. As a result, they take their concerns to higher-level managers or outside bodies they believe will respond and take action. This approach often shows a strong sense of urgency, as employees push for immediate solutions to serious organizational problems.

Organizational blasting can also be seen as an extension of the circumvention strategy (Bisel et al., 2024). While this approach can help ensure issues are heard, it may also create internal conflict. By going over their supervisors, employees risk damaging trust and professional ties in the hierarchy. Blasting can also divide teams or departments, especially when the dissent lacks consensus or solid evidence.

3.1.3.3 Whistleblowing

Whistleblowing is “the disclosure by organizational members (former or current) of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action” (Near, Miceli, 1985, p. 4). Scholars studying voice (e.g. LePine and Van Dyne, 1998) have not traditionally looked at whistleblowing in detail, as it differs from employee voice in terms of purpose, tone and

ethical implications. However, whistleblowing is increasingly recognized as an important way for employees to speak up, especially when it comes to addressing serious wrongdoing within the company. As a form of organizational dissent, whistleblowing can be directed to both internal and external parties and represents an escalation of dissenting voices (Kenny et al., 2020; Zeng et al., 2020). This escalation usually occurs when managers ignore or punish internal dissent, or when employees are unable to use the traditional grievance channels. Therefore, dissent is distinct from, but related to, employee voice and whistleblowing: While employee voice is a broader concept that includes dissent, whistleblowing involves reporting problems to external bodies such as the media or regulators (Kassing, 1998, 2009, 2011). As mentioned, Graham (1986) first introduced principle-driven organizational dissent focused on dissent motivated by ethical considerations. In this form, employees protest or attempt to change the status quo of the organization because they object to current policies or practices on moral grounds (Hamid and Othman, 2015). This type of dissent is particularly relevant in whistleblowing research, especially in cases involving serious organizational wrongdoing such as financial fraud (Hamid and Othman, 2015). In these situations, principled dissenters highlight issues of principle and aim to correct serious ethical problems (Hamid and Othman, 2015).

Whistleblowing is a challenging form of communication that requires special attention. It occurs when employees express dissent after witnessing serious misconduct that violates ethical codes, organizational rules, or laws. As an act of dissent, it is the open disclosure of serious misconduct by an individual motivated by the public interest (Martin and Rifkin, 2004), raising issues of freedom of expression, organizational resistance, and ethical dilemmas (Mazzei, 2015). For this reason, Mazzei and Ravazzani (2020) have broadened the conceptualization and defined whistleblowing as an act of communication, a form of employee voice and, in particular, dissenting voice, which has to do with freedom of expression, organizational resistance and ethical dilemmas.

Whistleblowing plays a key role in detecting fraud and organizational misconduct. It brings important benefits by helping to prevent financial losses, litigation and reputational damage (Iwai et al., 2020). The person who discovers wrongdoing in their professional role voluntarily reports it to a body that is in a position to investigate and resolve the issue (Martin and Rifkin, 2004). Zeng et al. (2020) describe internal dissent as a step that often

comes before whistleblowing. Employees usually start by raising their concerns internally, but when these mechanisms fail, they turn to external channels. This trend is also supported by research showing that internal dissent is a fundamental step leading to whistleblowing (Miceli and Near, 2005).

Whistleblowing and organizational dissent have common characteristics and differences. Both concepts involve raising concerns about organizational practices, but whistleblowing is a particular form of principled dissent (Hamid and Othman, 2015). Dissent in organizations can include issues ranging from personal complaints to ethical violations; whistleblowing usually addresses serious wrongdoing such as illegal or unethical actions (Hamid and Othman, 2015). Both are often motivated by a desire to maintain ethical standards and improve organizational practices, although whistleblowers may also receive legal protections (Hamid and Othman, 2015). The authors (2015) stress also the role of internal versus external reporting: internal whistleblowing allows the organization to take corrective actions within the organization, while external whistleblowing, which involves public disclosure, can cause major reputational damage. Employees who engage in internal whistleblowing bypass unresponsive decision makers, which is less damaging and risky than external whistleblowing (Hamid and Othman, 2015). Internal whistleblowing allows organizations to manage and correct wrongdoing internally, while external whistleblowing involves public disclosure through the media. Organizational dissent is generally more subjective as it does not usually result in media coverage. However, dissenters take all the risks of speaking up, unless it involves discriminatory issues, while whistleblowers may receive some legal protection (Hamid and Othman, 2015). Both groups are characterized by their refusal to conform to the actions or policies of an organization that they find objectionable and are distinguished by their conscientious opposition (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007). Despite their nonconformity, both dissenters and whistleblowers paradoxically want to remain part of the organization because they believe in their ability to effect positive change from within (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007). Their motivations come mainly from their sense of loyalty and honesty. Dissenters and whistleblowers see themselves as loyal employees whose commitment and integrity surpass that of their colleagues. They see their commitment to the organization as a reason to speak up and view their actions as ways to improve the organization rather than undermine it (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007). This sense of loyalty

is expressed in their decision to voice their concerns internally rather than simply leaving the organization and demonstrates their hope that their principled stance will lead to organizational improvement (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007).

Dissenters and whistleblowers differ also in their approaches and implications (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007). The main difference is how aware they are of the cultural resistance to criticism of their organization and how they respond to it. Whistleblowers recognize that their organization is resistant to internal criticism, so they are forced to bypass the usual reporting channels to expose problems, which often takes them outside the organization (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007). In contrast, dissenters remain optimistic and believe that their criticism is valued and respected by management. They aim for constructive dialog within the hierarchy of the organization and expect a reciprocal and respectful exchange (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007). When they see that internal discussion is ineffective, this approach can escalate into whistleblowing (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007). The second difference lies in the methods and possible consequences. Dissenters act strictly within the organizational structure and respect the authority of their direct supervisor. Constructive responses at this level can benefit both the organization and the individual without causing harm (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007). Internal whistleblowers, however, escalate the issue within the organizational or outside their department and risk retaliation from their immediate superiors or higher management (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007). External whistleblowers who report issues outside the organization face greatest consequences and may harm both the organization and themselves (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007). Finally, principled dissent is characterized by its form and intent and aims to protest or change the policies or actions of the organization (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007). Unlike roles such as devil's advocate, dissent is driven by personal conscience and authenticity rather than role-playing. It involves openly speaking out against or refusing to support certain organizational policies, which leads to a crisis in the social and organizational environment in which it occurs (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007).

Factors influencing whistleblowing intentions

The decision of internal employees to report wrongdoing depends on a combination of moral beliefs, performance and organizational factors (Miceli and Near, 1992). Employees are less likely to speak up if they do not feel a moral duty or if reporting is not an explicit requirement of their job role (Miceli and Near, 1992). In addition,

employees who rate their job performance as below average are less likely to report misconduct (Miceli and Near, 1992). The organizational structure is also decisive. Highly bureaucratic environments discourage internal whistleblowing. However, they may turn to external authorities if they believe the wrongdoing harms the public or colleagues (Miceli and Near, 1992). This depends on how harmful the wrongdoing appears to them. This suggests that organizations can promote more proactive whistleblowing behaviors, improving organizational policies, reducing bureaucracy, and fostering a supportive environment for reporting (Miceli and Near, 1992).

Individual factors play a key role on the intention to whistleblow within organizations. Moral values play a crucial role: individuals who prioritize fairness over loyalty are more likely to report wrongdoing as they see whistleblowing as an act of justice (Iwai et al., 2020). Conversely, fear of retaliation can withhold the intention to report wrongdoing.

Situational factors also affect this decision. Peer ethical behavior plays a central role, setting a standard and reducing the fear of retaliation (Iwai et al., 2020). The seriousness of the misconduct matters too. People are more inclined to report when the perceived benefits of addressing such issues outweigh the potential risks (Iwai et al., 2020). The overall work climate, peer norms, and support from colleagues also play a key role, since an ethical climate of supportive behavior create an atmosphere in which whistleblowing is more likely to be accepted and encouraged (Iwai et al., 2020). A supportive communication climate, based on open dialog and mutual respect, makes employees feel safe and trusted, which strengthens internal reporting. Having clear reporting channels, ethical leadership, and protection against retaliation are crucial in building this trust. When leaders act with integrity and promote open conversations about ethics, they create a culture where employees are more willing to raise concerns internally. This in turn reduces the chances of external whistleblowing and the risks associated with it (Morrison, 2011; Zeng et al., 2020). Leaders with strong integrity earn the trust of employees and create a safe environment where people feel comfortable raising concerns. This openness allows problems to be addressed early and supports a healthier workplace. On the other hand, when leaders show little integrity, employees lose confidence in internal systems and are more likely to report issues outside the organization, particularly in serious ethical cases (Zeng et al., 2020).

3.2 Themes and main factors related to dissent

Employee dissent is influenced by several factors that determine whether, how, and to whom employees express their disagreements. Research has shown that the expression of dissent is the result of the interplay of various individual, organizational, relational, and contextual elements that influence decision-making processes of employees regarding whether to speak up or remain silent.

This section examines the broad range of factors that influence the expression of dissent in organizations. It begins with an examination of the triggering events and specific issues that lead employees to consider expressing dissent. Given the complexity of the topic and the recognition that current models and strategies presented in the previous paragraph are not exhaustive, the section provides a detailed examination of the various dimensions of influence, including individual, organizational, relational, and cross-cultural dynamics, that combine to influence workplace dissent.

3.2.1 Triggering events and issues

Research on organizational dissent has triggering events, target groups, strategies, tactics and the development of dissent within organizations (Madsen, 2020). According to Kassing (1998), dissent occurs when a triggering event exceeds the tolerance level of a person and reveals a gap between expectations and reality. This causes employees to reconsider their decisions. These triggers may be ethical concerns, the importance of an issue or potential danger to self or others. Bad decisions, especially if they are illegal or unethical, are a common trigger that leads to dissent. When deciding whether to speak up, employees weigh the strength of their arguments, the potential risks and their feelings towards the company. Fear of management retaliation can also silence employees (Bisel et al., 2024), making the study of dissent important for both practical and social reasons.

Sprague and Ruud (1988) identified nine different triggers for employee dissent: treatment of employees, organizational change, decision making, inefficiency, conflicting roles and responsibilities, resources, ethics, performance evaluation, and avoidance of

harm to self, colleagues, or customers. Kassing and Armstrong (2002) summarize them in a table as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Typologies of dissent-triggering events

Category	Description
Employee treatment	Dissenting about how employees are treated within the organization concerning fairness and employee rights
Organizational change	Dissenting about organizational changes and the implementation of those changes
Decision making	Dissenting about organizational decisions and how decisions are made within the organization
Inefficiency	Dissenting about inefficient work practices and ineffective processes
Role/responsibility	Dissenting about one's work role and responsibilities or the roles/responsibilities of others
Resources	Dissenting about the use and availability of organizational resources
Ethics	Dissenting about unethical practices that exist within the organization or that employees are expected to enact within the organization
Performance evaluation	Dissenting about how one's or others' work is being evaluated or about the performance evaluation process
Preventing harm	Dissenting about things an organization may do to endanger self, coworkers, or customers

Source: own reproduction from Kassing and Armstrong (2002)

The triggers highlight common sources of tension that drive employees to voice concerns. Dissent may arise over fairness and rights of employees or over how organizational change is implemented. Decision-making can also lead to dissatisfaction when employees disagree with the way decisions are made or are excluded from the process. Frustration also grows from inefficiency, unclear responsibilities, or disputes over how resources are used. Ethical concerns are another critical trigger, as well as unfair performance evaluations.

3.2.2 Individual influences of dissent

The following sections examine how factors at the individual level influence the expression of dissent in the organizational context. Personal risks, personality traits, communication skills, perceptions of organizational justice, employee well-being, work-related rumination, and the fulfillment of psychological contract are examined for their influence on dissenting behavior. These individual characteristics have a significant impact on the strategic choices of employees in expressing opinions, ranging from direct confrontation with management to subtle or covert forms of dissent.

Personal risks

The literature on dissent in organizations has examined the considerations employees make before expressing their dissent (Madsen, 2020). Typically, employees consider three main factors: the risk of retaliation, the perceived seriousness of the issue, and their belief that dissent will effectively resolve the issue (Kassing, 1998; Garner, 2018).

These considerations also apply to (internal) social media platforms, where the notion of self-censorship is particularly relevant (Madsen, 2020). Madsen and Verhoeven (2016) have identified four main risks that employees weigh up before posting on (internal) social media: the risk of providing low-quality content, the risk of damaging personal reputation, the risk of violating unwritten organizational norms, and the risk of receiving negative feedback from colleagues and managers.

Personality and communicative traits

Individual personality and communicative traits affect how employees express dissent in the workplace. Argumentativeness, internal locus of control, organizational assimilation, organization-based self-esteem, and lower levels of verbal aggressiveness are traits associated with more frequent and articulated dissent (Croucher et al., 2019; Kassing and Avtgis, 2001; Payne, 2007). Conversely, burnout is associated with lower levels of dissent as it reduces the energy and motivation employees need to speak up (Avtgis et al., 2007). Internal locus of control and an individualistic orientation increase upward dissent, while external locus of control and collectivism in collective cultures also predict upward dissent due to demographic change (Chen, 2022). In addition, feelings of powerlessness,

conflict avoidance and a strong sense of justice influence the willingness of employees to engage in dissent (Kassing, 1998), suggesting that both individual characteristics and cultural factors influence the way dissent is communicated.

Argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness are two aggressive communication traits that, when present to a high degree, cause employees to display assertive or forceful communication behaviors (Zhan and Hamble, 2016), which in turn influences how employees express their dissent in organizations. Argumentativeness is a constructive personality trait that encourages individuals to take part in discussions on controversial issues by defending their views and challenging opposing arguments (Zhan and Hamble, 2016). It shows a balance between approaching or avoiding conflict. Individuals who are highly argumentative tend to express dissent when they see a gap between their current and desired situation. In organizational settings, these individuals are effective at engaging in dissenting behavior to improve unsatisfactory situations (Zhan and Hamble, 2016). However, when the risk of retaliation is high, employees often strategically choose to share their dissent with colleagues instead of superiors. This helps them to protect their psychological well-being while reducing negative consequences (Kassing, 1998). Conversely, individuals with a tendency towards conflict avoidance are more likely to express their dissent outside the organization and seek emotional support from non-organizational members who can show compassion but cannot change the situation (Zhan and Hamble, 2016).

On the other hand, verbal aggressiveness is a hostile and destructive interpersonal trait that damages others psychologically by attacking their self-concept, character or competence (Zhan and Hamble, 2016). In the workplace, it usually manifests in verbal or passive forms rather than physical ones and tends to increase during periods of organizational change (Zhan and Hamble, 2016). Individuals with high verbal aggression are more likely to engage in latent dissent by expressing their frustration to colleagues due to a lack of argumentative skills (Kassing and Avtgis, 1999). However, prosocial verbal aggressiveness emphasizes cooperative and supportive communication and contributes to upward dissent, where employees express their concerns directly to supervisors or who can address them. This constructive approach aligns with overt upward influence, as it encourages clear and open communication of concerns (Kassing and Kava, 2013; Zhan and Hamble, 2016). Thus, while argumentativeness fosters overt

and direct dissent, verbal aggressiveness tends to lead to covert and less constructive forms of dissent (Zhan and Hample, 2016).

Well-being

Employee well-being is a critical factor in the success of an organization, as it has a direct impact on productivity, engagement and overall job satisfaction. Well-being encompasses physical, emotional and mental health and is influenced by various factors in the workplace such as work demands, interpersonal relationships and company culture. When disagreements are dealt with constructively, they can lead to positive organizational change and innovation. However, unaddressed dissent or lack of opportunities for healthy expression can affect employee well-being and lead to burnout, disengagement and even job turnover. Burnout, for example, is characterized by severe emotional exhaustion, frustration, anger and cynicism (Maslach, 2003; Maslach and Goldberg, 1998). Research identifies three key components of burnout: emotional exhaustion, diminished personal accomplishment, and depersonalization (Avtgis et al., 2007). Emotional exhaustion refers to feeling emotionally drained and overwhelmed; diminished personal accomplishment reflects a sense of incompetence and lack of productivity; depersonalization is a relational dimension involving an emotional detachment and disconnection from colleagues (Avtgis et al., 2007). Moreover, burnout significantly increases the likelihood of turnover and decreases job satisfaction, showing its negative impact on individual well-being and organizational outcomes (Avtgis et al., 2007).

Work rumination

Work rumination is the constant thinking about work-related issues outside of working hours (Zeng et al., 2022). It can be either positive or negative, with varying effects on well-being and work performance. Negative rumination prolongs exposure to work-related stress and can lead to harmful consequences such as anxiety, depression, pessimistic thinking and burnout (Zeng et al., 2022). Employees who engage in negative rumination are often emotionally exhausted when trying to solve stressful work-related problems, contributing to long-term psychological distress. In contrast, positive rumination involves reflecting on positive work experiences, such as positive feedback or a sense of accomplishment. This form of rumination has been linked to benefits such as increased creativity, self-efficacy and improved problem-solving skills. Therefore,

negative rumination can affect well-being of employees and positive rumination can foster innovation and enduring positive emotions.

Moreover, Zeng et al (2022) found that positive work rumination is associated with more articulated and latent dissent, as employees are more likely to voice criticism when they trust their organization to respond constructively. Higher levels of trust thus encourage employees to speak up. Conversely, negative rumination intensifies dissent by increasing stress and undermining trust in the organization, making employees less inclined to voice their dissent. These employees may turn to latent dissent, voicing their concerns to colleagues rather than management, since this form of dissent often serves as a way for employees to collectively work out their frustrations.

Psychological contract

The psychological contract refers to the unwritten expectations and obligations between employees and their organization, such as promises regarding working conditions, rewards and mutual responsibilities (De Ruiter et al., 2015). When employees feel that the company has failed to keep these promises, they experience a psychological contract breach, which creates feelings of unfairness and mistreatment. This breach often damages trust and becomes a major trigger for employee dissent. Dissent arises when employees perceive a gap between the current situation and their expectations, leading them to voice objections or disagreements about workplace conditions (Garner, 2009a; De Ruiter et al., 2015).

Employees usually express dissent after a psychological contract breach for two main reasons. The first is the desire to understand why the company has not fulfilled its obligations. Employees often seek explanations, as a breach can create a sense of injustice and a loss of trust (Conway and Briner, 2005). Rousseau (1995) emphasized that employees may voice their concerns in such situations in order to restore trust. This need for information reflects the most common goal of dissent, which is to gain clarity and insight into the circumstances leading to dissatisfaction (Garner, 2009a; De Ruiter et al., 2013). By seeking explanations, employees try to determine whether the breach was intentional or due to unforeseen circumstances, which can help restore fairness or at least reduce feelings of injustice.

The second reason is a desire for compensation. When employees lose promised rewards, benefits or career opportunities, they often seek for some sort of compensation (Parzefall and Coyle-Shapiro, 2011; Rousseau, 1995). This reason reflects the effort to correct the imbalance created by the breach. In these cases, the strategy of dissent becomes a means of pressuring managers to take remedial action and retrieve the resources that employees believe have been unfairly withheld from them (De Ruiter et al., 2013).

The effectiveness of dissent following a psychological breach of contract depends on several factors: the motives of employees, the type of the breach and the willingness of the company to respond. As De Ruiter et al. (2015) note, organizations that fail to meet both the information and compensation needs of employees risk deepening mistrust and further fueling dissent.

3.2.3 Organizational influences of dissent

Some organizational aspects significantly shape how employees perceive their relationship with the organization, which in turn affects the expression of dissent. In organizations that promote open dialog and democratic practices, dissent is more likely to be expressed constructively. However, in an environment where dissent is discouraged, employees may resort to external channels or passive forms of dissent (Kassing, 1998). Among the organizational factors, this section explores organizational culture, organizational justice, climate of communication, and internal listening mechanisms.

Organizational culture

Employees' perceptions of institutional tolerance and the prevailing organizational culture significantly influence dissent, which in turn affects their loyalty to management (Kassing, 1998; Chen, 2022). The cultural environment is a fundamental factor in shaping how dissenting opinions are expressed and communicated. Organizational culture is characterized by collective values, established norms, and behaviors that guide perceptions, emotions, and reactions of employees to institutional challenges (Schein, 1992). It has a direct impact on decision-making processes and communicative behavior

and includes the perceived climate of voice and the degree of employee participation within the organization.

Effective organizational cultures are characterized by involvement, consistency, adaptability, and mission orientation. These dimensions taken together enhance institutional performance. A cultural that fosters transparent dialog, encourages disagreement, and supports ethical discourse creates favorable conditions for the articulation of dissent (Kassing, 2000a). In contrast, cultures that restrict employee input are more likely to generate lateral dissent (Kassing, 2008). Empowerment and perceived equality within organizational structures are other critical variables: empowered employees are more likely to engage in upward dissent, while others may express covert forms of dissent (Kassing, 1997; Goodboy et al., 2008). Consequently, organizational culture simultaneously acts as both an enabler and inhibitor of dissent by setting boundaries among which employees process and communicate their concerns.

In addition, institutional culture and historical precedent greatly influence dissent by creating accepted frameworks and expectations that shape both the expression of dissent and the organizational responses (Garner, 2013). These cultural structures ensure that dissent manifests in ways consistent with institutional values and practices. Furthermore, according to Garner (2013), the expression of dissent is shaped by organizational culture but also contributes to its evolution, demonstrating a reciprocal relationship between dissenting behavior and the evolving cultural narrative of the organization.

Organizational justice

Organizational justice refers to perceptions of employees of the fairness of workplace results and processes, particularly in the context of performance evaluations (Chory and Hubbell, 2008). These evaluations influence decisions such as salary increases and act as signals of self-worth, organizational value, and career potential. *Distributive justice* focuses on the fairness of these outcomes, typically judging them against standards or peer comparison, with equality often prevailing, but also with equity guiding considerations (Chory and Hubbell, 2008). *Procedural justice* emphasizes the fairness of the processes, focusing on consistency, ethics, impartiality and inclusivity (Chory and Hubbell, 2008). *Interactional justice* refers to the quality of interpersonal treatment during these processes and emphasizes respectful and dignified communication. High

levels of interactional justice are associated with stronger employee performance, job satisfaction, and citizenship behaviors (Chory and Hubbell, 2008). Taken together, distributive, procedural and interactional justice make it possible to evaluate fairness in the workplace and its influence on employee behavior. Moreover, higher perceptions of fairness and organizational prestige are linked to lower lateral and displaced dissent (Kassing and McDowell, 2008; Croucher et al., 2019; Chen, 2022). Specifically, distributive and interpersonal justice reduce lateral dissent, while informational justice is likely to increasing it (Goodboy et al., 2008; Chen, 2022).

Climate of communication

A work climate that values employee feedback and the sharing of opinions has a positive influence on dissent intention to disagree with management (Kassing, 2000a; Chen, 2022). Freedom of expression policies in the workplace are central to shaping perceptions of employees of the potential consequences of expressing dissenting views (Kassing, 1998; Chen, 2022). Moreover, organizational justice, employee empowerment and engagement are critical in fostering a climate that supports constructive dissent. When employees feel that decision-making processes are fair and their voices are heard and valued, they are more likely to constructively voice their dissenting opinions rather than remain silent or engaging in negative behaviors. Empowering employees to express their opinions, even if they disagree, helps to promote a culture of openness and transparency. This in turn encourages innovation and continuous improvement, as different points of view can be voiced and considered (Chen, 2022).

In addition, freedom of speech in the workplace has a significant impact on dissent within the organization (Kassing, 2000b) and the overall communication climate. Gorden and Infante (1987) found that supervisors who encourage free expression and affirm employees self-concept increase productivity, satisfaction, and commitment through open argumentation and free speech. The authors further demonstrated that less aggressive, more argumentative supervisors are perceived as more effective and supportive, thus promoting a positive communication climate. Companies that promote freedom of speech, create a climate where dissenting opinions are welcomed and integrated into the fabric of the organization, encouraging employees to voice their opinions openly. This supportive climate leads to greater identification with the company, as employees feel that their contribution is valued and in line with the goals of the

company. Consequently, when companies foster a communication climate that supports freedom of expression, employees are more willing to articulate their dissent and go directly to management with constructive feedback. This relationship underscores the role of an open communication climate in increasing employee satisfaction, commitment and organizational effectiveness (Hegstrom, 1990; Kassing, 2000b).

Internal listening mechanisms

According to Kang and Moon (2024), listening is critical to build strong, two-way relationships with stakeholders and enables symmetrical and dialogic communication. Effective listening in organizations supports diversity-focused communication and fosters meaningful dialogs. Research shows that employees often feel disengaged because their voice is not valued, and that organizational listening practices often do not align with experiences of employees (Kang and Moon, 2024). This disconnect may be due to organizations treating listening as a procedural task rather than truly considering the employee perspective.

Over the past two decades, participative employee communication has emerged as the leading approach for fostering ethical and effective employee-organization relationships (Kang and Sung, 2017). In contrast to traditional top-down communication, which focuses on aligning employee performance with organizational goals, participative communication promotes organizational pluralism and a sense of community by embracing diversity, equity, and the inclusion of different perspectives. It strengthens organizational culture by fostering shared identities and employees engagement (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). In addition, participatory communication supports innovation and learning in the organization through the open exchange of ideas between employees and management (Ruck et al., 2017). In public relations, two-way symmetric communication (Grunig, 2013; Grunig and Grunig, 2011) and the dialogic principles of public relations (Kent and Taylor, 2002; Taylor and Kent, 2014) are important frameworks that support participatory communication and promote mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their stakeholders. While the two-way symmetrical model focuses on structured systems and processes such as negotiation and conflict resolution for balanced exchanges, dialogic principles emphasize co-creation and empathetic understanding of power asymmetries. Despite efforts to improve listening in the organization through various initiatives, many employees feel that their voices are not

adequately considered due to the power imbalance in employee-organization relations. The power dynamic is central to understanding communication and conflict resolution in the workplace and underscores that listening and communication in organizations are essentially political processes (Kang and Moon, 2024).

According to Kang and Moon (2024), participatory employee communication is often hindered by two key challenges: employee silence and organizational incompetence in listening. Employee silence can be pervasive across different sectors and company sizes, with employees feeling insecure or ineffective if they express their dissenting views. Organizational factors such as hierarchical structures, leadership styles and cultural barriers further reinforce the climate of silence and prevent different viewpoints from being heard. At the same time, the organizational inability to listen poses a major challenge to effective communication within the organization. Listening is critical to fostering participative communication, managing conflict and promoting learning and adaptation. The ability of an organization to truly listen to its employees increases organizational effectiveness, employee engagement and employee-organization relationships. Despite its importance, listening in organizations is still underdeveloped in communication practice, as many organizations listen performatively or inauthentically. Furthermore, listening in organizations is often treated as an interpersonal phenomenon, overlooking the need for a systematic approach that is integrated into corporate culture, leadership and communication policy (Kang and Moon, 2024).

3.2.4 Relational influences of employee dissent

Relational influences on employee dissent include the nature and quality of relationships within the organization, particularly face-to-face interactions with supervisors. In addition, the climate in the immediate work group, concern for colleagues and antisocial forms of communication also have a significant impact on how and when employees express dissent (Kassing, 1998; Chory and Hubbel, 2008).

Superior-subordinate relationship

The relationship between managers and employees plays an important role in shaping dissent among employees, especially in the way dissent is expressed and handled.

Research has shown that employees often base their decision to dissent on interpersonal and relational factors (Kassing, 1997; Garner, 2013). Managerial trust is a central element in the dynamic between superiors and subordinates within an organization (Chory and Hubbel, 2008). It is considered a crucial factor that influences behavior and interactions and affects both interpersonal and group behavior (Chory and Hubbel, 2008). When trust between employees and their superiors is low, employees may be afraid to voice their concerns directly for fear of retaliation or rejection of their concerns. This dynamic can lead employees to choose less direct forms of dissent, such as lateral or displaced dissent (Kassing, 1997; de Ruiter et al., 2015). Trust in this context is characterized by a willingness to make oneself vulnerable to another person based on the belief that the other person will not engage in harmful actions (Chory and Hubbel, 2008). This vulnerability is based on the expectation that the other party, usually the manager, will act with integrity, predictability and honesty (Chory and Hubbel, 2008). Managers play a critical role in fostering trust because their actions set the tone for the reciprocal behavior of subordinates (Chory and Hubbel, 2008). This reciprocal relationship is essential to creating a positive organizational environment in which trust can flourish (Chory and Hubbel, 2008). Current research highlights the importance of trust-building behaviors and emphasizes the need for managers to demonstrate integrity, consistency, and transparency in order to create an atmosphere of trust (Chory and Hubbel, 2008). In addition, high levels of trust in superiors, high quality relationships and involvement in decision making can encourage articulated dissent (Croucher et al, 2019; Kassing, 2000b; Payne, 2014; Turnage and Goodboy, 2016; Chen, 2022). This relational dynamic highlights the importance of managerial openness and building trust, as a lack of this can suppress employee voice, leading to organizational silence or escalation of dissent through external channels such as whistleblowing (Kassing and Armstrong, 2002; Milliken et al., 2003). Furthermore, research (e.g. Lloyd et al., 2015) addresses the importance of listening by the supervisor to employee behavior and emphasizes that listening plays a more profound role than simply allowing employees to voice their concerns.

Relationship among coworkers

Relationships among coworkers are critical to the way employees express their dissent within an organization, as they serve as important sources of emotional and informational support. According to Sollitto and Myers (2014), the quality of these relationships has a

direct impact on the incidence of lateral dissent, where employees communicate their dissatisfaction with organizational policies, procedures or practices to their colleagues. Employees with close, high-quality relationships, such as collegial or special peer relationships, express more lateral dissent than employees with superficial connections (information peers). These relationships are characterized by trust, intimacy, and emotional openness, and create a safe space for employees to share frustrations and find practical solutions to work-related problems. In a few cases, lateral dissent can be constructive, helping to address unsatisfactory conditions and potentially leading to positive organizational change. Strong peer relationships increase the frequency with which employees express dissent but have no significant effect on the type of dissenting messages, such as humor or direct factual appeals. This suggests that the drive to voice concerns often goes beyond relationship dynamics. Lateral dissent in a supportive peer environment can strengthen bonds between employees, foster employee engagement, and provide organizations with valuable insight into underlying issues. Ultimately, fostering strong peer relationships can improve employee well-being and increase organizational effectiveness by encouraging open, constructive dissent (Sollitto and Myers, 2014).

Antisocial communicative behaviors

Antisocial communicative behaviors are widespread in organizations and have serious negative consequences for employees and the efficiency of the organization (Chory and Hubbell, 2008). This problem represents a significant relationship dynamic that has been also identified in the theoretical silence literature (Chapter 2).

These behaviors manifest in actions such as spreading rumors, silencing or deliberately withholding important information, often driven by perceptions of organizational injustice and low trust in leaders. Employees who feel unfairly treated or perceive a lack of fairness in work processes or interactions are more likely to resort to covert forms of aggression to cope with the perceived injustice and restore a sense of justice (Chory and Hubbell, 2008). This aligns with research on incivility, which indicate that disrespectful or dismissive behavior can undermine workplace relationships and contribute to negative outcomes such as employee disengagement, job-seeking behavior, and organizational dysfunctionality (Singh and Srivastava, 2023a). When confronted with persistent incivility or antisocial communication, employees may refrain from disagreeing or

providing constructive feedback, further weakening the organizational ability to address underlying problems and improve its operations (Singh and Srivastava, 2023a).

Chory and Hubbell (2008) examined the influence of distributive, procedural, and interactional organizational justice on antisocial behavior. The findings suggest that different forms of justice play different roles in shaping antisocial behavior in organizations and that interactional justice, which governs interpersonal fairness, is particularly important in preventing obstructionism and fostering a more positive work environment.

In addition to the role of justice, managerial trust was also identified as a key factor influencing AOBs, particularly hostility. Trust in supervisors influences the relationship between justice and antisocial behavior, highlighting its significance in shaping responses of employees to perceived injustice (Chory and Hubbell, 2008). For example, the effect of procedural justice on deception underscores the need for organizations to foster trust to mitigate the negative effects of perceived injustice. Consequently, both justice and trust should be seen as crucial elements in understanding and dealing with anti-social behavior in the workplace.

3.2.5 Cross-cultural influences of employee dissent

The expression of employee voice and therefore dissent is significantly influenced by national culture, legal systems and economic conditions, which shape the norms, expectations and consequences of expression in the workplace. In countries with robust labor legislation or less economic pressure, workplace dissent tends to be greater as protection encourages workers to express their concerns more freely (Croucher et al., 2014; Chen, 2022). However, national culture can play an important role as it often dictates how voice is expressed or suppressed. For example, in India, despite laws promoting social dialog, cultural norms that prevent bottom-up communication limit the effectiveness of employee voice in both the public and private sectors (McKearney et al., 2023).

In Western and individualistic cultures, voice is often perceived as empowering as it gives employees the opportunity to contribute to workplace efficiency and even improve their

status within the organization (Knoll et al., 2021; McKearney et al., 2023). However, in collectivist cultures such as Nigeria and much of East Asia, hierarchical structures and respect for authority present barriers to the open expression of dissent, especially for younger employees who have to contend with age and seniority dynamics. Paternalistic leadership, which combines authority with protection, is prevalent in African and Asian contexts and can further restrict the expression of dissenting opinions unless leaders actively seek input from employees (Chen and Appienti, 2020). In such contexts, voice behavior is often shaped by the cultural value of maintaining harmony and avoiding conflict, favoring indirect or non-confrontational forms of dissent (Brinsfield et al., 2009; Matsunaga, 2015).

Cultural dimensions such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, in-group collectivism, achievement orientation and assertiveness have a significant impact on how dissent is perceived and implemented in organizations (McKearney et al., 2023). Power distance refers to “the degree to which members of an organization or society expect and agree that power should be stratified and concentrated at a higher level of an organization and government” (House and Javidan, 2004, p. 12). Uncertainty avoidance concerns “the extent to which members of an organization or society strive to avoid uncertainty by relying on established social norms, rituals, and bureaucratic practices” (House and Javidan, 2004, p. 11). Group collectivism is defined as “the degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty, and cohesiveness in their organization and family” (House and Javidan, 2004, p. 12). Achievement orientation is “the degree to which an organization or society encourages and rewards group members for performance improvement and excellence” (House and Javidan, 2004, p. 13). Finally, assertiveness concerns “the degree to which individuals in organizations or societies are assertive, confrontational, and aggressive in social relationships” (House and Javidan, 2004, p. 12).

In high power distance cultures, employees are therefore less likely to question authority or openly express their dissenting opinions for fear of negative repercussions or disruption to group harmony. Similarly, cultures with high uncertainty avoidance emphasize established norms and rituals, making it difficult for employees to question existing practices. Collectivist societies that emphasize group cohesion and loyalty often discourage confrontational dissent in favor of maintaining relationships and avoiding disruption (McKearney et al., 2023).

These cultural influences emphasize the need for culturally intelligent leadership and HR practices that accommodate different ideologies and norms. Cultural intelligence helps employers and employees navigate cross-cultural dynamics and promotes more effective language strategies that are appropriate for specific cultural contexts (Afsar et al., 2019). Kwon and Farndale (2020) include cultural tightness-looseness in their framework, which refers to the strength of social norms and the degree of sanctioning within a society (Gelfand et al., 2006). This dimension interacts with other cultural values to reinforce the influence of national culture on organizational norms related to voice behavior (McKearney et al., 2023). For example, in “tight” cultures where social norms are strong and deviance is heavily sanctioned, leaders should intentionally create safe spaces for voice and dissent (Gelfand et al., 2006). As global workplaces continue to evolve, understanding the interplay of national culture, legal systems, and organizational norms is critical to fostering productive dissent and voice in a way that respects and adapts to the cultural context (McKearney et al., 2023).

3.3 Managerial approaches to employee voiced dissent

Supervisory responses to dissent are crucial in shaping the dissent process, as they affect immediate conversations and set expectations for future employee communicative behaviors (Garner, 2013). When supervisors reject dissent, employees become reluctant to approach them with innovative solutions or challenges to organizational policies and practices. Research suggest that open door policies create spaces for employee expression and could provide alternatives to organizational flexibility. However, Garner (2014) underline the importance of questioning whether this policy reflects the actual openness of supervisors to dissent (Garner, 2014).

Garner (2014) identified five ways in how managers respond to employee dissent, revealing a gap between stated intentions and actual practices. The most prevalent theme was the *desire to be open*. Managers overwhelmingly express openness to subordinate dissent, describing an “open door” policy and a welcoming communication climate. In addition to this stated openness, four other response emerged, reflecting varying degrees of actual openness: *instrumental support* was the most positive response, where managers encouraged dissenters to “let them try it” by facilitating change or allowing employees to

pursue their ideas with a “say yes, as much as possible” philosophy; *not within my power to act* described instances where managers acknowledged dissent but claimed to be unable to effect change due to higher level constraints, with some simply explaining their limitations, while others actively communicated concerns to higher ups; *explaining* involved managers refused to support change but provided justifications for maintaining current policy, essentially educating dissenters about existing approaches; and *rejecting dissent* represented the most negative response, where superiors explicitly denied subordinates the right to question policy, expressing annoyance or anger and sometimes threatening professional consequences if they continued to disagree.

Dissent is often perceived as disruptive, but when managed effectively, it becomes a powerful tool of great value to organizations. By recognizing dissent as a legitimate and constructive form of employee communication, organizations can leverage diverse perspectives that challenge the status quo, identify potential problems and drive innovation. Embracing dissent fosters a culture of openness, trust and continuous improvement, allowing organizations to adapt and grow in an ever-changing environment. When managed properly, dissent prevents important voices from being silenced, strengthens decision-making processes, increases organizational resilience, and contributes to overall success.

Despite its potential to improve decision-making, well-being, and trust, dissent in organizations is often suppressed by the prevailing belief that management knows best and dissent is unnecessary. However, organizational leaders who suppress dissent and respond with repression and silence face numerous negative consequences (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007). Silencing dissent can backfire by either provoking more dissent from principled individuals or causing those individuals to leave the organization. Those who stay may develop a hostile attitude and damage the organizational reputation. In extreme cases, dissenters may become whistleblowers (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007). This suppression lowers employee morale, productivity and loyalty, leading to increased turnover and higher replacement and training costs. From a pragmatic perspective, accepting dissent allows organizations to recognize and correct mistakes, consider alternatives, and improve (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007). Avoiding dissent, on the other hand, maintains the status quo and hinders growth. Even leaders who claim to support an open, learning-oriented environment can be tested by unexpected and challenging

disagreements (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007). Therefore, organizations should change their perception of dissenters to welcome them, to foster a culture in which everyone can fully utilize their abilities and capacities. Effective responses to dissent can also lead to better self-transformation, an ethical environment, informed decision-making and employee retention (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007).

Employee dissent plays a critical role in risk management as it fosters an internal culture that creates ethical awareness, exposes vulnerabilities and encourages responsible innovation. Dissenting voices provide valuable insight into potential organizational shortcomings and motivate leaders to adopt more transparent and responsible practices. From a management perspective, encouraging dissent also mitigates the risks associated with external stakeholders, particularly in relation to displaced dissent where concerns are raised outside the organization. By addressing issues internally through open communication and early reporting, organizations can prevent crises before they escalate beyond their control and become public challenges (Ma et al., 2023). This proactive approach to dissent supports risk and crisis prevention and strengthens organizational resilience and responsible decision-making.

While employee dissent is important for organizational learning and ethical practices, it can also lead to significant risks and negative consequences for both employees and the organization. Dissent often arises from perceived ethical concerns or dissatisfaction with the status quo (Kassing, 1997; de Ruiter et al., 2015). However, when employees voice their dissent, especially in hierarchical structures, they may face retaliation, marginalization, or even professional consequences, creating a hostile work environment that discourages other forms of communication (Bisel and Adame, 2019). This can lead to a culture of fear where employees prefer to remain silent rather than voice their concerns (Milliken et al., 2003).

From an organizational perspective, dissent can disrupt group harmony and lead to divisions among employees or between employees and management (Johnson, 2018). Furthermore, displaced dissent can significantly damage organizational reputation and stakeholder trust (Kang, 2021). In extreme cases, unaddressed internal dissent can escalate into a public crisis leading to reputational damage, legal challenges and financial losses (Ravazzani and Mazzei, 2018).

While dissent is important to identify and address organizational shortcomings, the risks of poorly managed or inadequately addressed dissent can be significant. Disruptive dissent can demoralize employees, reduce productivity, and contribute to organizational inefficiency (Landier et al., 2009). In addition, employees in lower positions are often punished more severely for expressing their dissenting opinions than employees in higher positions, reinforcing inequality within the organization (Bickford, 1996). Although dissent is critical to fostering a dynamic and responsive organizational culture, it should be carefully managed to mitigate the potential negative impact on both employees and the organization (Shahinpoor and Matt, 2007).

3.4 Unresolved gaps in dissent research

Several significant gaps exist in the current literature on dissent. While the literature on positive employee-organization relationships, supportive leadership, and dialogic internal communication is described as robust, no direct connections have been established between these areas and constructive forms of dissent. Kang (2025) identifies theoretical gaps, noting that existing research areas such as organizational justice, employee empowerment, engagement, and open climates for dissent have not been adequately connected, and recent developments in organizational listening scholarship have not been applied to understanding dissent as part of organizational processes. The author also highlights a practical implementation gap, suggesting that while prescriptive recommendations exist for cultivating open climates for dissent, there is insufficient empirical research on how to implement and sustain such environments in practice. Moreover, Kang (2025) points to a methodological gap, indicating that scholarship has not adequately examined dissent through the lens of strategic organizational listening and democratic communication frameworks, suggesting the need for new theoretical and methodological approaches to studying employee dissent constructively.

A gap in the dissent literature exists regarding how employees' expectations of supervisory responses influence their approach to dissent conversations and their willingness to voice concerns (Garner, 2014). Another gap in the literature concerns the limited understanding of the multiple factors beyond individual supervisor characteristics

that affect managerial responses to dissent, including organizational culture, hierarchical pressures, and contextual variables (Garner, 2014).

Finally, a significant gap in dissent research is the limited examination of the relationship between dissent suppression and toxic work environments. This dissent gap is problematic because toxic environments systematically discourage dissent through fear and retaliation, causing employees to retreat into protective silence rather than voicing concerns about harmful practices.

4 Activism in the worksphere

In recent years, activism has risen as a prominent socio-cultural phenomenon, serving as a driving force for change across various domains of society. Activism encompasses a wide range of collective actions and efforts aimed at advocating for social, political, environmental and economic change. As activism increasingly expands into the corporate sphere, understanding its various manifestations in organizational contexts has become crucial.

Activism includes diverse forms of social and political efforts such as issue framing, agenda setting, media campaigns, advocacy with decision-makers, creating new organizations, participating in governmental inquiries, and employing traditional tactics like boycotts and strikes (Belfield, 2020). Activist groups are individuals working together to influence a target audience through various actions like “education, compromise, persuasion, pressure tactics or force” (Grunig et al., 2002, p. 446). However, activists have often been unfairly portrayed as obstacles to be controlled rather than valuable contributors to communication strategies (Krishna, 2021).

A survey by Herbert Smith Freehills (2019) identifies key triggers of corporate activism, including artificial intelligence, workplace automation, employee well-being, environmental justice, and diversity and inclusion. In response, companies are redefining their purpose, shifting from a profit-centric focus on shareholder value to a broader aim of creating value for the company, its community, and global society, since people now seek meaningful work experiences and value purpose-driven employers (Adi, 2019).

This shift is reinforced by rising pressure from both external stakeholders and internal actors, who are actively contesting corporate stances, policies, and affiliations. As Kalodimos and Leavitt (2020) note, social activists are broadening their focus beyond public institutions to target corporate behavior, urging organizations to revise internal practices and embrace their role in shaping societal progress. This trend has given rise to a variety of activist expressions in the corporate context, including *corporate activism*, *CEO activism*, *shareholder activism*, and *employee activism*. These forms are not mutually exclusive but rather represent interconnected dimensions of the evolving relationship between business, values and the society.

There are several cases in the news where these different aspects of activism intersect. For example, in 2025, Ben and Jerry's filed a lawsuit against parent company Unilever, claiming that the firing of its CEO David Stever was part of a broader attempt to stifle the long-standing social mission and public activism of the brand (Da Silva, 2025). The lawsuit centers on allegations that Unilever violated a merger agreement that established an independent board specifically to protect the values of Ben and Jerry's. The company accuses Unilever of threatening employees, including the CEO, for refusing to stop publicly criticizing political figures, particularly US President Trump, and for supporting causes such as a ceasefire in Gaza and the rights of Palestinian refugees. The conflict highlights the tension between corporate control and mission-driven activism, particularly when employee and executive engagement clashes with the reputational or political risk management of the parent company. Ben and Jerry's positions itself as a company where activism is integral to the corporate identity, while the case highlights the complexity of corporate governance that arises when activism is embedded in the operational DNA of a subsidiary (da Silva, 2025). This case illustrates that activism in the corporate sphere is a phenomenon that operates across and within different power structures, from employees to executives and from corporate boards to shareholders.

Continuing from the broader discussion in Chapter 1 on employee communicative behaviors, this chapter explores the growing relevance of employee voice as it extends beyond traditional organizational concerns to encompass broader sociopolitical issues. Employees are increasingly attentive to societal change and are bringing these concerns into the workplace, challenging companies to respond both as employers and social actors. This shift places growing pressure on leadership and corporate communication to take clear positions or justify their neutrality on contested topics. On one hand, companies, CEOs, and shareholders are increasingly expected to take public stances on controversial topics. On the other, employees are becoming more vocal and organized, using both internal and external channels to advocate for alignment between corporate actions and sociopolitical values. This evolving tension makes employee activism a key phenomenon within contemporary debates about purpose-driven organizations and the influence of internal stakeholders.

The rise in activism holds significance as businesses perceive it as a substantial threat to their corporate reputation (Herbert Smith Freehills, 2019.). The employer dilemma lies in

adjusting to the changing work landscape and conditions while maintaining a balance in their exposure (Herbert Smith Freehills, 2019). King (2016) discusses how anti-corporate activists have been successful in influencing behavior of firms through various new tactics, including web-based boycotts and shareholder resolutions. Activism from external sources can have a significant impact on the reputation of a company. To proactively manage this, businesses are called to invest more in internal issue management. Detecting and addressing relevant concerns before they become public can reduce reputational risks. Communication professionals are crucial in this process, as they develop effective strategies for employee activism and prevent employees from seeking external outlets. In fact, especially employee activism is gradually reshaping organizational and communication landscapes as more employees bravely voice their dissent publicly. This trend reflects broader social, environmental, and political shifts, emphasizing the importance of corporate responsibility and clear communication. There is a need for communication scholars to explore the connections between employee activism, organizational democracy, CSR practices, and reputation management (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023).

Therefore, this literature review explores the dimensions of activism within the corporate sphere, with particular attention to employee activism as an emergent yet understudied form of organizational participation.

As per the methodology used for this review, systematic searches were conducted in Scopus using advanced Boolean queries with keywords related to *activism*, *employee activism*, *corporate activism*, *shareholder activism*, *CEO activism*, *purpose*, *authenticity*, and *voice climate* were combined, targeting studies between 1970 and 2024 in the areas of employee communication behaviors and risk and crisis communication. In total, 85 articles were included in the review. The full Boolean used is: TITLE-ABS-KEY(((“employee activism”) OR (“internal activism”) OR (“insider activism”) OR (“corporate activism”) OR (“CEO activism”) OR (“brand activism”) OR (“shareholder activism”) OR (“workplace activism”) OR (“employee advocacy”) OR (“employee mobilization”) AND (“employee voice”) OR (“employee silence”) OR (“employee dissent”) OR (“voice behavior”) OR (“communicative behavior”) OR (“purpose”) OR (authentic*) OR (“risk communication”) OR (“crisis communication”) OR (risk manag*))

OR (reputat*) OR (“sociopolitical issues”) OR (“socially relevant causes”) OR (“social issues”))).

As for the other reviews, all articles were categorized in a table containing reference, year, author keywords, identified keywords, journal, and notes field. In addition to bibliographic details, the table for this chapter also records how activism has been previously studied empirically, including research design, items, and questions. This process mapped the existing literature and informed the design of the empirical studies.

4.1 Corporate activism

The term *corporate activism* has become mainstream, suggesting that companies are expected to be transparent and consistent about their values, causes and supported ideas (Adi, 2019) and have an impact on social causes (Gautam and Carberry, 2020).

The views of social activists on key global issues pose a challenge to business leaders, who are now facing pressure even by their employees to take a stand on these issues. Companies are held accountable when they fail to meet the expectations of their employees and uphold the values they claim to support. While many companies have traditionally tried to avoid controversy, this approach is visibly changing. As a result, there is an increase in corporate activism: the power dynamic between companies and customers has changed, moving from one-way control to a two-way relationship in which companies are called to engage personally, earn trust and demonstrate authenticity as consumers, employees, regulators, and the media demand transparency and alignment with their values (Duncan and Hille, 2019; Gooch, 2019).

Corporate activism is driven by internal organizational structures, which challenges existing theories that often portray corporations as profit-driven entities responding to external pressures (Maks-Solomon and Drewry, 2021).

Activists exert a significant influence on corporate behavior (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016; Soule, 2018). In response, corporations have increasingly taken a proactive role in supporting social causes, particularly through corporate-sponsored social activism campaigns (McDonnell, 2015). The intersection of business and civil society has become a focus for scholars studying social movements, emphasizing the impact of movements

on corporations (e.g. Briscoe and Gupta, 2016; Soule, 2012, 2016). Scholars have also looked at corporate activism, examining prosocial demands, public opinion campaigns, financial engagement, and political lobbying (Li and Soule, 2021).

Companies are increasingly positioning themselves as agents of social change by embracing corporate activism and embedding purpose into their corporate identity (Detavernier, 2019). While corporate strategy used to revolve primarily around a clearly defined vision, the focus has now shifted to a deeper sense of purpose. This evolution goes beyond traditional notions of corporate social responsibility and signals a broader and more deliberate strategic focus. Rather than focusing solely on maximizing returns for shareholders, many companies are now redefining their success in terms of the value they create for employees, communities and the world at large. This shift is largely influenced by growing expectations of meaningful work and their attraction to employers with a strong social commitment (Adi, 2019).

Davis and White (2015) argue that the boundaries of corporate responsibility are shifting as activists increasingly demand that companies engage with social and political issues that go beyond their traditional economic mission. Against a backdrop of diminishing state capacity and increasing corporate power, the authors (2015) argue that companies are no longer seen merely as market players, but as important social institutions with public responsibilities. This redefinition is particularly evident in the rise of stakeholder activism, in which employees, consumers and civil society actors exert pressure on companies to respond to climate change, inequality, discrimination and other problems.

There are several examples from the news. In 2018, Nike launched a campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick, the NFL quarterback known for kneeling during the national anthem to protest racial injustice. The ad, with the slogan “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything”, provoked both support and backlash. While some conservative consumers called for boycotts, the alignment of Nike with its core audience, young, diverse and socially conscious people, led to a 31% increase in online sales shortly after the release of the campaign (Pengelly, 2018). The case illustrates how strategic corporate activism can build brand loyalty and boost business results despite political controversy. Similarly, Ben and Jerry’s has consistently resonated with its stakeholder community with its outspoken stance on social justice issues, strengthening its brand identity and public

trust. Their activism on issues such as racial justice, climate change and LGBTQ+ rights is seen as authentic and aligned with stakeholder values, offering an example of how consistent and values-driven engagement can build consumer loyalty and reputation (Segal, 2024).

Conversely, dissenting attitudes can trigger negative reactions, including backlash and boycotts (Nalick et al., 2016). In January 2019, Gillette released a provocative advertisement titled “We believe: The best men can be”, which aimed to challenge traditional notions of masculinity by addressing issues such as bullying, sexual harassment and toxic masculinity. The ad reinterpreted the slogan of the company, “The best a man can get”, to encourage men to hold each other accountable and promote positive behavior. This campaign received polarized reactions and consumer boycotts, particularly among segments of the traditional male audience who perceived the message as accusatory and incongruent with the brand identity (Horst, 2019). These cases show that the effectiveness of corporate activism depends on the willingness to engage and also on the strategic alignment between corporate values and stakeholder expectations.

Moreover, recent findings from a nationwide Italian study on corporate activism (International Corporate Communication HUB, 2023) confirm that the publics increasingly expect companies to actively engage with societal issues and that companies that take such positions are viewed positively. The report identifies four perceived motivations for corporate activism: *value-driven*, guided by values and social impact; *egoistic-driven*, motivated by reputational or financial gain; *strategic-driven*, aligned with broader business strategies; and *stakeholder-driven*, focused on meeting stakeholder expectations. The results of the survey show a strong alignment with value- and stakeholder-oriented motivations: over 70% of respondents believe that companies act because society expects change, because their employees or consumers demand it, or because they feel obligated to contribute to the improvement of society. Strategic and egoistic motivations are also moderately supported, with many agreeing that activism helps to gain a competitive advantage or improve reputation. Overall, the data suggests that activism is seen as both ethically and strategically motivated, with alignment with stakeholder values and expectations seen as the most legitimate driver. However, if activism is perceived as excessive, opportunistic or inconsistent with corporate behavior, it can backfire and lead to perceptions of hypocrisy and reputational damage. To avoid

such consequences, companies are called to communicate their commitments with authenticity, transparency, and consistency, as effective communication is crucial for public perception and trust.

4.1.1 Conceptualization of corporate activism

Corporate activism is defined and interpreted in a variety of ways in the literature and reflects the evolving role of corporations in addressing socio-political challenges. According to Villagra et al. (2022), corporate activism is a strategic approach that companies and organizations take to cultivate a social conscience alongside their primary business activities. This involves taking a stand either for or against controversial issues that directly impact their customers. Similarly, Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020) describe activism as the willingness of a company to engage in social, political, economic and environmental causes to bring about social change by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of people in its institutional environment. The issues advocated for often include gender, LGBTQIA+ rights, ethnicity, political affiliation, abortion or immigration laws, climate change and income inequality, most of which are controversial issues (Nalick et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, corporate activism remains controversial. It also emerges in response to societal expectations for companies to actively engage in broader social issues beyond profit maximization. Both society and stakeholders in general increasingly want companies to align with their values and demonstrate trustworthy behavior in the political, social and environmental spheres (Stanley, 2020). Building on the conceptualization of McDonnell (2015), Li and Soule (2021, p. 5) define corporate activism as a “company taking a stance on a controversial social issue and actively seeking to mobilize public support for that stance”. This orientation often contrasts with traditional views of corporate purpose, which focuses on maximizing shareholder value (Zhang and Luo, 2013).

Increased attention is also posited specifically on sociopolitical issues, defined by Nalick et al. (2016, p. 386) as “salient unresolved social matters on which societal and institutional opinion is split, thus potentially engendering acrimonious debate among

groups”. Sociopolitical issues are multifaceted, serving as (a) *social issues* that trigger debates and emotional responses across diverse social groups, (b) *political issues* subject to legislative discourse, and (c) potentially *legal issues* that may require court intervention when political solutions are insufficient. The prevailing social consensus on these issues is inherently unstable. It evolves and maintains differences between geographical locations, religious beliefs, individual demographics and ethnic backgrounds. The emotional or moral aspects of these issues can sometimes make people ignore logical or analytical viewpoints. Therefore, when companies get involved in these discussions, there is a risk of upsetting certain groups of stakeholders (Nalick et al., 2016).

Another way to define corporate activism is corporate sociopolitical activism (CSA), i.e. taking a non-neutral position on controversial, politically charged and emotional issues (Nalick et al., 2016). CSA manifests itself through various channels, including donations, public statements, and changes to products and services in response to political viewpoints (Nalick et al., 2016). Implementing CSA initiatives can have significant benefits for companies, such as improved reputation, better product and service ratings, and increased consumer loyalty (Atanga et al., 2022). However, missteps in CSA implementation or an unpopular stance can trigger adverse reactions such as brand avoidance, switching or boycott (Atanga et al., 2022).

While companies may claim altruistic motives for their CSA engagement, previous research suggests that some also attach financial expectations to public support of causes (Nalick et al., 2016). Regardless of the underlying motives, companies should approach CSA strategically due to the sensitivity of sociopolitical issues that can evoke different responses.

Despite the increasing expectation that companies will speak up in societal debates, the positive reaction to such measures depends on whether the perspectives of companies and stakeholders are aligned.

Nalick et al. (2016) refer to the sociopolitical involvement of companies, which is a trend wherein certain companies actively involve themselves in sociopolitical issues that are divisive, emotionally charged, or contested. Often these issues lack normative or institutional societal consensus, contributing to their contentious nature. Given the intense emotions surrounding these matters, public opinion is often highly divided, leading to

debates across different arenas. These issues encompass social, political, and potentially legal dimensions.

It is proposed that socially and politically controversial issues are open moral questions without social consensus and that the conflicting judgments of individuals are due to a different prioritization of the five moral foundations. These are care (versus harm), fairness or proportionality (versus cheating), loyalty or in-group (versus betrayal), authority or respect (versus subversion), and sanctity or purity (versus degradation). Therefore, a stance on a controversial social or political issue reflects the prioritization of the company of these moral foundations (Mukherjee et al., 2020).

Hence, several elements characterize sociopolitical issues (Nalick et al., 2016). First the *lack of societal consensus and divisive discourse*, that leads to divisive discourse across various sectors. Even entities not directly impacted may leverage these issues to shape political reputations or stereotype opponents. Second, *low information rationality* with information asymmetries hinders the availability of concrete facts and reasoning. They exhibit dynamic patterns and evolving viewpoints, gaining salience based on cultural shifts or events. Third, *evolving viewpoints and issue salience*: sociopolitical issues can persist for generations, either remaining unresolved or gaining renewed attention. The salience of an issue varies through phases of development, influenced by evolving viewpoints. An issue to be considered a current sociopolitical concern should attain widespread salience, indicating its significance to a broad segment of society. Issues may lie dormant, gaining salience suddenly due to cultural norm shifts, events, or disasters, and may subsequently dissolve into obscurity. Finally, *persistence and resolution*: sociopolitical issues can be resolved and become part of established laws and social norms. Alternatively, issues may continue to be controversial until a consensus or impasse is reached, making them less relevant or contentious in the community or society.

Therefore, corporate activism can be seen as a mechanism that enables stakeholders to evaluate the degree of similarity of the own brand in the context of moral judgments. High self-brand similarity relates with stronger self-brand identification, thereby promoting more positive attitudes towards the brand, higher purchase or endorsement intentions and higher levels of brand endorsement (Mukherjee et al., 2019).

By bringing these perspectives together, this study argues that corporate activism should be understood as a tactic to enhance reputation or as a response to external pressures, reflecting a shift in the way companies communicate, define their purpose and relate to society. Recent changes in communication dynamics, driven by digital and social media, have reshaped the relationship between companies and stakeholders into a dialogic, participatory exchange (Kent and Taylor, 2021). In this context, companies are increasingly expected to engage personally, demonstrate authenticity and gain the trust of consumers, employees and the public. As a result, corporate activism has become a communicative act through which companies align themselves with societal values, address contentious issues and respond to stakeholder demands for transparency and integrity (Mirzai et al., 2022; Stanley, 2020). This represents a clear departure from the traditional, profit-maximizing view of the corporation, indicating the rise of purpose-driven corporate cultures (Rey et al., 2019; Adi, 2019), in which activism is not merely reactive but strategically embedded in the identity of the company. Furthermore, corporate activism is no longer only influenced by market or political forces, but increasingly by internal factors such as employee expectations, managerial beliefs and the climate of corporate communication (Maks-Solomon and Drewry, 2021). Therefore, this study conceptualizes corporate activism as the deliberate and public engagement of companies in controversial socio-political issues, implemented through communicative practices that reflect strategic, ethical and participatory considerations. It positions activism within the broader framework of corporate communication, in which taking a position is a response to the evolving expectations of a values-oriented and media-supported society.

4.1.2 Characteristics of corporate activism

To understand the characteristics of corporate activism, it is important to consider what corporations do or say in public and also the conditions that make their activism credible, effective, and legitimate. Recent literature has examined the motivations and evaluation of corporate activism efforts and offers insights into how stakeholders interpret and respond to corporate engagement in sociopolitical issues.

Villagra et al. (2022) illustrate some features of corporate activism, namely *corporate credibility*, *institutional credibility*, and *authenticity*. *Corporate credibility* is the ability of a company to align actions with statements or demonstrate trustworthiness in business operations. It comprises *competencies*, *capacities*, and *knowledge*, encompassing proficiency, capabilities, expertise, and experience; *trust* is an aspect focusing on the honesty and authenticity of the company and its related brand; and *goodwill* involves responsiveness to stakeholder actions, understanding, and display of empathy. *Institutional credibility* relates to the level of trust citizens place in public institutions working for the interests of society and taxpayers. Finally, *authenticity* is the perceived consistency of the behavior of a company reflecting its core values and norms without compromising its essence.

Social movement theory emphasizes *mobilization* as the key effect of any campaign, aiming to secure support from target or observer audiences (Lee et al., 2018). McDonnell (2015) notes that corporate activism campaigns may face setbacks, with their failure attributed to negative outsider evaluations of corporate identity. Research shows that corporate social activism campaigns gather increased support when corporations engage in collaborative efforts with nonprofit or public organizations possessing suitable organizational structures. Conversely, campaigns experience diminished support when perceived as hypocritical or incongruent with the business practices. Therefore, the extent of cooperation serves to mitigate perceived hypocrisy, meaning that the negative perception of inconsistent organizational actions is more pronounced when the organizational form is perceived as inappropriate (Li and Soule, 2021).

Among the most significant factors motivating companies to engage in sociopolitical issues are external dynamics, namely the interactions of a company with the relevant stakeholders and their interpretation. Stakeholders play a key role in the perception of the social environment and in the choice of issues a company wishes to address. As sociopolitical issues are dynamic, stakeholders may adapt their responses to the stance of the company over time (Nalick et al., 2016).

Nalick et al. (2016) highlight three perspectives that influence sociopolitical issues in organizations. The first perspective implies that organizations take risks to achieve future benefits for their stakeholders. They view activism as a strategic investment from which they expect a better reputation and commercial gains from stakeholders who align with

the issue. The second perspective deals with situations where external pressure, often from social movements, forces companies to engage actively to prevent harm. The third perspective focuses on the influence of the ideological inclinations of managers. It assumes that managers engage in activism based on personal beliefs rather than expected profits or external pressures, creating the potential for agency problems.

Taken together, these insights show that corporate activism is not simply a matter of taking a stand, but a complex, relational and evaluative process characterized by credibility, authenticity and the perceived alignment between a company identity and its sociopolitical commitment. The ability of a company to successfully engage in activism depends on more than communicative intent: it requires strategic alignment with stakeholder expectations, organizational consistency and institutional legitimacy. Moreover, stakeholder responses are not static but evolve depending on perceived motives and the broader sociopolitical context. Therefore, corporate activism needs to be carefully assessed to avoid reputational risks associated with perceived opportunism or hypocrisy, and should ideally be based on authentic values, credible practices and responsive collaboration with trusted societal actors. These characteristics are important to gain legitimacy, support and mitigate backlash in an increasingly polarized public sphere.

4.1.3 Corporate activism and branding

Corporate activism is often encouraged by internal factors. Existing theories emphasize how factors such as market dynamics, political strategies, and societal background drive companies to address social issues and portray companies as profit-seeking entities that respond to external signals (Maks-Solomon and Drewry, 2021).

A key concept here is that of purpose. Purpose is “a concrete goal or objective for the firm that reaches beyond profit maximization” (Henderson and Van den Steen, 2015, p. 327). Purpose-driven organizations are increasingly seen as important players in promoting corporate activism. Embedding purpose into the strategic core of a company promotes internal change and enables organizations to go beyond profit maximization and adapt to societal expectations. When the corporate purpose is clearly articulated and

consistently implemented, organizations can take a public stand without being perceived as opportunistic or inconsistent (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

In organizations that are aligned with their purpose, there is a strong connection between the core mission of the company and the individual values and aspirations of employees, fostering a cohesive and meaningful workplace culture. When organizational purpose is embedded in both strategic planning and daily practice, it increases employee engagement and effectiveness. This alignment supports mutual growth: it empowers the organization and its employees to thrive, especially in a challenging and competitive environment, while deepening sense of purpose and satisfaction of employees with their work (Rey et al., 2019).

Recent studies show that purpose-driven organizations are better able to manage crisis situations (e.g. Qin et al., 2022). Purpose serves as a unifying force within an organization and motivates those involved to pursue a common goal that has a positive impact on society and goes beyond simply making a profit. When companies clearly communicate a defined purpose and act accordingly, they can strengthen employee trust and identification with the company and thus promote internal cohesion (Qin et al., 2022).

Riggins (2019) further highlights the importance of cultivating a purpose-driven culture, even in the face of competing operational demands, and notes that this can lead to a growing divide between organizations that seek purposeful cultural change and those that adhere to the status quo. Central to fostering such a culture is clarity around organizational values and responsiveness to the concerns of key audiences, which in turn builds trust and support. The author identifies seven interrelated components that define a purpose-driven culture: *clear values and purpose*, extending beyond profits and enhancing authenticity; *leadership support* in fulfilling the purpose; *transparency and openness* in sharing information; *listening and co-creation* of tests, ideas, policies, programs, and products; *alignment and consistency* in both messaging and actions; *data-driven approach* to identify issues and gauge purpose delivery; *advocacy*, in order to prioritize concerns of people, demonstrating understanding and support for their interests.

Gambetti and Biraghi (2023) emphasize the importance of establishing *trust* as an institution. The *2021 Edelman Special Report on Brand Trust* highlights that companies need to operate at the intersection of culture, purpose, and society. The concept of

corporate activism operating within this intersection has emerged as a prominent and rapidly expanding topic in the literature. An authentic perception of corporate cultural elements is crucial to achieve this goal.

Authenticity means that companies are seen as altruistic, that they are guided by values and not by profit, and that they are managed by intrinsically motivated individuals (Gambetti and Biraghi, 2023). Vredenburg et al. (2020) examine the concept of authenticity alongside the potential pitfalls associated with *woke washing*. Negative perceptions in this area can have a detrimental impact on business revenues and brand equity. The key to the success of such activism lies in achieving authenticity and communicating it effectively. Authentic corporate activism is characterized by aligning the explicit goals and values of a company with its activist messages and socially responsible corporate practices. This authenticity contributes to success and has the potential to drive meaningful social change through strategic activism.

Authentic corporate activism, then, is a strategic approach in which companies articulate a clear purpose and values, align communications with an activist stance on sociopolitical issues, while engaging in prosocial corporate practices. This synergy between purpose, values, messaging and practice creates a holistic system in which each factor influences, determines and reinforces the authenticity of activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Four defining characteristics are identified for the analysis of corporate activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020). First, it is *purpose- and values-driven*, since it is rooted in the purpose and values of the company, emphasizing its contribution to broader public interests and societal goals. This form of activism prioritizes the delivery of social and environmental benefits beyond the immediate economic interests of the brand. In extreme cases, it may be perceived as a political mission inherent to the purpose of the firm, often reflecting the values of its leadership. Second, it *addresses controversial sociopolitical issues*, extending beyond the general societal impact to engage with controversial, contested, or polarizing sociopolitical issues. These issues involve competing values, interests, and disagreements that are politically sensitive and evoke strong emotions. Third, it involves adopting either *progressive or conservative positions* on sociopolitical issues. The nature of these stances is subjective and influenced by factors such as political ideology, religion, and other beliefs. Lastly, it *contributes through messaging and brand practice*. It is characterized by both intangible (messaging) and tangible (practice)

commitments to sociopolitical causes. It overcomes mere advocacy and messaging, encompassing alignment with corporate practices that sustain the purpose and values of the company. Tangible changes within the organization, such as modifications to corporate practices and policies, monetary donations, and partnerships, reinforce the messages and aim at facilitating social change. The depth of these prosocial corporate practices varies, with long-term and embedded commitments likely generating greater social impact.

However, corporate activism is still a risky practice.

The rise of corporate activism has amplified attention on societal issues but also highlighted inconsistencies between the purpose and actions of a company (Gambetti and Biraghi, 2023). This gives rise to *woke washing*, which refers to “inauthentic brand activism in which activist marketing messaging about the focal socio-political issue is not aligned with a brand’s purpose, values, and corporate practice” (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 445).

As woke activism exposes companies to intense social scrutiny, it often leads to criticism from stakeholders who think businesses are mainly focused on making a profit and may falsely claim a higher purpose for financial gain. Particularly on social media, organizations can face sudden backlash if a significant segment rejects their socio-political stance as unrelated to their business goals. This can result in sanctions and collective retaliation from a skeptical audience if woke initiatives appear questionable (Gambetti and Biraghi, 2023).

Recent research highlights the amplification of woke washing on social media, and fuels anti-brand movements as consumers quickly generate polarized and extreme backlash (Gambetti and Biraghi, 2023). Woke washing triggers polarized discourse when exposed, amplified, and challenged on social media. Online culture and civic engagement lead to severe anti-company movements when activism seems insincere and inconsistent (Kozinets and Jenkins, 2022). Anti-company actions involve consumers adopting activist roles on social media against corporate and cultural power. Social media enables widespread alignment around shared values but often results in superficial activism termed “clicktivism” or “slacktivism” (Gambetti and Biraghi, 2023), which represents easy, low-commitment political engagement facilitated by quick online interactions.

In the realm of social media, the interplay between corporate activism and woke washing gives rise to polarizations, sarcasm, and protest, opposing both corporate power and cultural authority. In politically charged contexts, this can drive consumers to boycott or support brands, significantly impacting their reputation and financial status (Gambetti and Biraghi, 2023).

Therefore, the integration of purpose into corporate activism is therefore changing the way organizations engage with societal issues, shifting the focus from reactive, profit-driven behavior to a proactive, value-driven strategy. This shift makes organizations economic and institutional actors capable of driving social change. When purpose, values and practices are authentically aligned, companies can actively engage without risking accusations of opportunism or woke-washing. Instead, they build institutional trust, employee engagement and stakeholder support. At a time when brands are expected to take a stand on controversial issues, corporate activism is becoming a strategic tool for differentiation, resilience and long-term legitimacy, especially when embedded in a consistent, transparent and purpose-driven culture. This underscores a broader shift in strategic branding: corporate activism, when authentic, is not collateral but central to the identity and competitiveness of the company.

4.2 CEO activism

In parallel to corporate activism, CEOs are also increasingly engaging in discussions on social and political issues, going beyond their traditional role as representatives of their companies (Cycyota, 2023). A growing number of corporate leaders have begun to speak out on controversial sociopolitical issues such as ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, immigration and climate change (Chattergi and Toffel, 2018; Lee and Tao, 2021).

CEO activism is a phenomenon in which corporate leaders advocate for non-corporate social and environmental policies, taking a public stance on socio-political issues to influence public opinion. Different scholars have different views on CEO activism. Some focus on the potential impact on company performance, while others consider both direct and indirect sociopolitical issues. Between 2011 and 2019, CEO activism at US companies increased dramatically from less than 1% to 38% (Homroy and

Gangopadhyay, 2025). Some executives champion controversial issues to articulate their personal beliefs, while others do so to demonstrate alignment with key stakeholder expectations in an increasingly polarized political landscape. These public positions can enhance the reputation of the company among supportive groups while risking alienation from opposing ones, making the underlying drivers of CEO activism both complex and controversial (Homroy and Gangopadhyay, 2025). For example, in 2013, Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz defended the support of the company for gay marriage by claiming that not all decisions are based on profit and urged dissenting shareholders to sell their shares (Smith, 2013). In 2017, Under Armor CEO Kevin Plank publicly criticized President Trump decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement, stating, “Climate change is real” and reaffirming the commitment of the company to sustainability (Bonesteel, 2017). Conversely, a negative case illustrates how CEO activism, when not aligned with stakeholder values or communicated provocatively, can lead to reputational damage. In 2013, Whole Foods CEO John Mackey faced backlash after calling Obamacare “fascist” in a radio interview, leading to criticism and consumer boycotts. Although he later clarified his remarks, the incident damaged the brand reputation among its progressive customer base (Keller, 2013).

4.2.1 Conceptualization of CEO activism

CEO activism is a growing trend that indicates the increased influence of corporations on the wider community (Cycyota, 2023). Despite the established role of CEOs as representatives of their companies, the current phenomenon of CEOs expressing opinions on non-business matters has attracted the interest of the media and management experts. This has led to investigations into the expectations, incentives and potential governance conflicts associated with such actions (Cycyota, 2023).

Chatterji and Toffel (2018) define CEO activism as the advocacy of corporate leaders for social and environmental policies outside the company. Some scholars link it to corporate performance, while others consider a broader range of sociopolitical issues. Cycyota (2023) takes a broad view and defines CEO activism as taking a public stand on a sociopolitical issue to influence public opinion. Hambrick and Wowak (2021, p. 34) define CEO sociopolitical activism as “a business leader’s personal and public expression

of a stance on some matter of current social or political debate, with the primary aims of visibly weighing in on the issue and influencing opinions in the espoused direction”. They also contribute by applying stakeholder alignment theory, which states that CEO activism is driven by the alignment of the CEO values, which in turn influences expectations of stakeholder support. Therefore, CEO activism becomes a dynamic concept that encompasses corporate advocacy, sociopolitical engagement, potential impact on performance, and alignment of values with stakeholder expectations.

CEO activism is a form of symbolic action within a spectrum of strategies that CEOs use to communicate messages to various stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, alliance partners, local communities, etc. This symbolic approach can exert various influences on the attitudes and behaviors of these stakeholders (Wowak et al., 2022). Based on Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT), research shows that expectations of stakeholders have a significant impact on how they evaluate a company and its behavior (e.g. Kim, 2019). ECT states that the evaluations and actions of stakeholders towards a company are shaped by their expectations and perceptions of the performance of the company (Kim, 2019). If performance does not meet expectations, negative disconfirmation occurs, which triggers unfavorable perceptual, emotional and behavioral reactions among stakeholders.

In line with corporate sociopolitical activism as defined in the previous paragraph, CEO sociopolitical activism refers to a CEO public stance on current social or political issues in order to influence opinions on that stance (Appels, 2022). This is a significant and resource-intensive signal of the commitment of a CEO to openly expressing their personal values regardless of conflicting pressures. In addition, CEOs can strengthen the employer branding of the company by authentically championing sociopolitical causes and associating their activism with personal convictions rather than customer pressure. However, strategic overuse of this approach could undermine its authenticity, as misleading signals may spread and their effectiveness diminish over time (Appels, 2022).

CEO activism is in line with corporate initiatives such as corporate social responsibility, corporate political advocacy, and corporate social advocacy, which aim to drive societal change (Hong and Ji, 2022; Ji and Hong, 2023). However, it differs from these as it is rooted in the behavior of individual CEOs and maintains a direct link to the CEOs themselves. The latter three, on the other hand, are organizational efforts in which

companies advocate for specific social or political causes. While CEO activism focuses on the individual CEO as an agent of change, corporate social responsibility, corporate political advocacy and corporate social advocacy are driven by the company (Hong and Ji, 2022; Ji and Hong, 2023).

Therefore, companies are now involved in sociopolitical matters and CEOs are likely to become more engaged in activism, with top executives taking a stand on various external issues beyond their primary business role (Brown et al., 2020). While CEO activism shows mostly positive outcomes, its potential negative effects on employees and workplace outcomes are not yet sufficiently explored in current research (Brown et al., 2020).

4.2.2 Characteristics of CEO activism

Across different stakeholder categories, corporate leaders play a role in promoting corporate legitimacy, shared value, value creation and the betterment of society (Cycyota, 2023). Existing literature identifies several potential aspects that characterize CEO activism. These encompass *personal values of the CEO* (e.g. Hambrick and Wowak, 2021), *moral authority* (Cycyota, 2023), *pressure from influential employees or other stakeholders* (e.g. Gupta and Briscoe, 2020), *managerial discretion* (Finkelstein and Hambrick, 1990), *a propensity to emulate fellow CEOs* (Gupta and Misangyi, 2018), or a purely *instrumental motive aimed at cultivating favor with specific stakeholders* (Jones, 1995).

These aspects may coexist and sometimes align to strongly drive a particular course of action, while in other cases they may pull CEOs in conflicting directions, complicating the mental accounting process as CEOs strive to align their preferences with instrumental considerations (e.g. Lungeanu and Weber, 2021). Regardless of the driving forces behind their decisions to speak out, the outcomes of such actions remain unpredictable given the inherent imprecision and incompleteness of any prior calculations of potential benefits and costs (Wowak et al., 2022).

CEO activism is shaped by the *personal values*, *leadership role* and *alignment* of the CEO with the values of the company, which significantly influence the decision to engage in

sociopolitical issues. These values include the sense of morality of the CEO, the principles of the organization, and societal norms that often shape ethical practices within the organization (Hambrick and Wowak, 2021). These individual characteristics can heighten the sensitivity of the CEO to certain social issues and compel them to publicly address issues they deem important (Cycyota, 2023). These personal values have a strong influence on their involvement in sociopolitical issues and impact the ethical practices within their organizations (Cycyota, 2023). Recent research shows that a political stance of a CEO, when reflects the values of the organization, has a significant impact on CSR efforts and other organizational outcomes (Cycyota, 2023). Psychological traits such as narcissism and the need for positive reinforcement also play a role in the choice of CEO.

Another aspect is the *moral authority*, which is influenced by the nature of the problem, the industry context and the possible skepticism of stakeholders (Cycyota, 2023).

Employee perceptions also play a role and emphasize the responsibility of the CEO to anticipate the consequences for themselves and the company. Employees expect leaders to address societal issues publicly and may also exert pressure on CEOs (e.g. Briscoe and Gupta, 2020). In fact, there is a growing belief that CEOs should demonstrate civic leadership alongside their corporate responsibilities (Appels, 2022; Cycyota, 2023).

Finkelstein and Hambrick (1990) introduced *managerial discretion* and found that CEOs influence organizational performance through their discretion. Factors such as the industry environment, the strength of the board and the personal characteristics of the CEO influence the decisions of managers. In CEO activism, personal characteristics such as experience, education, and values play a role in their decision to address societal issues and use their role as a corporate leader to reach a broader audience and increase public awareness (Cycyota, 2023).

Moreover, the tendency to emulate other CEOs or a purely instrumental motive aimed at cultivating the favor of certain interest groups are other factors that should be considered (Wowak et al., 2022).

According to Wowak et al. (2022), CEO activism is most pronounced under certain conditions: (a) when addressing issues only generally related to the immediate financial situation of the company of the CEO; (b) when the CEO appeals to social or moral

justifications rather than purely economic considerations; and (c) when society is deeply and evenly divided on the issue.

Additionally, research (e.g. Cycyota, 2023) mentions *organizational culture and employee expectations*. Organizational culture significantly influences CEOs through internal pressures that stem from corporate values established by founders and previous leaders. Employees often see CEOs as role models; thus, alignment with cultural values such as sustainability or social justice can be critical. In addition, employee expectations are crucial as CEOs feel pressure to align their actions with culture and values. This is driven by employee perspectives and the transparency enabled by technology.

CEO activism can generate both positive and negative results for companies, depending on how the various stakeholders, including employees, shareholders, customers, suppliers, and the public, interpret the actions. Some CEO activism actions result in increased sales and improved reputations, while others trigger protests and product boycotts, sometimes with both outcomes (Cycyota, 2023). When dealing with sensitive issues, CEOs need to think about the potential risks and how their actions might be received. They face the decision to act or maintain neutrality, with inaction potentially leading to a negative public image and complicity in unacceptable actions (Gooch, 2019).

Stakeholders expect leaders to use their influence to effect social change and act as agents of change both internally and externally. This implies that CEOs use their social influence to fulfill these expectations (e.g. Hong and Ji, 2022; Ji and Hong, 2023).

Internally, CEO activism can influence cognitive and behavioral responses of employees, affecting loyalty, motivation, turnover intention, employee activism, and inaction. The nature of these effects depends on the public expression of sociopolitical views by CEOs and the alignment of CEO and employee positions (Hong and Ji, 2022; Ji and Hong, 2023).

Brown et al. (2020) show several ways in which employees may react to CEO activism. Some develop turnover intentions, especially when they perceive leadership as self-serving or politically motivated, leading to mistrust and concerns about job security. Others engage in employee activism, especially when leaving the organization is not an option. In such cases, individuals or groups without formal influence may take collective action to challenge or correct perceived injustices in the organization, a topic covered in

detail later in this chapter. Employee activism can be internally or externally directed. Finally, some employees choose not to act and deliberately fail to respond.

4.3 Shareholder activism

Shareholder activism has emerged as a dynamic institutional force, redefining the dynamics in contemporary corporations by challenging managers to be accountable to both shareholders and stakeholders (Goranova et al., 2014).

Several cases have appeared in the news recently. At the 2025 Annual General Meeting of BP, 24.3% of shareholders voted against the re-election of CEO Helge Lund (Moore, 2025). The backlash was triggered by institutional investors disapproving of the strategic shift of the company away from renewables and towards fossil fuels, as well as frustration with the limited engagement of the board with shareholders (Moore, 2025). Although the vote is largely symbolic, it reflects growing shareholder pressure for climate-friendly governance and could accelerate a change at the top of the company (Moore, 2025). In 2021, activist hedge fund Engine No. 1 led a successful proxy campaign to elect three directors to the board of ExxonMobil, despite holding only 0.02% of the shares (Philips, 2021). The campaign, which was backed by large institutional investors, portrayed inaction on climate change as a material risk to long-term shareholder value (Philips, 2021). This case marks a turning point in shareholder activism and demonstrates how environmental and social concerns can be used to achieve governance change in traditionally resilient industries (Philips, 2021).

These examples show that shareholder activism plays a crucial role in the regulation of sociopolitical issues in companies. It is about shareholders putting pressure on companies in their investment portfolios to address both financial performance and corporate governance issues. Rehbein et al. (2004) offer insights into the importance of taking into account strategic considerations that either enhance or limit the sensitivity of a company to shareholder activism on social issues. The authors (2004) emphasize the importance of corporate executives being aware of the increasing transparency of their actions and internal operations, which are increasingly monitored by social activists. Proactively improving practices in areas that attract more attention allows companies to mitigate their

inherent social risk and enables them to better manage the landscape of shareholder activism. This awareness enables corporate leaders to take precautionary measures to strengthen their social resilience and manage potential challenges arising from activist evaluations.

Some trace its origins back to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Activist resolutions and petitions aim to highlight views or draw attention to risks linked with corporate social actions, potentially impacting profits and customer relationships. Scholars view these actions as signals that push CEOs to align more closely with shareholder perspectives, often leading to proactive responses and organizational changes (Cycyota, 2023). Other authors (e.g. Goranova et al., 2014) affirm that the shareholder activism landscape has undergone significant changes since the early 1940s, evolving from individual investors to a diverse range of actors. A pivotal moment in 1970 challenged the exclusion of social issue proposals from proxy statements, leading to the emergence of social activism. Institutional ownership fueled financial activism in the 1980s when the surge in shareholder activism aligned with a rise in institutional ownership, particularly among index-tracking funds. These institutions use activism to prompt improved corporate performance. This trend also coincided with the adoption of anti-takeover measures at company and state levels from the 1980s onward (Denes et al., 2017).

Two fundamental theories for shareholder activism are the *agency theory* and the *stakeholder theory*. *Agency theory* challenges the assumption of homogeneity of shareholder interests and emphasizes the diversity of objectives influenced by factors such as social identities. This diversity poses a challenge when it comes to reconciling the objectives of activist shareholders with the broader shareholder base. The concept of private shareholder activism emerges, emphasizing managers as potential guardians to self-interested shareholders. It argues for a balanced consideration of agency and stakeholder theories that recognize their strengths and account for shareholder heterogeneity. Managerial responses to activism depend on the alignment between the interests of activists and those of shareholders, leading to various outcomes, from value creation to managerial deficiencies. Agency theory serves as the predominant theoretical framework, emphasizing the need for shareholders to monitor managers and create incentives to maximize value. *Stakeholder theory*, however, questions the prevalence of shareholders and points to the broader obligations of the firm (Goranova et al., 2014).

Stakeholder theory raises questions about how companies engage with stakeholders and respond to social activism. While some research sees benefits for stakeholders, others argue that managers may take superficial actions. Stakeholder theory emphasizes the multiple relationships between stakeholders, but social activism sometimes shifts the focus back to shareholders. Despite the differences, both stakeholder theory and agency theory agree that managers prioritize large shareholders.

Investors are not a uniform group but exhibit significant heterogeneity in objectives, preferences, and time horizons, influencing their interactions with portfolio companies. They can be distinguished between institutional and noninstitutional investors in the investor base of a company. Prior research (Flammer et al., 2021; Gillan and Stark, 1998, 2000) reveals that institutional investors play a pivotal role in actively engaging and shaping governance structures. The literature indicates that institutional investors are more likely to initiate and garner support for shareholder proposals, contributing to increased shareholder activism aligned with the rise in institutional investor holdings over the past decades. Conversely, noninstitutional investors face weaker incentives and resource constraints, limiting their ability to actively monitor and engage with management. Their smaller size and dependence on the efforts of institutional investors may result in challenges in coordinating with other shareholders and gaining widespread support for their proposals. This dichotomy emphasizes the distinct dynamics between institutional and noninstitutional investors in the context of shareholder activism (Flammer et al., 2021; Gillan and Stark, 1998, 2000).

These developments underline the growing importance of shareholder activism as a mechanism for influencing corporate governance, particularly with regard to sociopolitical and environmental issues. To better understand how this influence takes shape, the following sections examine the different forms of shareholder activism, the factors that drive it and the effects it produces in companies.

4.3.1 Forms of shareholder activism

Over the past two decades, shareholder activism has grown significantly, accompanied by increased media attention and public interest that extends to areas such as corporate

governance and addressing social, political and environmental issues (Kalodimos and Leavitt, 2020). The literature on shareholder activism is divided into two main streams: financial activism, which focuses on shareholder value and corporate governance issues, and social activism, which addresses broader corporate outcomes and stakeholder concerns. Activists representing different investor groups may address both financial and social issues, reflecting a concern for the triple bottom line of economic, social and environmental performance (Goranova et al., 2014). Shareholder activism primarily targets specific corporate practices and manifests itself in various forms. However, not all forms are equally effective in effecting change in corporate activities (Rehbein et al., 2004).

A common form of shareholder activism is the submission of proposals that lead to votes at the company annual general meeting. Managerial responses vary from defensive to anticipatory as managers either seek to satisfy institutional investors or counter these initiatives (Kalodimos and Leavitt, 2020). Shareholder proposals are effectively used to influence the careers and well-being of employees in companies (Kalodimos and Leavitt, 2020). Shareholders exert pressure through activism, prompting managers to take actions such as reassessing corporate practices and improving information disclosure (Flammer et al., 2021; Gillan and Stark, 1998, 2000).

In addition to shareholder proposals, Denes et al. (2017) examine three other common forms of shareholder activism: *private negotiations and non-proposal pressure*, *hedge fund activism* and *proxy contests*. These approaches to activism often complement each other. Hedge fund activists, for example, may negotiate privately with the target company management while simultaneously submitting shareholder proposals. Hedge funds are becoming a prominent and controversial force that differs from traditional governance activism in that they prioritize immediate financial outcomes without necessarily seeking a change of control. Different types of activism require different levels of activist investment. The key question is whether shareholder activism ultimately creates value.

Denes et al. (2017) show that investment-intensive activism, such as hedge fund activism, can improve firm value and performance by increasing accountability and driving change. They also show stronger evidence of value and operational enhancements in targeted firms, suggesting that activists have adapted their strategies over time through a process of economic selection.

Shareholder activists focus on companies facing governance or underperformance problems and seek to solve these problems and profit from the resulting share price increases. Research suggests that activists target problems and capitalize on opportunities that increase their chances of successfully intervening in companies, with attributes such as board size and composition as influential factors (DesJardine et al., 2023).

Although the relationship between shareholder activism and profitability is uncertain, research suggests that activism effectively influences social policy and, to some extent, corporate governance. Activist shareholders have an impact on various aspects of the company, such as executive compensation, stakeholder engagement, social projects and environmental responsibility (Kalodimos and Leavitt, 2020).

Gillan and Starks (1998) examine shareholder activism along a continuum of responses to corporate performance, ranging from passive buying and selling of shares to more active interventions such as takeovers or the acquisition of minority control. *Voice* in shareholder activism is characterized by investors acquiring partial control to bring about fundamental change, with the most common form being an attempt to change the status quo without a change in corporate control. Voice in shareholder activism manifests itself through various activities, including shareholder proposals, direct negotiations with management, and public outreach through media channels to inform other investors about problems and necessary changes within a company. These activities relate to a wide range of issues, with a focus on social policy and corporate governance reform.

4.3.2 Influencing factors and impacts of shareholder activism

There are several factors that influence shareholder activism and they include factors related to the *company*, the *activist* and the *environment* (Goranova and Verstegen-Ryan, 2014).

At the corporate level, shareholder activism is influenced by company size and performance. Activists often target large companies because it is more difficult for shareholders to monitor them effectively and the visibility of such companies attracts public and media attention. Activists also focus on companies with high cash balances and low payouts to shareholders. The level of debt in a firm can affect its vulnerability to

activism, with companies with lower levels of debt more likely to be targeted by hedge fund activism. Executive ownership, alignment between company performance and executive compensation, and board independence are important governance-oriented factors that influence activism. Greater institutional ownership and large owners also increase the likelihood of being targeted by activists.

Understanding shareholder activism at the activist level requires considering the characteristics, interests and motivations of activists. The incentives of activists may be aligned with the financial situation of the target company, and their costs vary, which influences their engagement. Factors such as investment portfolio characteristics, business relationships and resource commitment also play a role. Shareholders with higher awareness or a better ability to gain support may be more inclined to activism, and their bargaining leverage influences the likelihood that they will become activists. Activist efforts are driven by financial or social goals, taking into account benefits and costs. People social identity, emotions or moral beliefs can help explain why activists support certain goals, even when they appear difficult. Understanding identity-based perspective can shed light on why individual investors remain active on various issues. Activists may be motivated by a combination of factors and apply different logics depending on their identification with particular companies in their investment portfolios.

Finally, in terms of the environment, it is important to recognize the influence of better informed institutional investors on the monitoring of corporate leaders, as well their potential impact on societal structures and norms. Normative changes and technological advances have further influenced shareholder activism by increasing the accountability of corporate managers and reducing the associated costs. The direct and indirect effects of environmental trends on shareholder activism suggest that a contextual approach is needed to understand how these factors influence activism and its dynamics.

When considering the potential impact of shareholder activism at the corporate level, market reactions can vary widely, including positive, negative or insignificant reactions. Factors contributing to these mixed results include the negotiation and withdrawal of many shareholder proposals before they are disclosed in proxy statements, as well as the advisory nature of such proposals, which do not necessarily result in changes in a company practices. Market reactions are influenced by the nature of the activist, the demands of the activism, alignment with the interests of other shareholders, agency issues

within the company, and the willingness of managers to negotiate. While traditional activism focused on governance changes does not consistently improve operating performance, hedge fund activism tends to have mostly positive effects, possibly related to subsequent acquisitions or lower shareholder value. Governance-related issues can make companies more attractive takeover targets. Shareholder activism also has an impact on stock options, with voluntary restrictions improving stock performance, and it limits pay increases for CEOs, especially when supported by a majority of shareholders.

The impact at the activist level focuses primarily on the benefits and challenges faced by activist shareholders. Studies show that activists are financially successful to varying degrees, with some realizing significant gains while others experience insignificant returns. In addition to financial gains, activists can realize benefits on various levels. These include strengthening the activist identity and benefiting the stakeholder of the company, such as employees or community members, by improving corporate social responsibility, environmental performance and political activities. Activists can also contribute to public benefits, including the spillover effects of activism that improve overall governance standards in the market. Shareholders can also pursue these benefits by directly communicating expectations to corporate management, developing voting guidelines, or using situations where shareholder approval is required as leverage to influence substantive changes in corporate behavior.

Finally, shareholder activism can be a catalyst for change and have an impact on the environment. It has a direct impact on the company, and wider implications for its operating environment, institutional dynamics and legal framework. Engaging with shareholders and observing activist processes in other companies can trigger the dissemination of reforms throughout the corporate network. The transformative role of activism is explained by social movement theory, which illustrates how it challenges existing organizational paradigms and forces corporate leaders to consider alternative approaches. This social movement has successfully placed shareholder value at the center of corporate attention, influencing both executives and regulatory reforms aimed at improving shareholder control and executive accountability.

4.4 Employee activism

Employee activism is on the rise, with employees increasingly voicing concerns about ethical practices, workplace equality, and broader societal issues (e.g. Briscoe and Gupta, 2021) such as gender discrimination, diversity and inclusion, immigration, abortion, climate change, income inequality, and sexual harassment. Activist employees are now engaging in collective actions to advocate for change (Li and Soule, 2021; Wowak et al., 2022), reflecting a shift towards activism that extends beyond the workplace to include social, political and environmental concerns (Miles et al., 2021).

Employee activism is no longer an isolated or marginal phenomenon. Instead, it reflects a broader trend in which employees engage in socially relevant causes and seek to influence the values, policies and actions of the organization from within. While scholars (e.g. Briscoe and Gupta, 2016) highlight the tensions faced by insider activists, more recent research confirms that employee activism has evolved into a dynamic, globally relevant phenomenon.

Employees now play a central role in corporate strategy as they act as advocates and disruptors (Krishna, 2021). They increasingly influence how organizations define their strategic direction and societal role, acting either in alignment with or in opposition to corporate goals. If their involvement is constructive and aligned with the organization identity, it can increase reputational value and employee involvement and enhance social engagement through targeted communication. Conversely, when employee-driven dissent becomes confrontational it can generate reputational, operational and morale challenges for the company (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016; McCown, 2007; Miles et al., 2021; Reyes, 2021).

Several recent cases underline these dynamics. In Italy, during the Sanremo Music Festival 2024, employees of the public broadcaster RAI publicly distanced themselves from a televised statement of political solidarity with Israel, read live on air by presenter Mara Venier but written by the CEO, Roberto Sergio. Employees formally protested the use of corporate communication channels for personal political messages of the CEO, stating that it did not represent the values of the company or its workforce (Rocco, 2024).

In Seattle, United States, Amazon fired two employees in 2019 who had publicly criticized the environmental practices of the company and helped organize the group “Amazon Employees for Climate Justice”. While Amazon cited internal policy violations, the case sparked widespread debate about internal dissent, transparency and the limits of corporate tolerance for employee engagement (BBC News, 2021).

Another prominent case occurred in 2018, when thousands of Google employees organized a global walkout to protest the handling of sexual harassment allegations of the company after it was revealed that high-ranking executives had received large severance packages despite allegations of misconduct. The coordinated action spread to cities including Singapore, Berlin, Zurich and Chicago, signaling a growing willingness among employees to challenge corporate power and demand accountability (Time, 2018).

In 2025, Microsoft fired an employee who publicly protested during an internal AI conference, accusing a company executive of being a “war profiteer” in connection with Microsoft contracts with the Israeli government. Another employee was reportedly fired in protest shortly after resigning. The case underscores the increasing friction between ethical concerns of employees and corporate strategies, particularly those related to defense technologies and geopolitical conflicts (Warren and Roth, 2025). Again in 2025, Microsoft employees protested on the Redmond campus against the ties of the company to the Israeli Defense Forces and demanded an end to this collaboration. The demonstration led to 18 arrests and prompted Microsoft to announce an urgent review of the military use of its technology (Ansa, 2025).

Conversely, Patagonia is an example of a company that actively supports employee activism by aligning corporate policies with civic engagement. In 2022, following the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, Patagonia announced that it would cover bail and legal fees for employees arrested during peaceful protests for reproductive rights, reaffirming its commitment to social justice education (Scribner, 2022).

Therefore, increasingly, employee activism is forcing companies to confront a fundamental tension between control and collaboration. On the one hand, some companies are responding by suppressing activism by enforcing policies, firing or reputational containment, viewing it as a threat to cohesion and authority. On the other hand, a growing number of companies are recognizing employee activism as a strategic

opportunity, especially when it aligns with the goals and values of the company. These companies seek to channel internal advocacy to strengthen authenticity, promote employee engagement and reinforce their social positioning. This divergence shows that employee activism is changing internal dynamics and redefining the way organizations negotiate legitimacy and purpose in an era of heightened ethical scrutiny and stakeholder expectations.

4.4.1 Conceptualization of employee activism

There are several definitions of employee activism in the literature. Krishna (2021, p. 119) defines employee activism as “goal-oriented efforts organized and negotiated by individuals and/or groups of employees to internally and/or externally advocate for or against organizational policy and/or decision-making to generate social change”. This definition highlights organized efforts, considers both individual and group involvement, and emphasizes advocacy or fight (adversarial) for organizational policy change with the potential for a positive impact on social issues.

Brown et al. (2020, p. 128) define employee activism as “an individual employee, or group of employees, who lacks full access to official channels of influence, and thus engages in collective action to remedy a perceived wrong within the organization”.

Jin and You (2023, p. 173) describe employee activism as collective action by employees without direct access to upper management, aiming to increase their influence within the organization.

Briscoe and Gupta (2021) define employee activism as organized efforts by employees to tackle a societal issue related to their employer, which can involve advocating change within the company or using it as a platform to highlight broader societal concerns.

Gautam and Carberry (2019) define employee activism as “employees engaging in collective action to change organizational policies and practices from within”, while Lee (2022, p. 6) emphasizes employees’ “intentions to participate in collective actions with other coworkers to influence their organization”. In contrast, Duncan and Hille (2019) and Weber Shandwick (2019) adopt a broader framing, referring to employees who “speak out for or against their employers on controversial issues that affect society”.

More recent definitions capture the inherent tension between dissent and belonging: Ninova-Solovykh (2023, p. 153) describes activists as “employees actively speaking out against their employer but still wanting to remain part of the organisation”, linking activism to both “social responsibility and organisational loyalty”. Similarly, Ramirez and Islam (2022) conceptualize activists as “organisational members who negotiate the position of being insiders while challenging the status quo”.

Finally, Reitz and Higgins (2022, p.1) describe activism as “voices of difference, on issues of wider social and environmental concern, that seek to influence company action and challenge existing patterns of power”.

Table 6 summarizes these evolving conceptualizations of employee activism.

Table 6. Definitions of employee activism

Author	Definition
Briscoe and Gupta (2021, p. 1)	“employees engaged in coordinated action to address a societal problem connected to the company they work for. This may entail promoting or countering change in their organization or using the organization as a platform to bring attention to an issue in society at large”
Brown et al. (2020, p. 128)	“an individual employee, or group of employees, who lacks full access to official channels of influence, and thus engages in collective action to remedy a perceived wrong within the organization”
Duncan and Hille (2019, p. 34)	employees “who speak out for or against their employers on controversial issues that affect society”
Gautam and Carberry (2019, p. 2) <i>Internal activism</i>	“employees engaging in collective action to change organizational policies and practices from within”
Jin and You (2023, p. 173)	“employees who lack institutional channels to top management decision-making engaging in organization action to gain influence inside the organization”
Krishna (2021, p. 119)	“goal-oriented efforts organized and negotiated by individuals and/or groups of employees to internally and/or externally advocate for or against organizational policy and/or decision-making to generate social change”
Lee (2022, p. 6) <i>employees’ activism intentions</i>	“employees’ intentions to participate in collective actions with other coworkers to influence their organization”
Ninova-Solovykh (2023, p. 153)	“employees actively speaking out against their employer but still wanting to remain part of the organization and thus revolve around the positive notion of social responsibility and organizational loyalty at the same time”
Ramirez and Islam (2022)	Organisational members who negotiate the position of being insiders while challenging the status quo
Reitz and Higgins (2022, p. 1)	“voices of difference, on issues of wider social and environmental concern, that seek to influence company action and challenge existing patterns of power”
Weber Shandwick (2019, p. 3)	“people who speak out for or against their employers on controversial issues that affect society”

Source: own elaboration

Drawing from these definitions, employee activism is here conceived as purposeful and coordinated efforts by individuals or groups of employees to advocate for or against organizational policies and decisions, both internally and externally, to bring about social

change. This activism may stem from limited access to official channels, perceived injustices within the organization, or initiatives driven by motivated individuals, prompting collective action. Employees engage in challenging organizational policies, even without direct access to upper management, in order to increase their influence or promote broader societal changes. It goes beyond internal matters, encompassing initiatives to address broader societal issues connected to their employer, using the organization as a platform for awareness and change.

4.4.1.1 Features of employee activism

As assumed from the definitions, a key feature of employee activism is *collective orientation and voice*. Rather than acting individually, employees often engage in *coordinated, group-based* efforts to achieve *common goals*, which increases their influence and visibility (Briscoe and Gupta, 2021). This *group dimension* is closely linked to the emergence of a *collective voice* expressed through organized structures (Briscoe and Gupta, 2021; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023). Employee activism often involves employees, non-governmental organizations, and community groups working together to pursue goals that combine personal ethics with professional responsibility (Carrington et al., 2018). Such actions include small green initiatives, proposals for policy changes, and protests (Skoglund and Böhm, 2020; Briscoe and Gupta, 2021; Miles et al., 2021). For environmentally focused individual actions, Skoglund and Böhm (2020) illustrate diverse approaches, from personal efforts like office recycling and energy conservation to leveraging professional expertise for sustainable practices like in-depth life cycle assessments and waste management investigations.

A recurring feature across definitions is the focus on *controversial social issues*, with employee activists speaking out either for or against their employer on issues that intersect with the public interest and corporate identity (Duncan and Hille, 2019; Weber Shandwick, 2019). These actions are usually targeted and carried out through *visible and organized efforts* (Briscoe and Gupta, 2021; Krishna, 2021; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023), since activists seek to *gain influence* (Jin and You, 2023) and advocate for change through strategic communication and mobilization.

Another feature is the idea of creating *social good* (Briscoe and Gupta, 2021) to promote *social change* (e.g. Krishna, 2021; Duncan and Hille, 2019; Ramírez and Islam, 2022; Reyes, 2021). In this sense, employee activism often seeks to *change company policies, behaviors, or stances* (e.g. Krishna, 2021; Lee, 2022). This can put pressure on leadership to view activism not as opposition but as a potential driver of innovation, culture building and reputational value. However, Martin et al. (2007) argue that not all community-benefiting activities are activism, suggesting that some positive actions may be inherent to normal social life. Bobel (2007) agrees, stating that minor personal efforts like word-of-mouth issue spreading should not be considered activism.

An important feature of employee activism is its *negotiated nature*. Ramirez and Islam (2022) argue that activist employees constantly negotiate their dual roles as insiders and challengers of the organizational status quo. This negotiation leads to paradoxical tensions, as activists align themselves with the values of the organization while simultaneously challenging or resisting the practices of the organization, making their positioning unstable and politically charged.

Table 7 summarize the main features of employee activism.

Table 7. Features of employee activism

Features of EA	Source
Includes collective action and collective voice through organized group	Briscoe and Gupta, 2021; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023
Focus on controversial or sensitive issues	Duncan and Hille, 2019; Weber Shandwick, 2019
Goal-oriented and marked by organized, visible efforts	Briscoe and Gupta, 2021; Krishna, 2021; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023
Aims to gain influence in organizational decision-making	Jin and You, 2023
Commitment to the social good	Briscoe and Gupta, 2021; Krishna, 2021
Aimed at promoting social change	Krishna, 2021; Duncan and Hille, 2019; Ramírez and Islam, 2022; Reyes, 2021
Seeks to change company policies, behaviors, or stances	Krishna, 2021; Lee, 2022
Use of negotiation as a means of influence	Ramírez and Islam, 2022

Source: own elaboration

4.4.1.2 Forms of employee activism

In terms of forms, employee activism can be differentiated according to its orientation. Brown et al. (2020) distinguish between *internally directed or externally directed*. *Internally directed employee activism* refers to actions within an organization that are not publicized and pose lower risks. This behavior involves speaking up in meetings, building alliances within the organization, and using internal communication channels. It is a constructive form of deviance similar to expressing opinions, with a focus on organizational matters. *Externally directed employee activism* involves actions that draw public attention to certain issues, like employee strikes, protests, unionizing, and public whistleblowing. Such activities, facilitated by modern tools like social networks, carry the risk of organizational backlash. This form of activism puts pressure on companies to address concerns and has been effective in altering corporate behavior.

Other authors (e.g. Krishna, 2021; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023; Reyes, 2021) distinguish employee activism as *adversary or anti-corporate activism*, where employees raise issues or voice their concerns against their organization, and *employee advocacy*, where employees speak out in support of their organizations and promote actions that drive positive societal change. Both these types of activism demonstrate the desire of employees to make a difference and improve society. This duality reflects how much employee activism can vary depending on the situation and alignment with organizational values and responses to social issues (Reyes, 2021).

This aspect of employee activism is closely related to the concept of megaphoning in public relations, which refers to employees publicly sharing positive or negative views about their organization (Kim and Rhee, 2011; Krishna, 2021). Although both megaphoning and employee advocacy involve external communication, they differ in their intent. Megaphoning expresses support or disapproval without necessarily aiming for change, whereas employee advocacy focuses on defending the organization, often regardless of context (Men, 2014; Thelen, 2020). In contrast, the communicative dimension of employee activism aims to influence organizational policy in response to social issues. In contrast to megaphoning or advocacy, activism focuses on driving social change and often targets the position of the organization on broader societal concerns (Krishna, 2021; Reyes, 2021).

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of employee activism as a *proactive form of direct participation*, which is initiated by employees themselves and differs from traditional models of employee participation (e.g. trade unions or industrial democracy). In contrast to union action, which focuses mainly on wages and working conditions, employee activism addresses broader social issues, extending beyond labor rights to encompass company decisions that impact external stakeholders (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023). This shift reflects the evolving expectations of employees on meaningful work and social responsibility.

In addition, *Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)* have emerged as a structured form of internal activism. ERGs are employee-led initiatives focused on several topics, organizational movements initiated by employees to address social issues like diversity and inclusion. These employee-led initiatives provide mentoring and networking, influence business strategies and build strong relationships within the organization, and advise senior leadership, thereby contributing to both organizational change and strategic direction (Byrd, 2022; Krishna et al., 2023; Maks-Solomon and Drewry, 2021).

Finally, activists often pursue their objectives through *confrontation, opposition, and pressure*, especially when dialog fails or leadership does not respond. As Ninova-Solovykh (2023) points out, activism, even when peaceful and orderly, aims to challenge existing narratives and persuade public opinion by using the power of discourse to give visibility and urgency to employee concerns. The communicative work of activist employees thus becomes a central factor in challenging company decisions and in redefining the role of employees as active contributors to the company purpose.

Table 8 summarizes the forms of employee activism as conceptualized in this study, based on a synthesis of existing academic conceptualizations.

Table 8. Forms of employee activism

Forms of EA	Source
Internally directed or externally directed	Brown et al., 2020
Willingness to speak out (either for or against organizational actions)	Duncan and Hille, 2019; Weber Shandwick, 2019; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023
Involves adversary or anti-corporate activism or employee advocacy	Krishna, 2021; Duncan and Hille, 2019; Weber Shandwick, 2019; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023; Reyes, 2021
Characterized by direct, purposeful participation	Ninova-Solovykh, 2023
Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)	Byrd, 2022; Krishna et al., 2023; Maks-Solomon and Drewry, 2021
Confrontation, opposition, pressure	Ninova-Solovykh, 2023

Source: own elaboration

4.4.1.3 Tactics of employee activism

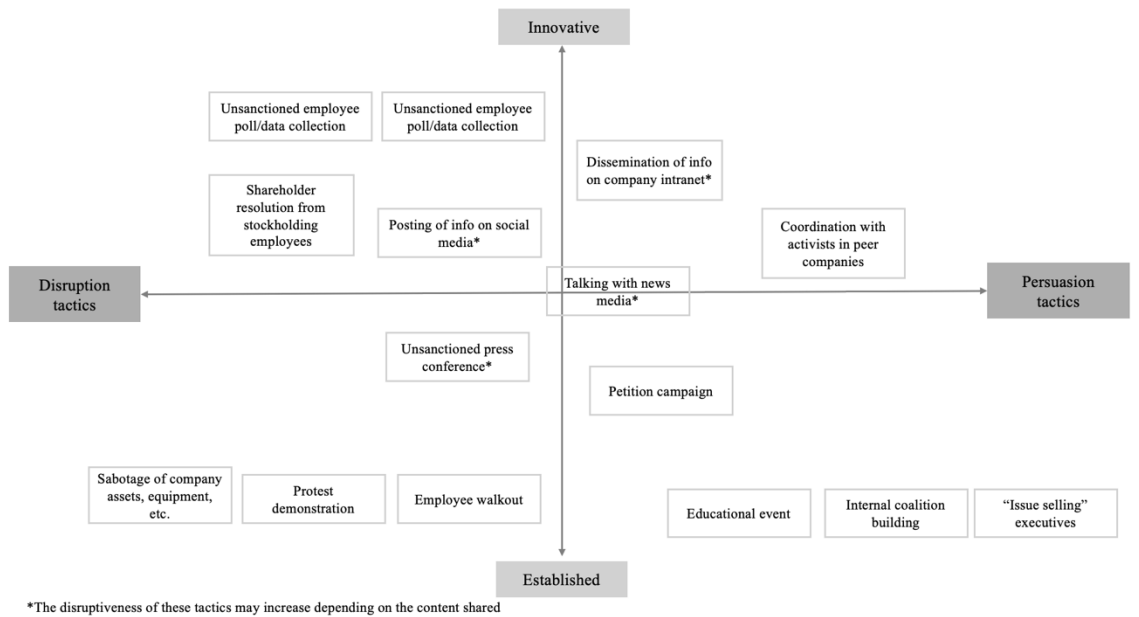
Employee activists use various *tactics*, including collective action, petitions, open letters and social media, which are similar to other forms of activism. Prominent among these are large-scale protests and work stoppages that attract significant public attention (Briscoe and Gupta, 2021; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023). Employee activism usually takes place collectively and publicly, often organized and communicated via social media platforms. It is a form of collective expression in which employees voice their perspectives and concerns. Furthermore, employee activism is characterized as principled and displaced dissent driven by ethical motives and a desire to bring about positive change.

Briscoe and Gupta (2021) suggest that employees choose their actions along a spectrum of disruptive actions for the organization that lies between disruption and persuasion. *Disruptive tactics* involve disrupting internal routines and damaging public reputation to push leaders to meet the demands of activists, while *persuasive tactics* use more discreet communication strategies to influence colleagues and leaders for more effective internal change. In addition, recent employee activist strategies leverage *social media platforms*

that allow for rapid mobilization to promote company practices to various stakeholders. These tactics include framing social issues to drive organizational change, internal lobbying, targeted issue advocacy, sharing benchmarking or scientific reports, forming political coalitions, and using victim testimonies, documentaries, and social media as common methods of persuasion (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016).

Figure 9 shows the range of tactics used by employee activists, ranked by their level of disruption (Briscoe and Gupta, 2021). Briscoe and Gupta (2021) categorize employee activist tactics along two axes: *disruption vs. persuasion* and *established vs. innovative*. Disruptive tactics (e.g. walkouts, protests, leaks to NGOs) are more visible and often controversial, while persuasive tactics (e.g. issue selling, coalition building) are more subtle and less confrontational. Similarly, tactics range from traditional (e.g. petition campaigns, educational events) to novel forms (e.g. unsanctioned data collection, shareholder resolutions). This framework illustrates the diversity of activist strategies, from internal advocacy to public-facing actions, depending on goals and the level of risk or visibility involved.

Figure 9. Employee activists tactics



Source: own reproduction from Briscoe and Gupta 2021

However, activism involves more than simply voicing concerns. Its true measure lies in the ability to exert influence and drive actionable change that is supported by political and organizational leaders (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023). Activists engage as organized

groups in different areas of society and unite under a shared goal of change. Consequently, their main focus is to put pressure on institutions and entities to change objectionable policies, practices or circumstances (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023).

Curtin (2016) analyzed how employee activists use discourse to promote responsible employer actions. Luo and Jiang (2014) examined empowerment strategies that employee activists use to reverse unfavorable policies.

The tactics of employee activists are important because they go beyond voicing concerns and aim to influence policy, change public perceptions, and drive organizational change. These tactics, often based on ethical concerns, help reframe issues, mobilize support, and move institutions to action (Briscoe and Gupta, 2021; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023) and ultimately serve as a powerful tool to drive change from within.

4.4.1.4 Drivers of employee activism

Previous research identifies a variety of individual, organizational, and contextual drivers that motivate employees to engage in activism. Briscoe and Gupta (2016, 2021) highlight four primary drivers of employee activism: rising workforce expectations, empowerment as a management principle, urgent societal challenges, and the use of technologies, including social media. At a more general level, in fact, social media emerge also as a contextual trigger and communication platform to engage in activist behavior (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023). This is due to a *generational shift in the workplace*. The younger generations are increasingly demanding corporate responsibility, are tech-savvy nature, and are adept at using platforms like social media to express concerns (Krishna, 2021). The generational shift in the workforce, led by millennials, has raised expectations for ethics, transparency and social responsibility and contributed to the rise of employee activism (Krishna, 2021; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023). Millennials often seek employers with strong societal values and are actively engaged in improving workplace responsibility. They prefer open communication and the involvement of external stakeholders in addressing misconduct. However, researchers caution against over-generalization of generational characteristics, as the evidence on millennials behavior is mixed and sometimes contradictory (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023).

The rise of corporate social responsibility globally has led to an increase in public employee activism. Companies are integrating social impact goals into their strategies based on beliefs of leaders and societal expectations (Deloitte, 2019). This shift is evident in executives publicly advocating on sociopolitical matters (i.e. CEO activism; Chatterji and Toffel, 2019). Such trends can lead to employee activism due to perceived ideological discrepancies (Brown et al., 2020), especially if the image of the company diverges significantly from its actions.

Lee (2022) found that *dissatisfaction with company misconduct* led to internal activism. In addition, active communication and information sharing within the organization increased the likelihood of collective action. Furthermore, the intentions of employees to engage in activism vary based on their perceived relationship with the organization. For those in an exchange relationship, negative emotions may lead them to participate in collective actions, as they anticipate the resilience of the organization. Meanwhile, communication behaviors were among the primary catalysts for activism among employees with a communal relationship.

Jin and You (2023) identify transparent *internal communication* and *moral obligation* as key drivers of employee activism. Transparent internal communication involves an open, credible, and accountable flow of information that promotes mutual understanding and benefits employee-organization relationships, corporate reputation, and engagement. Moral obligation refers to the motivation of employees, which is guided by ethical principles, and influences their activism in morally significant situations where non-compliance with moral standards has significant consequences.

Moreover, scholars underscore the critical role of communication climate: when internal communication is open, credible, and accountable, employees are more likely to feel safe to actively voice their concerns and therefore engage in activism (e.g. Lee, 2022), especially if they also identify with their goals and norms. These employees express their unconditional support, even without expecting personal benefits, and can serve as activists driving collective actions within the company. In essence, a collaborative relationship strongly motivates employees to work together and allows them to criticize company wrongdoings that hinder its progress. Internal employee activism is not necessarily a threat but can provide organizations with the opportunity to address concerns, obtain constructive feedback, and rectify misbehaviors. From certain

perspectives, this can be interpreted as a form of normative whistleblowing or constructive voice behavior aimed at promoting organizational change. Through activism, employees strive to positively transform their organization, fostering greater responsibility and positive change (Lee, 2022).

Brown et al. (2020) and Jin and You (2023) explain that employee activism arises from a lack of recognition from management or a lack of formal mechanisms through which employees can voice concerns and influence organizational decisions.

Scully and Segal (2002) identify three key factors that drive employee activism. First, when employees *directly attribute inequalities in the workplace to corporate action or inaction*, they are more motivated to address issues of injustice, discrimination and inequality. Second, *the familiarity of employees with the organizational culture and informal power structures* helps them to share information and coordinate actions effectively. Third, *workplace proximity and shared experiences of inequity* enable group mobilization, organization, and member recruitment for collective issue resolution.

Employee motivation to engage in such activism stems from a strong attachment to the organization, alignment of personal identity with the company, and a growing concern for the social impact of the organization (Davis and White, 2015). Employee activism can also be triggered by corporate silence or perceived inaction on social issues (Gooch, 2019), especially in contexts where companies are expected to take a public stance.

Briscoe and Gupta (2016) identify resource dependence and knowledge of the target as two drivers of employee activism. Resource dependence involves organization-dependent activists who are cautious due to potential consequences; while knowledge of the target involves insiders who have valuable knowledge of the informal social structures, prevailing culture, and routines of their organization for effective persuasion and education tactics.

Table 9 recalls the drivers of employee activism.

Table 9. Drivers of employee activism

Drivers of EA	Source
Generational shift	Ninova-Solovykh, 2023
Rise of CSR	Ninova-Solovykh, 2023
Role of social media and new technologies	Ninova-Solovykh, 2023; Briscoe and Gupta, 2016, 2021; Krishna, 2021
Rising workforce expectations	Briscoe and Gupta, 2016, 2021; Krishna, 2021
Empowerment	Briscoe and Gupta, 2016, 2021; Krishna, 2021
Urgent societal challenges	Briscoe and Gupta, 2016, 2021; Krishna, 2021
Misalignment of personal identity and moral attitudes with company conduct	Lee, 2022; Jin and You, 2023; Scully and Segal, 2002; Davis and White, 2015
Transparent internal communication	Jin and You, 2023
Communication climate	Lee, 2022
Lack to official channels of influence	Brown et al., 2020
Lack of direct access to upper management	Jin and You, 2023
Leaders' attitudes toward social advocacy	Hong and Ji, 2022; Ramirez and Islam, 2022
Direct attribution of workplace inequalities	Scully and Segal, 2002
Familiarity with organizational culture and informal power structures	Scully and Segal, 2002
Company's inaction	Gooch, 2019
Resource dependence	Briscoe and Gupta, 2016
Knowledge about the target	Briscoe and Gupta, 2016

Source: own elaboration

4.4.2 Managerial responses to employee activism

An important concern for companies and communication experts is how to deal effectively with employee activism. While earlier studies viewed activists as adversaries, modern research suggests a more nuanced approach (Krishna et al., 2023). This is due to

the importance of employee activism in the field of communication, particularly due to its potential to damage the organizational reputation (Krishna, 2021; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023).

Reitz and Higgins (2022) emphasize that employee activism reshapes power dynamics in organizations. Krishna et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of understanding these practices and the challenges associated with connecting employee activists with organizational leadership.

Many companies have introduced strategic communication management to strengthen relationships with their employees through open and balanced dialog. In the context of employee activism, internal communication plays a critical role in meeting employees communicative expectations and preventing unresolved concerns from escalating into hostile or externalized activism (Krishna et al., 2023).

A culture of open communication and participatory decision-making facilitates two-way, symmetrical dialog and enhances trust and collaboration (McCown, 2007). This approach is consistent with the principles of dialogic communication (Kent and Taylor, 2021), which are increasingly being embraced by companies in their interactions with employees, consumers and the media, who are increasingly demanding transparency and alignment with ethical values.

Organizational listening as part of this dialogic approach represents a strategic communication practice in which companies proactively engage stakeholders through genuine, two-way interaction (Macnamara, 2016). Internally, this means leadership behaviors and policies that promote psychological safety and allow employees to speak up, including on socially important issues (Qin and Men, 2021).

Krishna et al. (2023) also identify the importance of listening to employees and their perspectives as one of the most important best practices related to employee activism. This is a critical internal communication strategy for dealing with employee activism that emphasizes active and intentional listening to employees for issue management. Moreover, the authors (2023) highlight ERGs as a critical mechanism of listening, alongside formal management opportunities for feedback. They use annual and quarterly surveys to assess sentiment and make program adjustments. Other methods include surveys, affinity groups and employee working groups to keep track of employee needs.

In addition, some companies view employee activism as a way to demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility by offering benefits such as paid time off for ERG activities and volunteering during work hours. In other words, they see employee activism as a form of corporate purpose and giving.

In light of the changing employee activism landscape, employers should prioritise two actions for readiness (Herbert Smith Freehills, 2019).

First, *to provide an effective channel for the internal voice*. Several academic studies emphasize the significance of granting employees an influential voice, which offers advantages such as enhanced management comprehension of employee perspectives for informed decision-making, fostering reciprocal employment perceptions, facilitating efficient organizational information flow, knowledge sharing, and heightened engagement linked to increased productivity. This strictly recalls to the studies on whistleblowing and climate of voice within organizations.

Second, *to consider an appropriate level of control for the outside voice*. In the context of engaged employees expressing opinions, legal limitations on employer-mandated silence are growing due to public interest considerations. Whistleblower protection laws and the impact of #MeToo movement have reshaped the use of confidentiality clauses to prevent harassment victims from speaking out. It is increasingly recognized that stifling grievances hinder workplace improvements. Employees also leverage their external voice to compel employers to take stances on non-business issues, exposing any inconsistencies with their publicized values. Navigating this landscape demands a reevaluation of traditional norms, as curtailing social media expression raises questions about privacy infringement. This underscores the significance of well-defined social media policies.

As previously seen, Briscoe and Gupta (2021) suggest that managers can act as allies to employee activists, supporting their organizational change objectives, which can significantly impact the success of the activists. Such alliances are often driven by managerial alignment with activist goals, benefiting both personal values and business outcomes. This collaboration can foster stakeholder relations, and drive innovation through new ideas, products, and markets, while also enhancing talent attraction and the reputation of the company. It is crucial for managers to avoid hasty judgments of activist

employees and instead prioritize maintaining transparency and civility throughout interactions, even during intense discussions (Briscoe and Gupta, 2021).

Figure 10 (Briscoe and Gupta, 2021) illustrates five key techniques used by employee activists to promote organizational change, and more importantly, the specific ways in which managers can respond constructively and act as allies. The figure underscores that employee activism is not intrinsically confrontational, but its impact often depends on how management reacts to it. For every activist tactic, there is a corresponding form of managerial support that can help channel activism into productive and strategic outcomes.

The first technique, *analyzing the conditions*, involves employees timing their actions strategically, such as waiting for leadership changes, to maximize the likelihood of success. Managers can respond by advising on when and how to approach leadership or when to consider external escalation. The second, *framing the issue*, refers to how employees position their demands to align with organizational values or external trends. Here, managers can lend their expertise in shaping narratives that resonate with institutional logic.

A third technique, *repurposing processes and spaces*, entails using informal or underutilized areas within the organization (e.g. cafeterias or call rooms) as spaces for coordination and planning. Managerial support in this case includes providing access to physical spaces, pilot resources, or relevant internal data. The fourth, *utilizing knowledge of the organization*, draws on the understanding of employees of internal politics and decision-making dynamics. Supportive managers can guide employees by identifying the most receptive leaders or departments to approach.

Finally, *leveraging networks* involves reaching beyond the organization to build alliances and legitimacy through external stakeholders or peer organizations. Managers can facilitate this by connecting employees to external peers or networks, helping amplify their voice and influence. These examples illustrate how managers play a crucial role in enabling or hindering activism, and how constructive allies among managers can transform potentially adversarial activism into cooperative change initiatives.

Figure 10. Employee techniques and managerial support

Technique	Examples	Manager ally support
Analyze the conditions	LGBTQ employees wait for arrival of sympathetic CEO before presenting the internal case for change	Offer advice on when to approach leadership and when to wait (or, to resort to public action)
Frame the issue	Food industry employees pushing the launch of new meatless products emphasize growing health concerns among consumers	Lend your expertise on frames that fit the organization's values/logic
Repurpose processes and spaces	Physicians in training at major hospitals use cafeteria and resident call rooms in off hours to coordinate action against powerful surgeons and administrators to improve working conditions	Offer space/resources for a pilot project Provide access to relevant data
Utilize knowledge of the organization	Employees pursuing new sustainability equities product at Bloomberg identify line manager in traditional equities unit to back initiative	Provide insight into which senior leaders are most approachable on the issue
Leverage networks	Human Rights Campaign compiles information from activists and HR managers across major corporations to create Corporate Equality Index	Reach out to peers at other companies

Source: own reproduction from Briscoe and Gupta, 2021

Employee activism is a trend that is expected to spread across sectors (e.g. Miles et al., 2021). Riggins (2019) highlights the need for communication professionals to manage radical uncertainty, foster trust, and cultivate a purpose-driven culture that potentially creates a divide between purpose-driven organizations and those that maintain the status quo. As recalled for corporate activism, the author outlines seven critical elements for cultivating such an organizational culture: *clear values and purpose, leadership support, transparency, active listening and co-creation, consistency and alignment, data-informed decision-making, and advocacy*. Together, they form a comprehensive framework for creating a corporate culture that emphasizes authenticity and purposeful engagement with stakeholders and goes beyond profit-driven motives.

Briscoe and Gupta (2021) suggest that managers should actively engage with employee activism by minimizing the risks and leveraging the potential benefits. First, managers should enhance their comprehension of how contemporary social concerns align with the purpose, mission, and values of their company. This requires cross-functional collaboration in larger organizations or seeking external expertise in smaller companies. Second, managers can foster ties with both internal and external stakeholders, such as nonprofits, industry experts, and associations, offering valuable insights, trend awareness, and enhanced credibility. These relationships, whether formal or informal, can be facilitated by employees acting as bridges to external stakeholders, aiding in information acquisition and promoting mediator roles. Finally, effective managers adeptly engage with employee activists, providing a platform for idea exchange and concern expression. Open-minded managers recognize that certain employee suggestions can advantageously align with the organizational enduring goals, although seemingly disruptive in the short term. Active listening allows managers to better understand the stakeholder perspective without necessarily giving in to demands while balancing competing business pressures.

4.4.3 Risks of employee activism

Employee activism has been observed to trigger new policy changes and generate negative word of mouth about organizations (Miles et al., 2021). While criticism often comes from those opposing the company (Krishna, 2021), organizations can benefit from employee voices.

Positive advocacy by employees, such as sharing company achievements on social media or speaking favorably to acquaintances, can improve the reputation of the company (Krishna, 2021). This dual nature of employee activism presents both a challenge and an opportunity for organizations, as it is perceived as controversial by management (Briscoe and Gupta, 2021) and requires strategic management action to channel its impact positively. Internal activists can challenge the status quo and advocate for change: these activists work both internally and externally to put pressure on the organization, emphasizing the link between their intentions for activism and their communication actions.

Employee activism can be an opportunity for organizations to receive feedback and make positive changes rather than a threat. Through activism, employees strive to positively change their organization, which leads to more accountability and positive change (Lee, 2022). Employee-driven social change efforts face many obstacles in organizations, including resource constraints and resistance. These challenges can lead employees to adopt a dual perspective, simultaneously embracing their role in the organization and a broader activist identity (Ramirez and Islam, 2022).

While previous research suggests that employee activism has a positive impact on internal communication and policies, some authors (e.g. Krishna et al., 2023) emphasize tensions within organizations due to generational and ideological differences between management and employees.

Miles et al. (2021), for example, warn that engagement with non-work-related social issues can distract employees and reduce productivity, while dissenting opinions can marginalize dissenters and disrupt workplace cohesion. Reitz and Higgins (2022) note that some business leaders argue that companies should remain apolitical and not get involved in sociopolitical issues. In addition, employees may choose not to engage in activism if they perceive the organizational climate as unsafe or fear negative repercussions (Rheinhardt et al., 2023).

In developing EA-related communication strategies, organizations need to consider how employee activism intersects with all the other forms of activism that involve taking public positions on social issues and that may reinforce or contradict each other. Although a comprehensive discussion of their respective dynamics is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to recognize that employees may respond to perceived inconsistencies, such as a mismatch between CEO or corporate activism and organizational behavior, with their own forms of activism that can be either adversarial or supportive (Brown et al., 2020).

Furthermore, employee activism poses risks both to employers and employees themselves, as it may distract them from their work-related tasks when addressing societal issues unrelated to their work (e.g. Miles et al., 2021).

Employee activists face a fundamental paradox: while their insider status gives them privileged access to institutional knowledge and decision-making processes, the same

position simultaneously exposes them to the risk of co-optation and personal vulnerability through dependence on the organization. Therefore, they usually avoid confrontational approaches characteristic of external movements and instead develop persuasive strategies that leverage their intimate understanding of organizational dynamics (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016).

4.5 Empirical research on employee activism

The theoretical framework has shown that activism in the worksphere may take place at different organizational levels, encompassing corporate, CEO, shareholder, and employee-driven initiatives. While each form of activism has different characteristics and impacts, employee activism emerges as particularly complex due to its bottom-up nature and its potential to challenge established organizational communication and power structures.

The literature shows that employee activism represents a unique intersection of individual action, organizational dynamics, and broader social movements. Employee activism stems from personal beliefs of employees and collective initiatives, which may or may not align with the official positions of the organization. This results challenges for management and communication potential issues that have not yet been fully addressed.

Despite the growing interest of scholars and practitioners in activism, there remain significant empirical gaps in understanding how employee activism is experienced, interpreted, and managed in organizational contexts. To address these empirical limitations, the next two chapters presents two complementary studies that examine employee activism from the perspectives of both managers and employees. Both projects are the result of international research collaborations that combine different expertise and perspectives.

The first study adopts a cross-national approach that through interviews seek to understand how managers and communication professionals in Italy and the United States interpret and respond to employee activism. This study is the result of a collaboration established with an international research team based in Italy and the United States. This project was carried out in collaboration with an international research team led by Silvia

Ravazzani, Associate Professor in Management at the Department of Business LECB “Carlo A. Ricciardi”, Università IULM, together with Yan Jin, Professor of Public Relations in Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia (UGA), Anna Rachwalski, undergraduate researcher within the University of Georgia’s Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication’s Crisis Communication Think Tank, and Sonny Glenn Robinson, undergraduate Public Relations student and a researcher of the Crisis Insights and Analytics Lab at the University of Georgia’s Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication. This research group brings together scholars with complementary expertise to provide a cross-cultural perspective on the phenomenon. This study resulted in a journal article published in the *Journal of Communication Management*.

The second study employs a survey to analyze activism intentions from the perspective of employees in Italy and examine how individual and organizational factors influence their willingness to engage in activist behaviors. This research was also conducted as part of an international collaboration together with Yijing Wang, Professor and Chair of Strategic Communication at the Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands, and Silvia Ravazzani, Associate Professor in Management at the Department of Business LECB “Carlo A. Ricciardi”, Università IULM. Also, this study resulted in a journal article published in the *International Journal of Business Communication*.

5 Employee activism: An interview-based study

This chapter presents a qualitative cross-national study between Italy and the United States that examines how managers and communication professionals in multinational companies and consulting firms perceive and manage employee activism.

As anticipated, this study is the result of a collaboration established with an international research team based in Italy and the United States and resulted in a journal article published on the *Journal of Communication Management*¹.

In developing this research, I worked together with Silvia Ravazzani, Associate Professor in Management at the Department of Business LECB “Carlo A. Ricciardi”, Università IULM, Yan Jin, Professor of Public Relations in Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia (UGA), Anna Rachwalski, undergraduate researcher within the University of Georgia’s Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication’s Crisis Communication Think Tank, and Sonny Glenn Robinson, undergraduate Public Relations student and a researcher of the Crisis Insights and Analytics Lab at the University of Georgia's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication.

This study is the result of the joint work of all co-authors. My contributions were particularly prominent in the conceptualization phase and in managing the Italian part of the study, especially in the collection and analysis of the Italian data. I also played a central role in designing the methodology, preparing the first draft of the manuscript and supporting the subsequent visualization, review and editing. Although the publication reflects the collective contribution of the whole team, my involvement was substantial in driving the Italian part of the research, which explains its inclusion in this dissertation.

¹ Ravazzani, S., Jin, Y., Conti, S., Rachwalski, A., and Robinson, S. G. (2025). Seeking social change from the inside out: A cross-country study on employee activism. *Journal of Communication Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-07-2024-0102>

See Attachment 1 for the authorship statement and for the published version of the study.

5.1 Introduction

More and more employees are speaking out publicly for or against their employers on relevant social issues, concerning both the workplace and broader social, political, and environmental issues (Miles et al., 2021). Employees are becoming insider activists who can put pressure on organizations and managers by advocating for change through collective action (Li and Soule, 2021; Wowak et al., 2022), especially when employers take actions they disagree with and workers respond through employee walkouts, whistleblowing, public letters or social media complaints.

Literature on social change efforts undertaken from within corporations (e.g. Scully, 2015) underlines how employee activism has grown both as a global phenomenon and as an area of concern in specific national contexts. News sources in the U.S.A. report several cases of employees walking off the job to protest the sale of guns at Walmart shops or Wayfair's agreement to supply immigrant detention centers (Gurchiek, 2019). And indeed, North America is a context that favors EA, as corporations there play a dominant role in how regulation is implemented and therefore insider corporate knowledge is often used by internal activists to drive social change (Scully, 2015). In Europe, too, various crises (Diers-Lawson et al., 2024), from the financial and refugee crises to the climate crisis with a variety of extreme weather events, combined with the pressure of the UN 2030 Agenda and ESGs, have increased social scrutiny on organizations and the rethinking of how they should address social issues, impacting external and internal stakeholders alike. In Italy, for example, more and more cases of employee activism dominate the news, such as when RAI employees protested against the CEO's statement on the Israeli-Hamas War, criticizing both the use of corporate channels to express his personal and political views and the silence of the trade unions (Carugati, 2024). Given the global impact of employee activism and its varied manifestations in different continents and countries, this study aims to advancing the understanding of employee activism from the views of communication management executives in Italy and the U.S.A.

EA differs from other employee-led initiatives, in that employees engage in socially relevant causes beyond labor rights and employment conditions that personally affect

them. Employee activists proactively initiate or participate in change actions that bear broader societal value (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023). Employees therefore act as internal advocates or disruptors, playing a central role in the redefinition of corporate purpose and strategy. Alongside corporate and employee activism, CEOs more frequently participate in conversations about social and political matters, extending their responsibilities beyond the conventional scope of representing their organizations. When supportive and organic, employee activism can provide new opportunities for organizations that want to increase their social impact on socially relevant issues (e.g. sustainability, diversity, and inclusion) and make that impact more visible through strategic communication management. When employee activism is dysfunctional and hostile, new risks and challenges for organizations facing hostility from their own employees may emerge, especially when the confrontation becomes publicly visible (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023). Research in this area also suggests that employee activism blurs the distinction between employees who aim to improve the business and those who advocate for social causes, making it difficult for employers to distinguish between actions that benefit the business or society (Briscoe and Gupta, 2021).

In light of all this, this study addresses several critical research needs in communication management theory and practice. First, employee activism has become more urgent in this “age of purpose” (Weber Shandwick, 2019), driven by rising societal expectations, growing employee awareness and empowered voice, and generational change. This increased pressure has prompted companies to address employee concerns more directly. As a result, effective communication and relationship-building have become essential for managing these expectations, making employee activism an important focus for organizations. This study intends to contribute a deeper understanding of this phenomenon in contemporary workplaces. Second, while employee activism is not so new in social movement research (Scully, 2015), this study follows Krishna et al.’s (2023) call for more explorations of employee activism in public relations and communication scholarship by recognizing the fundamental communicative dimension of this phenomenon, and by examining the perceptions of communication professionals and their communication and engagement practices. Third, delving deeper in existing communication literature, employees engaging in social change are mainly viewed as an obstacle rather than a contribution to strategic communication (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023).

The common focus is on how mishandling employee activism can be detrimental to the organization's reputation and employee morale (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016; Miles et al., 2021; Reyes, 2021). This study aims to broaden the view of employee activism not only as an obstacle, but also as an opportunity for proactive change within organizations. While organizations are called to assess the risks of dysfunctional forms of employee activism and take preparatory actions that are essential for organizational readiness (Jin et al., 2024), they should also proactively promote forms of advocacy employee activism that drive positive change in a way that is consistent with the organization's purpose. Finally, most of the discussion and examples in the literature come from the U.S.A. This cross-national study provides additional insights from the U.S.A. and new findings from Italy, contributing to the understanding of how employee activism is understood in North American and European contexts. Although employee activism and protest cultures may differ by country, this study provides new evidence of their global characteristics and impact, particularly due to generational shifts and the ubiquity of digital media that foster a culture of dissent and mobilization (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023).

The study is structured as follows. It first reviews and integrates the core literature on employee activism to provide a description of this concept and the factors influencing it, its different forms and tactics, the connection to the phenomena of corporate activism, shareholder activism and CEO activism, and an examination of the ways in which employee activism can be addressed and managed from an organizational perspective. Second, it presents the results of a cross-national qualitative study, including Italy and the U.S.A., based on 20 qualitative interviews with corporate communications directors and senior internal communications executives from multinational corporations and consulting firms. Building on these findings, it ends with key takeaways and implications for both theory and practice.

5.2 Theoretical framework

Understanding employee activism and its influencing factors

The intersection of business and civil society has become a focus for scholars studying social movements, emphasizing the impact of activist movements on corporations (e.g.

Briscoe and Gupta, 2016). In this context, the workplace environment sees a growing importance of employee voice (Reitz and Higgins, 2022). Employee activism within organizations can be conceived as an example of voice behavior where employees aim to drive social change (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016).

As emerged in the general theoretical framework (see par. 4.4), there are several definitions of employee activism that emphasize common characteristics of this phenomenon: i.e. purposeful, organized and visible efforts, expressed internally and/or externally in the organization, aimed at social change by changing a company's stance and/or behavior towards certain social issues. This study conceptualizes employee activism as the active and conscious participation of employees, who usually join in groups to promote social change through collective actions that have public visibility on common social, political or environmental issues. The social issues employees advocate for can vary, including issues surrounding gender, LGBTQIA+ rights, ethnicity, political affiliation, abortion, immigration laws, climate change, and income inequality, which often are controversial topics.

Research also highlights the influencing factors that drive and shape employee activism (e.g. Briscoe and Gupta, 2016, 2021; Krishna, 2021; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023): the rising expectations of the workforce, empowerment as a management principle, pressing societal challenges related to CSR and sustainability issues, and emancipation enabled by digital technology. This appears particularly true for the younger generations, who are increasingly demanding corporate responsibility, are tech-savvy and use platforms such as social media to voice their concerns (e.g. Ninova-Solovykh, 2023). While these are contextual factors influencing employee activism worldwide, national culture can also play a role in shaping employee behaviors and, to a large extent, their activism within the organization. Culture is built on shared beliefs, values, and norms that help societies address common challenges (Schein, 2017) and influences how individuals perceive and respond to workplace dynamics, from leadership style to voice and activist behavior (Knoll et al., 2021; Tsui et al., 2007). Through norms for communication and social interactions, national culture shapes employee interpretations of workplace issues and their responses, making it key to understand differences in activism behavior across countries (Knoll et al., 2021).

Other studies add the influence of individual and organizational factors. At the individual level, these include the quality of the relationship with the organization and the degree of (dis)satisfaction with the workplace (Lee, 2022), the direct attribution of workplace inequalities to organizational (in)action (Scully and Segal, 2002), the (mis)alignment of personal identity with the organization, and personal moral attitudes and concerns about the social impact of the organization (Davis and White, 2015). In addition, psychological motives often drive employee activists to focus on the broader moral implications of their actions and to seek both personal and societal change (Hug and Zhang, 2024). At the organizational level, influencing factors relate to the organizational culture and more specifically the communication climate and information flow in the workplace (Lee, 2022), transparent internal communication practices (Jin and You, 2023), and leaders' attitudes towards social advocacy regardless of their personal stance on controversial issues (Hong and Ji, 2022).

Considering the understanding and practice of employee activism may vary also given the combination of this set of influencing factors, and recognizing employee activism is a communicative form of employee voice expression (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016), this study follows Krishna et al.'s (2023) call for more research on employee activism in public relations and communication studies and seeks to delve deeper into how communication professionals engaged in employee relations management and communication conceptualize this phenomenon (e.g. Jin and You, 2023, Krishna, 2021). Therefore, the following research question arises:

RQ1: How do corporate executives specialized in employee relations and internal communication conceptualize employee activism on socially relevant issues?

Forms and tactics of employee activism

In practice, employee activism can take different forms and be implemented using different tactics. From an organizational perspective, employee activism can be divided into supportive and non-supportive forms. In the literature (e.g. Krishna, 2021; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023; Reyes, 2021), these categories are generally referred to as *adversary or anti-corporate* EA, i.e., when employees raise issues or voice their concerns through confrontation and opposition to their employer, and *advocacy* EA, i.e., when employees advocate for their company while promoting actions that advance social change. Both

types of activism demonstrate employees' desire to make a difference and improve society, especially through persuasion (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023). This classification aligns with previous studies on employee communication behaviors during crises (e.g. Mazzei et al., 2019). In crises, employees can either support or challenge their organizations by acting as advocates or opponents, depending on the situation, to influence the organization's stance and behavior regarding social issues relevant to society as a whole (Reyes, 2021).

The direction of the activism is another aspect to consider when understanding employee activism forms. Brown et al. (2020) distinguish between internally directed EA, which refers to the constructive expression of opinion within an organization that is not publicized and therefore carries lower risks, e.g. by building alliances within the organization; and externally directed EA, which includes actions attracting public attention, e.g. strikes or protests by employees, which typically resonate through traditional and social media and carry the risk of organizational backlash. Rheinhardt et al. (2023) focus on externally directed employee activism by elaborating on the subtype of "platform activism", the use of an organization's physical or symbolic resources by an employee to communicate messages about social issues to an external audience. This form of activism uses the organization's platform to reach beyond internal boundaries and advocate for broader social issues. However, the perceived accessibility of such activism varies by company and is influenced by organizational culture. Employees may feel they do not have access or do not feel safe engaging on this platform because they fear reprisals.

When it comes to tactics, Briscoe and Gupta (2021) point out that employees can choose to act along a disruption spectrum including two main poles: Disruption and Persuasion. *Disruptive tactics* involve disrupting internal routines and damaging public reputation to get leaders to comply with employee demands, such as employee walkouts, protest demonstrations, or leaking internal information to NGOs. *Persuasive tactics* use more discreet employee communication approaches to influence colleagues and leaders, such as coordinating with employee activists in other organizations, petition campaigns, and talking to the media.

Many of the communication tactics used internally by employee activists are like those used externally. These tactics include: defining and articulating grievances, organizing to

put pressure on management, rallying and collaborating with other employee groups, spreading rumors or (dis)information, using news media to increase pressure on the company (McCown, 2007), campaigning on social media, framing social issues to drive organizational change, sharing benchmarking or scientific reports, building political coalitions, and using victim narratives (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016). McCown (2007) describes how employees typically mobilize by forming coalitions with others who share their concerns and initially attempt to engage in two-way symmetrical communication with their organizations. When these efforts are unsuccessful, employees may escalate to asymmetrical tactics, such as engaging the media and issuing formal letters and individual statements. These more confrontational tactics appear more effective in getting a response from the organization. In this way, activists' internal-external pressures force their organizations to accept their right to exist, listen to their concerns and improve communication processes. When organizations participate and use effective communication management strategies in addressing EA, negotiation, two-way communication and joint decision-making occur.

The above discussion of the various forms and tactics of employee activism raises another research question that this study will attempt to deepen:

RQ2: What tactics do organizations face when considering both adversary and advocacy employee activism forms as well as internally and externally directed EA?

Communication management of employee activism

From an organizational perspective, employee activism is a communication-driven phenomenon that can have an impact on the organization's development and reputation (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023; Reitz and Higgins, 2022). Employees are increasingly integrating their non-work identities and beliefs into the workplace and in some cases redefining the organization's role by using it as a platform for communicating messages about social issues. This is often done without the explicit consent of the organizational leadership (Rheinhardt et al., 2023). Therefore, organizations face the challenge of recognizing employee activism and dealing with it effectively, especially when it takes adversary and externally driven forms.

In response to the challenges posed by EA, organizations have adopted strategic communication management and effective public relations practices to strengthen

relationships with their employees and to engage and listen to employees in an open and balanced dialog. These strategies include internal communication, dialogic communication and organizational listening. *Internal communication* in the context of employee activism (Krishna et al., 2023) is crucial to address the communicative needs and concerns of employees and to prevent employee concerns from escalating adversary activism and its externalization, causing potential crises. Open internal communication and a participative decision-making culture promote symmetrical, two-way communication between an organization and its employees, which fosters mutual understanding, trust, and collaboration (McCown, 2007). This align with the principles of *dialogic communication* (Kent and Taylor, 2021) on which companies are increasingly relying when communicating with their employees and with consumers and the media, who all increasingly expect transparency and value alignment. As part of effective internal and dialogic communication, *organizational listening* represents a strategic communication approach in which organizations actively engage with stakeholders through open, two-way communication (Macnamara, 2016). This involves not only gathering feedback, but also creating an environment fostering dialog, ethical engagement, and mutually beneficial relationships by shifting the focus from crafting persuasive messages to genuinely responding to stakeholder concerns (Qin and Men, 2021). Internally, this manifests itself in both organizational policies and leadership actions that create a safe environment for open expression and employee voice (Qin and Men, 2021), including employee activism on socially relevant issues. Krishna et al. (2023) emphasize the role of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) as a strategic platform to listen to employees and anticipate potential problems. ERGs are employee-led initiatives that focus on various issues, such as diversity in the workplace. They play an important role in internally directed employee activism and advise senior management (Byrd, 2022; Krishna et al., 2023; Maks-Solomon and Drewry, 2021). ERGs provide networking and mentoring and help influence corporate strategies. In the context of EA, they enable employee activists to collectively address commonly perceived social issues within the organization. These corporate groups act as internal social movements within organizations (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016). They can range from formal to informal structures, but all share the common goal of driving social change within their organizations (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016). While ERGs are intended to facilitate internally driven activism, they could also support forms of externally driven platform activism

(Rheinhardt et al., 2023), which, as illustrated earlier, involves using the organization's platform to reach beyond its internal boundaries to advocate for broader societal concerns.

All in all, these strategies for the communication management of employee activism help to build trust, openness, and involvement within the organization while promoting more control, mutuality, and employee satisfaction (McCown, 2007). At the same time, internal and dialogic communication that goes hand in hand with listening and structured solicitation of employee voice, even in their dissenting forms, become a means to anticipate and prevent risks when employee activism is potentially dysfunctional, i.e., in its adversary and externally driven forms (Krishna et al., 2023).

However, the proactive acceptance and management of employee activism can also entail some disadvantages and internal resistance. Miles et al. (2021) warn that engaging with non-work-related issues can distract employees and reduce concentration and productivity, while dissenting opinions can isolate dissenting employees and affect workplace harmony. Reitz and Higgins (2022) add that some leaders have responded to social issues by claiming organizations are apolitical and should not deal with such issues. The authors explain this resistance with the fact that employee activism has the potential to reshape traditional notions of power within organizations. However, millennials, the largest generation in the labor market, as well as younger generations, place great value on the purpose of an organization and its role in addressing social injustices and contributing to positive social change. As these generations are also the ones most likely to engage in EA, leaders face significant risk if they fail to recognize these rising expectations and employee activism expressions. Rather than suppressing EA, organizations and leaders would do better to work on aligning social missions with business objectives to achieve positive impacts for both the company and society (Ramirez and Islam, 2022) with positive outcomes for employee activists too such as such as employee retention and work recognition (Hug and Zhang, 2024). Yet, resistance to employee activism can come from the employees themselves. Research shows employees generally avoid engaging in risky behaviors, such as constructive discussions or addressing social issues in the workplace, if they perceive an unsafe environment or fear punishment (Rheinhardt et al., 2023).

All this considered, for employee activism to emerge spontaneously and develop in its advocacy forms entails a shift in organizational culture where employees feel empowered

to express their views even when disruptive and in conflict with organizational leadership (Rheinhardt et al., 2023). In this regard, Riggins (2019) outlines some key elements in corporate activism, which also apply to EA, that are critical to building an organizational culture prioritizing authenticity and purposeful engagement: clear values and purpose, leadership support, transparency, active listening and co-creation, consistency and alignment, data-driven decision making, and advocacy.

Finally, when developing their employee activism communication management strategies, organizations should also consider other forms of activism, especially corporate, CEO, and shareholder activism, as all these different forms can either fit together or conflict with each other. Companies increasingly engage in *corporate activism*, a strategic approach to cultivate a social conscience alongside their primary business activities (Villagra et al., 2022). This involves taking stances on controversial issues that directly impact stakeholders, such as LGBTQIA+ rights, political affiliation, immigration laws or climate change. Similarly, but with a focus on individual agents of change, *CEO activism* sees “a business leader’s personal and public expression of a stance on some matter of current social or political debate, with the primary aims of visibly weighing in on the issue and influencing opinions in the espoused direction” (Hambrick and Wowak, 2021, p. 34). Finally, activists from various investor groups can voice financial and social concerns, challenging a company’s triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental performance. This is known as *shareholder activism*, where shareholders actively work to shape corporate policies and practices (Kalodimos and Leavitt, 2020). While a detailed discussion of the nature and outcomes of different forms of activism is beyond the scope of this article, it is recognized that corporate, CEO, and shareholder activism can serve as powerful catalysts to increase the likelihood employees will actively participate in activist efforts. Employees may respond to CEO activism (Brown et al., 2020) or other corporate or shareholder activism by engaging in their own activism. Aligning these various forms of activism is challenging but can bolster the organization’s dedication to social causes and foster a collective purpose, motivating employees to participate in advocacy efforts aligned with the company’s objectives, including its leadership and shareholders.

Hence, research seems to emphasize the crucial role of internal and dialogic communication and listening processes in the effective governance of constructive and

supportive forms of EA, providing platforms for activists to voice their ideas and concerns, even when they are disruptive, for example through ERGs (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016) for internally driven employee activism or platform activism (Rheinhardt et al., 2023) for externally driven EA. These strategies also help to align employee activism with corporate goals and values as well as other forms of organization-related activism. In light of all these subtleties, further research is needed to investigate the strategies and implications of communication management of EA. This includes examining how communicators perceive and manage the balancing act between employee activism as a risk and employee activism as an opportunity for proactive change within organizations and contribution to strategic communication (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023). Therefore, the last research question of this study reads as follows:

RQ3: What communication management strategies exist for the expression, listening and regulation of employee activism?

5.3 Methodology

Data collection

This study is a cross-national qualitative investigation involving Italy and the U.S.A. As is typical of this type of cross-cultural research (Bryman, 2012), each research group was responsible for conducting the study in their own country, with work closely coordinated to ensure comparability of interview questions and procedures for administering the research instrument and analyzing the data.

Data was collected between August and November 2023 through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with corporate communications directors and senior internal communications executives. Based on the insights from the literature review, the interview guide (table 10, appendix A) was organized around the three research questions of the study, i.e. conceptualization and influencing factors of EA, forms and tactics, and communication management strategies. Still participants were given the opportunity to expand on the themes of the questions from their own perspective and practical experience, allowing new concepts and ideas to emerge from the data (Bryman, 2012). The interview guides in the two languages were tested in advance, after questions jointly

developed in English by the two country teams were back-translated to Italian by two independent native-speaking individuals.

Participants were recruited using the non-probability sampling technique of purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012) based on the researchers' social networks. Expert contacts from two research centers in Italy and the U.S.A., which network experts in corporate and internal communications, were used. This technique allowed to deliberately identify and select participants who were knowledgeable and well-informed about the phenomenon of interest, demonstrated a willingness to participate and had the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate and reflective manner (Etikan, 2016). As for the sampling criteria, participants had to be employed in private companies or consultancies, hold a managerial position in their respective organization, and work in the field of internal communication. Those working in consultancies were approached in their role as corporate communication directors or senior internal communication executives dealing with their own staff, without taking into account their experience with external clients.

Two researchers from the two country teams were involved in the data collection and conducted the interviews online via video conferencing. The Italian sample comprised 8 individual interviews and 2 group interviews, i.e. a total of 10 interviews with 15 informants. The group interviews involving multiple participants simultaneously (five in one case and two in the other) made it possible to collect relevant information from those companies where employee activism was addressed with a cross-functional strategy, where the internal communication function was supported by the industrial relations, digital communication and sustainability functions. Participants were almost equally divided between male and female, and between those belonging to Generation X (44-59 years) and Millennials (28-43 years), with only one Boomer (60-69 years). All participants identified themselves as White. Three companies belonged to the Communications industry, three were from the Energy industry and the others were from the Banking, Pharmaceutical, Electronics and paint industries, respectively.

The American sample included 10 individual interviews. Eight of the ten participants were male, and all participants identified as White, with one identifying as White/Other. The ages of the participants were skewed, with six belonging to Generation X (44-59 years), two Boomers (60-69 years), and only one Millennial (28-43 years). Four participants came from the Communications industry, three came from the Healthcare

industry, and one came from the utilities, higher education, and food industries, respectively.

All interviews lasted an average of one hour. They were recorded, transcribed, and the Italian interviews were back-translated into English in preparation for the joint data analysis phase.

Data analysis

Two researchers from the two country teams were involved in the data analysis. To ensure inter-coder reliability, the coding scheme was first piloted on each qualitative dataset. Then the coders carried out an iterative process of data coding and interpretation across the entire data set to allow for continuous (re)discussion and agreement (Bryman, 2012).

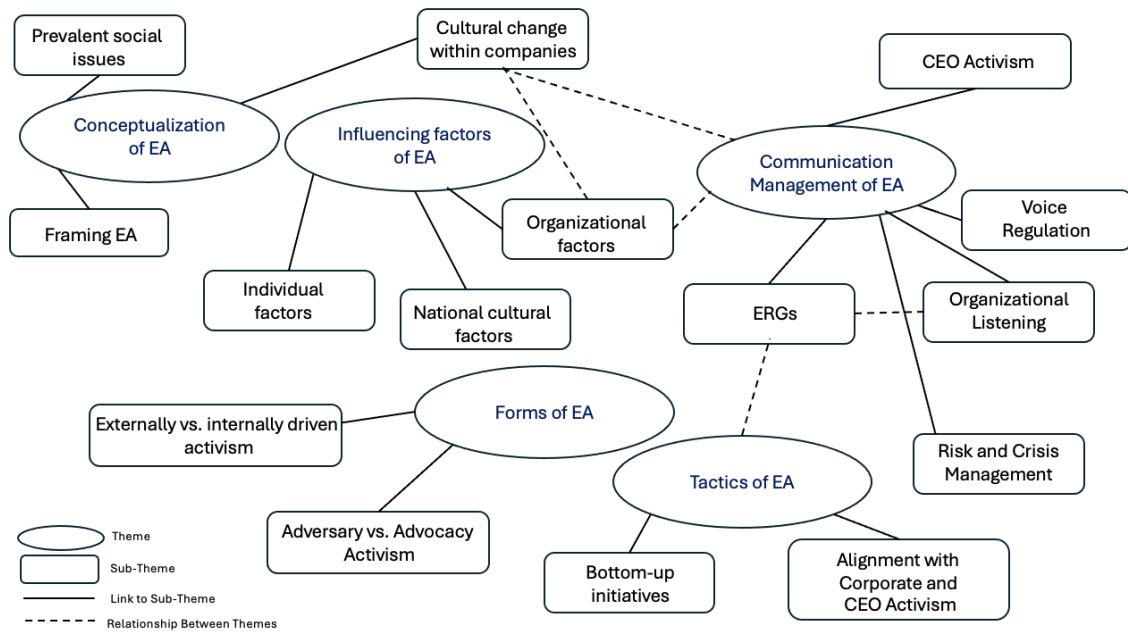
The analysis was done manually and followed a thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke, 2012) for systematically identifying, organizing, and synthesizing patterns of meaning and experience (themes) across the overall dataset. In this study, a combination of deduction and induction was used in the thematic analysis: on the one hand, the researchers brought to the data a set of concepts and ideas derived from previous literature on EA, with the study's three research questions providing the general coding framework. On the other hand, codes, themes and subthemes were derived from the content of the data itself during the analysis to refine the coding and interpretation of themes and subthemes. The iterative process of creating the initial codes and then searching, reviewing, defining and naming themes, and locating exemplars, was facilitated by structuring two coding tables for the two datasets. This procedure eventually facilitated the systematic cross-country comparison, providing valuable insights into the general trends and at the same time the specific nature and characteristics of employee activism in the two national contexts.

5.4 Results

In the following, the results are explained on the basis of five core themes that emerged from the analysis across Italian and American interviews. Figure 11 offers a visual overview of the main themes and subthemes emerged from the data analysis. Therefore,

each theme is supplemented by sub-themes and underpinned with examples and quotes from the interviews. The core themes include: 1) the conceptualization of employee activism and 2) the national cultural, organizational and individual factors that influence it (RQ1); 3) the forms of activism and 4) the tactics used (RQ2); and finally, 5) the elements related to the communication management of employee activism (RQ3). If relevant cross-country differences clearly emerged from the data, these are emphasized in the explanation of subthemes.

Figure 11. Thematic map



Source: authors' own elaboration

Conceptualization of employee activism

This theme covers the different perceptions of employee activism by communication professionals. These include the ideas and concepts they associate when framing EA, the links they make to organizational culture and change, and the social issues they perceive to be prevalent in their environment.

Framing employee activism

When asked about their conceptualization of EA, participants commonly associated it with *employee prosocial engagement*, *active citizenship*, *active participation* or

involvement, freedom of expression, and megaphoning with external resonance. What differed was the employee- or organization-centered focus of these definitions. For example, Italian Participant 8 elaborated on an employee-centered definition: “All the ways in which an employee actively engages in supporting the social causes that are important to them and makes themselves available to champion and promote them”. In contrast, Italian Participant 3 expressed a more organization-led conceptualization, still embodying the above concepts: “It is a journey that companies are undergoing in terms of evolution and transformation related to active participation, collaboration, and inclusion of employees who are no longer seen as colleagues to whom only information is directed, but as individuals to involve even outside the company. Hence, Employee Activism”. American participants also debated whether employee activism is defined more by employees expressing their voice or by organizations responding to it. American Participant 2 stated that their understanding of employee activism was “being able to let people express themselves”, while American Participant 4 stated that “employee activism is when employees of an organization try to drive the organization to act in certain ways, to speak out on certain issues that are important to them”. Most participants wavered between whether the organization, in response to calls from employees, was the primary actor in EA, or the employees were the primary actors in expressing their voices.

Cultural change within companies

A key subtheme related to the conceptualization of employee activism from all the interviews concerns the strong link between the emergence and development of employee activism and *cultural change* within companies, both as a purpose and an outcome of EA. All participants underlined that employee activism takes shape when employees can actively contribute and advocate for the positive transformation of organizational behaviors on socially relevant causes. This entails increased *empowerment* and *engagement* in corporate decision-making, a *culture of openness*, a *purpose-driven culture*, *alignment with mission and vision*, opportunities to *influence strategic decisions*, a focus on *reputational capital*, *transparency*, and *listening*. Italian Participant 4 in this regard emphasized: “Employee activism is linked to the broader concept of the company’s reputational capital and the ability of corporate stakeholders to express a position regarding broader roles and projects related to purpose on issues stemming from

widespread editorial power, namely the ability of users to intervene in organizational narrative flows”. In line with this, American Participant 6 stated “[employees have] come to be comfortable with speaking out on issues that are important to them at their workplace... and they have expectations now of their employers to support the things that they believe in or to advocate for things that they believe”. American Participant 4 agreed that employee activism occurs when “employees of an organization try to drive the organization to act in certain ways”.

Prevalent social issues

Prevalent social issues associated with employee activism are manifold and, interestingly, vary according to national context. In Italy they include Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and CSR. Conversely, there is a reluctance to discuss religion or politics, likely because Italian culture considers these topics part of the private sphere and considered more suitable for private circles than professional environments. In the American interviews, prevalent social issues were racial justice, connected to the 2020 death of George Floyd, COVID-19 and the return to office movement, and the Israeli-Hamas War. Unlike in the Italian interviews, political issues, such as abortion, climate, and equal pay were discussed. Religion was not mentioned unless associated with views on abortion or the Israeli-Hamas War. Political events and resulting social movements triggered activism and prompted organizations to act through DEI or environmental, social, and governance (ESG) policies. American Participant 3 stated that the amount of topics around which activism has emerged in the U.S.A. has created an organizational attitude where “companies have learned... it’s not in their best interest to weigh into those topics”. When facing too many concerns, organizations may feel pressured to respond hastily or without full consideration.

Influencing factors

This theme provides a detailed overview of a range of national cultural, organizational and individual factors that are considered by the participants to be decisive for the willingness of employees to get involved in social, political or environmental issues within or outside their company.

National cultural factors

Among the *national cultural factors*, the role of *unions* was highlighted as a powerful lever that can intensify or solve employee concerns. In fact, with Italian Participant 6, it emerged that: “The union becomes the main interlocutor within the company around employee issues related to work organization”. Three American Participants agreed, stating that unions made activism processes more “straightforward”, as when union action occurred, it created a more *organized and established method* of discussing issues with employees. Moreover, American Participant 5 added that without the union “rulebook”, the lines of interaction between employee and employer are less clearly drawn, and “then it becomes much more of a push and pull”. The lack of a designated process to go through when faced with concerns could lead to more internal conflict. In general, the Italian Participants highlighted that employees tend to voice *softer and less divisive topics* or refer to unions for more complicated matters. Participant 2 further explained, “Italian culture tends not to let people fully express themselves in the workplace, not because the company does not want to, but because people think that the organizational setting is not the most suitable place”.

Organizational factors

Several *organizational factors* were mentioned across all interviews as powerful in shaping employee activism and influencing its supportive (versus more adversary) forms: *open communication climate and corporate culture; purpose-driven companies; corporate activism on socially relevant causes in line with employees’; culture of change; active listening; transparent communication in leadership style*. These elements together seem to facilitate employee empowerment, engagement, and voice behaviors. Employee activism appears to prevail in purpose-driven companies, authentically practicing corporate activism on socially relevant issues and/or open to employee dialog and voice, emphasizing synergy between individuals and the organization. This is also connected to the subtheme of cultural change previously mentioned in relation to the framing of EA. In the words of Italian Participant 2: “If the company knew how to listen and was attentive to the needs of its employees, people would not need to take the expression of their opinions and needs elsewhere. The company would be the privileged place where they would feel free to communicate and actively participate”. American Participant 5 agreed

that the level of dialog allowed by the organization influenced employee retention: “Every company that I’ve ever run across has had an open-door policy. The culture dictates how open that door really is, but there’s always been an avenue to share your voice. And then the reality is if you’re not finding that, you don’t have to stay at that company”.

Individual factors

Finally, the thematic analysis highlighted the influence of *individual factors* such as *generational differences* and the *role of identity and belonging*. Regarding generational differences, Italian findings suggest younger organizational newcomers may initially display less involvement but become highly active once integrated into the organization over time. Conversely, American findings found younger individuals highly active and “serious” about addressing social and political issues within the workplace. Younger workers in organizations with a union presence also “haven’t felt the pain of (...) the stress and the financial burden of going through a strike”, and may be more likely to act through their union as a result. In contrast, older employees who may have been through a strike already “just want to hold on to their pension, (...) finish off strong” rather than fighting for action in the workplace”, according to American Participant 5. Middle-aged individuals were found as more self-confident and often active in both employee and corporate activism. American Participant 3 spoke about how more senior workers could feel “personally attacked” and spurred onto activism when faced with an issue as “they just have such a strong emotional connection to the job or the company”. In Italy, different age groups prioritize activism differently: younger members focus on environmental concerns, and senior members on social issues, though there are instances of shared activism.

Moreover, employee activism relates to *employee internal values*, including the *manifestation of individual identity, sense of belonging, sense of identification, perception of authenticity, alignment, and trust relationships*. Accordingly, Italian Participant 6 employee activism encompasses “All instances of voice by colleagues, expressions of consensus as well as of dissent related to corporate strategy and all related initiatives and activities. It is a manifestation of the individual’s identity, the brand purpose of each person also translated to social media”. American interview 7 also aligned, stating employee activism as the right for employees to speak up internally for outward change,

or “for employees to have a voice in things beyond what’s going on within their organization”. Regarding *identity and belonging*, newer generations prioritize aligning personal values with company values, in contrast to senior generations, emphasizing the need for corporations to adapt to this evolving dynamic within the multi-generational workforce. Italian Participant 9 specified: “Today, the issue of identity and belonging in identifying one’s values or identity with that of the company is very much alive for the younger generation. Religion, family, and school have less influence, and young people seek identification with companies. For senior generations, this approach was not essential; on the contrary, this mission is crucial for new generations”. American Participant 10 agreed, stating younger employees want “to work for an organization on their side that supports the same issues, or that at least has a reasonable position on the issues that are important to them”.

Forms of EA

This theme covers the different forms of employee activism the participants experienced in their respective organizations: *adversary EA*, where employees challenge or confront their employer on social, ethical, or organizational issues, and *advocacy EA*, where employees support and promote their company’s social initiatives. These can be directed *externally*, through visible public actions or *internally*, with concerns raised within the organization.

Adversary vs. advocacy forms

Participants across countries mentioned instances of employee activism encompassing both advocacy and adversary actions. The most prevalent form of employee activism in Italy is *advocacy activism which adheres to and supports corporate activism*. An Italian example of advocacy activism is an employee’s spontaneous initiative to promote slow mobility, driven by a personal passion for sports and cycling, which resonated with the company’s goals and led to the creation of a platform encouraging global challenges to enhance employee well-being and sustainability. In the U.S.A., an example occurred when a taxation authority was considering changes that would raise costs on the entire industry. The organization galvanized and educated their employees to lobby their legislators and post on social media against the taxation changes, eventually resulting in the policy change not occurring.

Conversely, an Italian example of *adversarial activism* emerged from pre-existing controversies regarding inadequate investments and infrastructure within an energy company. In response to a nationwide electricity emergency, isolated voices grew to the point they culminated in organized union protests and spontaneous actions on social media to ask the company for a quick and decisive problem solution. An American version of adversarial activism arose when in response to the company's contracts with several government agencies who were taking actions that were politically unpopular with the employees. Even after the employees expressed their voices through corporate channels, they were rebuffed, leading to "hundreds of employees literally storming corporate headquarters and the CEO's office".

Externally driven vs. internally driven forms

Interviews revealed that in Italy employee activism tends to be internally directed within the organization. Dissent based and externally driven activism are less common in this country, and when this happens, social media is the primary platform for expressing individual dissent publicly. Moreover, the union serves as an intermediary between organizations and dissenting employees, amplifying concerns and ensuring protection from retaliation. This role of unions as intermediaries persists in the U.S.A. While *externally driven activism* is present while not very frequent, *dissent based* activism is the most common form of activism observed. American employees would, for example, speak up about an organization's lack of opportunities for advancement for women or lack of accommodations for disabilities in the workplace. Dissent could come from individual employees contacting a manager, HR, or leadership, and posting online, or from an ERG. Advocacy activism is much rarer than dissent based activism, and usually only seen through employee ambassador programs or when legal regulations affecting employees were imposed on an organization.

Tactics of EA

This theme includes tactics identified as prevalent among participants, from disruptive to persuasive approaches that employee activists choose based on the likelihood of securing a response from leadership: bottom-up initiatives, alignment with Corporate and CEO activism, and ERGs from an employee perspective.

Bottom-up initiatives

Participants in all interviews, when asked about tactics, focused almost exclusively on those associated with internally directed employee activism used by employees to raise awareness of social issues relevant to them and to establish the movement within the organization. Firstly, they commonly referred to bottom-up initiatives, i.e. *spontaneous employee suggestions and proposals* on relevant social issues involving the organization and its operations. According to Italian Participant 8: “We have many spontaneous initiatives proposed by colleagues that are very varied, ranging from corporate volunteering and sustainability-related activities to others aimed at integrating more disadvantaged groups or sustaining inclusion activities”. However, challenges in implementation sometimes, as noted by Italian Participant 9: “There are proposals from colleagues, such as new associations, that are particularly difficult to implement because they clash with other strategic issues that are rooted in a strongly established and influential corporate culture”.

American participants mentioned bottom-up initiatives as mostly being directed through an ERG or addressed to the activist’s managers. American Participant 3 discussing the negative repercussions when employees can’t make proposals to their managers, or their proposals are rebuffed: “These situations typically evolve because those relationships are broken. I don’t have any. I can’t talk to my manager, or I did, and they ignored me, or they laughed at me out of the room”. Having a proposal ignored can then lead to an escalation outside of the organization’s internal processes, as employees will feel as if “I’m being disrespected, and I feel like I don’t matter, and [more external EA] is the way that I’m going to get everybody’s attention” (American Participant 3).

Alignment with corporate and CEO activism

Both Italian and American employees tend to express their opinions in *direct connection with existing company projects, linking employee activism to corporate activism, CEO activism* or to other company-led initiatives, e.g. employee ambassador programs or existing programs promoting DEI and sustainability. In this regard, Italian Participant 1 stressed that “[...] company initiatives are supported by employees who, on a voluntary basis, lend their voices and spontaneous resonance to the company’s projects”.

Employee resource groups

Participants in all interviews mentioned ERGs as a tactic from the perspective of employee activists. ERGs, whether initiated by the company or by employee movements, provide employees with an official platform that allow them to voice their concerns on issues that are important to them. Italian Participant 6 explained that, particularly “on Yammer, there are spontaneously emerging subgroups and communities” which can subsequently be converted into better structured ERGs. Interestingly, in both countries, employee activism manifests itself as isolated voices rather than a widespread movement, if not through ERGs. At the same time, participants indicated that companies view ERGs as a strategic way to monitor internal conversations about these issues and maintain an open dialog. This second role of ERGs will be discussed further under the next theme.

Communication management of employee activism

This theme addresses the communication management strategies that participants have experienced in relation to employee activism expression, listening and regulation. In particular, the subthemes that emerged from the analysis include voice regulation, organizational listening, ERGs, CEO activism, and risk and crisis communication.

Voice regulation

Participants from both countries highlighted the sub-theme of voice regulation, which is done through *company guidelines and policies*: ethical guidelines, codes of conduct, whistleblowing policies, and especially social media policies.

Social media policies in the context of employee activism have emerged as practical guidelines encouraging the expression of voice within secure boundaries, prioritizing corporate security and protecting sensitive information while allowing the free expression of voice. Italian Participant 9 explained: “We have guidelines for employees’ need to speak up within safe boundaries, a tool that allows everyone to speak up, express their voice and enable change”. While Italian Participant 3 emphasized: “It is crucial to promote and enhance the active participation of employees by providing clear guidelines on how they can represent the company on their personal social media channels to protect the company’s image as well”. American Participant 6 shared an example of regulating social media use by requesting a disclaimer posted on social media “that those are [the

employee's] views and not the views of their employer". This could alleviate reputational damage to the company if an employee activist makes controversial statements in relation to social issues.

Voice behavior of employees has emerged as a key focus for companies, not only for risk management reasons, as in the previous examples, but also as a *strategic communication opportunity* to promote dialogic communication and position employees as credible spokespeople for the company in order to manage and improve their external reputation. According to Italian Participant 7: "Colleagues are encouraged to be spokespeople for the company's initiatives to the outside world as well, emphasizing a key internal-external synergy. Active participation through comments, sharing and dissemination is invited to stimulate constructive conversations and encourage the development of specific tools to facilitate sharing". Some organizations harness their employees to act as social media ambassadors for their organization, and provide resources such as talking points, website spaces, coaching and guidelines to help employees become effective external communicators for the organization. However, risks come with regulating voice in this manner. American Participant 5 believed asking employees to do their regular job along with being an ambassador is not sustainable long-term, and brought up industry-dependent concerns about employees accidentally leaking trade secrets or breaking protected health information.

Organizational listening

Organizational listening is widely implemented to promote an open culture within organizations based on feedback and dialog, where employee activism in its constructive form can take shape and influence the way social issues are addressed within the company. The common tools identified across the interviews include annual climate surveys, structured reporting systems for anonymous and non-anonymous feedback including whistleblowing procedures, town hall meetings, bottom-up communication tools and listening in informal settings, non-retaliatory and non-discrimination policies as well as policies for creating synergy between internal and external communication. Formal and structured listening tools are particularly important to benchmark performance and well-being. Italian Participant 3 explained: "We promote structured internal processes of listening and a feedback path with managers, characterized by

planned moments throughout the year to foster not only performance evaluation but also corporate well-being”. Besides tools and policies for organizational listening, participants stressed the role of the direct supervisor in creating an environment of active listening and counteracting situations that may pose a disruption to the organization. American Participant 3 for example stated when activism situations “come to a head”, it is often because “there’s not a strong relationship between the employees and their immediate managers”. By focusing on listening to employees, American Participant 5 stated: “If you’ve got a larger issue on a group level, it shouldn’t be a surprise”.

Employee resource groups

As mentioned before, ERGs have evolved into a dual role: a tactic used by employee activists and a strategic tool for dialog, listening and risk prevention from an organizational perspective.

In the U.S.A., employee voice is often raised in response to a social or political issue or as a complaint by a union or ERG. Here ERGs play a particular role in assisting internally driven activism. Italian findings indicate a strong interest in ERGs among eight out of ten companies to foster discussions on diversity, inclusion, wellness, and mental health. Eight out of ten American participants had experience with ERGs, which are typically connected to executives or the greater company in some concrete manner, whether through an executive sponsor, a memo process to submit ideas to senior management, or a line to HR.

In those companies where ERGs are established, they were found to foster a more inclusive organizational culture by enabling meaningful conversations at work and by facilitating open dialog, freedom of expression, and action. According to Italian Participant 2: “ERGs are one of those moments of more or less free conversation or openness (...); they help to create a culture of voice in the organization because individuals feel freer to raise issues in the workplace that they would otherwise find difficult to raise”. ERGs play an active role also in shaping the company’s strategy and promoting a collaborative and inclusive work environment. These groups can be influential if they grow large enough, because, as American Participant 6 discussed, “If you’ve got that many people asking for something or calling you out (...), organizations can’t ignore that”. American Participant 6 described a process where an ERG created a style guide of

inclusive language for the organization, filling in a gap that the organization's communications team had not yet addressed. ERG involvement, in this case, was described to have saved the organization from a "crisis" of being called out publicly.

CEO activism

CEO activism was highlighted across interviews as a strategic approach that organizations should consider when developing their communication management strategies and, more specifically, in their efforts to manage and inspire EA. In Italy, CEO activism was explicitly identified as a source of inspiration for supportive forms of EA. The highly influential role of CEOs in Italy can be explained in the words of Italian Participant 2: "In Italy, there are very few publicly listed companies and the rest are entrepreneurial companies, where the values of the entrepreneur permeate the nature of the company". Also across American interviews, emphasis was placed on authenticity and overall alignment with corporate values to balance all positions and maintain credibility. American Participant 10 stated: "If the issue is not aligned, you shouldn't be doing it (...) The organization needs to have a clear purpose for taking a position". American Participant 2 praised a university president who, when he spoke up due to the Israeli-Hamas War, his voice was "consistent with his own feelings, and his own values (...) there was an authenticity to it", which was reported to have had a positive effect on employees and other stakeholders. All in all, CEO activism was described by participants as impacting employees and their engagement, amplified by the public visibility and prestige of the spokesperson.

However, this can also be detrimental in those cases in which the CEO activism conflicts with corporate and shareholder positions. For example, an Italian Participant 2 described "This is the case of a CEO of a company in the food sector, who, while firmly embracing a sustainability-driven path, was fired due to lack of shareholder support". Similarly, American Participant 6 discussed when "the CEO was a long standing, owner or part owner of an organization and their activism was going to be 100% based on their personal values and beliefs, and they were going to do what they were going to do regardless of the impact on an organization. And it created tremendous amounts of friction". Careful monitoring and strategic alignment of all forms of organization-related activism therefore proved essential in all interviews to facilitate collective purpose on social issues and

strategically motivate employees to engage in employee activism in a way that aligns with the company's goals and values.

Risk and crisis management

The last sub-theme relates to risk and crisis management, respectively, in connection with EA. The participants emphasized that the aforementioned tools used for *voice regulation* and *organizational listening* are also essential for risk management purposes. Participants across countries also mentioned the value of *strategic communication*, with continuous reminders of corporate policies, guidelines and values. American Participant 3 for example stated that "People need to know what the rules are to not break them, and you have to enforce them constantly and you have to still give employees this space because they're going to be talking anyway". As American Participant 7 states, to anticipate a crisis as a result of EA, "It starts with really understanding the work environment that you're creating". American Participant 2, who specializes in crisis, agrees, stating "We need to make sure we understand what is the rationale behind that position, and then we have to be prepared for the counter-arguments (...) to anticipate the issue".

The *proactive monitoring of internal and external social media channels* to protect the company's reputation was presented as crucial in Italy, while American participants were mixed on the topic. American Participant 2 discussed, for example, how in their university context, their team does not monitor social media, as "We don't want to be sneaky. Our whole feeling about this is if they're doing it and we see it, they know we're looking". Another participant added that "ERGs can contribute to risk management in healthy companies, and we are talking about healthy activism in this case, while in other companies that are not so strong on a cultural level, this could have other effects" (Italian Participant 2).

In cases of externally directed and adversary forms of EA, quickly turning into crises, *crisis prevention strategies* mentioned across interviews include: managing *union relations*, which play a key role in escalating or resolving issues; using *participatory models of industrial relations*; *restoring dialog and trust* through one-on-one interactions with dissenting employees, and not just external stakeholders and the media, which provide opportunities for open dialog; having a framework and trained *team* ready to respond to a crisis if and when it does occur; reviewing and analyzing crisis responses to

“continually grow and evolve” (American Participant 7); and taking *concrete corrective actions*, such as awareness-raising campaigns in direct response to the expressed concerns. In this regard, as Italian Participant 6 revealed: “Instead of reacting each time to every dissenting voice, which would restrict the initiative aimed at social change, we are focusing on deepening the most important issues through concrete actions such as awareness-raising campaigns”. Finally, a *reputation management angle* was emphasized by American Participant 5: “If you’re perceived to not treat your employees well, then that’s the harbinger for the rest of the company’s culture (...) If the price is comparable, would you rather work with a company that’s got a good reputation, or one that doesn’t?”.

5.5 Discussion

Given the essence of employee activism is to generate social change via organized efforts of employees advocating for or against organizational policy and/or decision-making (Krishna, 2021) and common negative perception and/or misunderstandings of employee activism (e.g. employee activism viewed as an obstacle to strategic communication, see Ninova-Solovykh, 2023; employee activism perceived as a threat to organizational reputation and workplace morale, see Briscoe and Gupta, 2016, Miles et al., 2021, Reyes, 2021), it is critical to broaden the view of employee activism as an opportunity for proactive change within organizations. To do so, organizations need to clearly define and understand EA, its influencing factors, forms, and tactics, in order to manage such organized efforts effectively and ethically.

The findings of this study, based on in-depth interviews with international communication experts in Italy and the U.S.A., provide a timely picture of how employee activism is perceived and managed by organizations. The participants’ current experiences bring new and unforeseen risks to organizations, as these expressions of often dissident voices can become disruptive to organizational reputation and/or operation internally and externally. It is important for strategic communication professionals to counsel their organizations

on how to assess and regulate employee activism proactively, especially from a risk management and crisis prevention approach.

Four theme-based takeaways related to employee activism emerge from participants' insights, as discussed in the following.

Issue social relevance and internal value alignment at the core of employee activism

Social change is at the core of the definition of employee activism definition (see Krishna, 2021), as employees are increasingly seeking social change and contributing to social impact, which need to be addressed internally via proactive communication management. According to this study and insights gained from RQ1, employee prosocial involvement is expressed in their employee active citizenship, active participation, freedom of expression, and megaphoning with external resonance. Issue involvement is deeply rooted in employees' internal values (e.g. manifestation of individual identity, sense of belonging, sense of identification, perception of authenticity, alignment, and trust relationships). Cultural change within companies is a central concern across the board, as employees are increasingly actively advocating for positive transformation of organizational behaviors on socially relevant causes, which parallels their increased empowerment and engagement in organizational decision-making.

This echoes prior literature on the importance of optimizing organizational culture and fostering a transparent communication climate (Jin and You, 2023) that allow information flow in the workplace (Lee, 2022), as well as aligning organizational leadership attitudes towards social advocacy regardless of personal stance on controversial issues (Hong and Ji, 2022).

Three-tier model of employee activism influencing factors

According to the principles of dialogic communication (Kent and Taylor, 2021), organizational listening represents a strategic communication approach to actively engaging with stakeholders through two-way communication (Macnamara, 2016). This applied to EA, especially in identifying employee activism influencing factors. Insights gained from RQ1 further render a three-tier model has emerged from this study when it comes to identifying the influencing factors of employee activism from an organizational perspective: national cultural, organizational, and individual. At the national cultural

level, the role of unions is a focal, powerful lever, which can either intensify or help solve employees' expressed concerns. Interestingly, Italian participants highlighted that employees tend to voice softer and less divisive topics or refer to unions for more complicated matters as they often do not regard the organizational setting as the most suitable place to express their voice alone. American participants emphasized that unions have often made activism processes more straightforward via providing an organized platform and more structured process for issue discussions with concerned employees. At the organizational level, having an open communication climate and corporate culture (or not), whether a company is purpose-driven (or not), and to what degree an organization's corporate activism on socially relevant issues aligns with employees (or not) all play a key role. Having a culture of change and active listening together with a transparent and transformative leadership style help foster trusting employer-employee relationships that aid effective employee activism management (e.g. empowerment, engagement, and voice behaviors). At the individual level, generational differences, issue identity, and sense of belonging are essential, which also manifested different patterns among American and Italian employees as well as issue prioritizations across different age groups.

This three-tier factor model influencing employee activism forms and organizational communication management practices in genuinely responding to stakeholder concerns (Qin and Men, 2021), aligning both organizational policies and leadership actions (Qin and Men, 2021) and influential individuals and groups act as internal social issue and movement influencers formally and informally (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016). Organizational perspective needs to be in line with employees' cultural backgrounds at group and individual levels to shape employee activism and influence its supportive (versus more adversary) forms, national and organizational factors, as well as corporate activism on socially relevant causes (if applicable).

Varied forms of employee activism: A call for culturally-tailored approach

The most prevalent social issues associated with employee activism seem to manifest differently among American and Italian employees, as evidenced in what learned from RQ2. While DEI and CSR are the focal issue concerns, issues related to religion or politics are less discussed in Italy. In contrast, racial justice, COVID-19 and the return to office

movement, and the Israeli-Hamas War have emerged as the most prevalent social issues in the U.S.A., with political issues often highlighted.

Another set of noted differences lies in the activism stance toward organizations in the two countries: (1) American employee activism tends to be dissent based (adversary) with instances of externally driven activism; (2) the most prevalent form of employee activism in Italy instead is advocacy activism that supports corporate activism, almost exclusively internally driven. Internally driven activism (bottom-up initiatives and ERGs) also takes on different forms. While bottom-up initiatives are based on employee suggestions and proposals on relevant social issues involving the organization and its operations, these initiatives are typically advanced in constructive ways and in alignment with the company's vision and mission. For ERGs to function constructively, fostering a more inclusive organizational culture by enabling meaningful conversations at work and by facilitating open dialog, freedom of expression, and action are key. Across the board, willingness to engage with internally directed, bottom-up employee activism is essential to advocacy activism management.

In light of prior research on national and organizational culture influences, a culturally-tailored approach to proactively manage employee activism needs to consider both national culture (Schein, 2017) and internal culture (e.g. Briscoe and Gupta, 2016, 2021; Knoll et al., 2021; Krishna, 2021; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023; Tsui et al., 2007) that drive and shape EA. A culture of openness, a purpose-driven culture, alignment with mission and vision, opportunities to influence strategic decisions and a focus on reputational capital, transparency, and listening are critical in addressing employee activism proactively (i.e., increasing empowerment and engagement in corporate decision-making). Given the observed differences in Italy and the U.S.A. when it comes to advocacy vs. adversary activism and the different tactics employed, these different levels of prevalence of advocacy and adversary actions require culturally-tailored strategic communication management efforts.

Key strategies: Voice regulation, CEO activism and dissent communication management

From the standpoint of strategic communication management, organizational approaches to managing employee activism need to take into consideration intersecting open internal communication (Macnamara, 2016; McCown, 2007), dialogic communication (Kent and

Taylor, 2021), and organizational listening (Krishna et al., 2023), which help identify and respond to employees' concerns and their communicative needs and prevent employee concerns from escalating adversary activism and its externalization. Ranging from formal to informal structures, a voice-regulation system based on two-way communication can help drive social change within an organization (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016), and even serve as support of externally driven platform activism (Rheinhardt et al., 2023).

Echoing these findings from prior literature, insights gained from RQ3 further provide strategic recommendations for organizations. Voice regulation, via social media policies and internal voice processes (e.g. ethical guidelines, codes of conduct, whistleblowing policies), has emerged as a central theme across participants' experiences. Social media policies have served as practical guidelines encouraging the expression of voice within secure boundaries, which prioritize corporate security and protecting sensitive information while allowing open discussions. When these policies authentically promote transparency and ensure the free expression of voice, they also can safeguard both employee and company protection, especially in eliminating legal and reputational risks. Learning how to support secure expression and empower individual voices for collective social change is critical in fostering a culture of listening, events promoting top-down transparency and bottom-up communication, and feedback and dialog within organizations.

As the findings show, employee activism appears to prevail in purpose-driven companies. Therefore, authentic corporate activism on socially relevant issues, that is open to employee dialog and voice on these shared issues, can create strong individual-organization synergy as well as internal-external stakeholder synergy. CEO activism was also identified as a new strategic communication approach for promoting corporate values and inspiring supportive forms of EA. As CEOs act as spokespersons and authorities on societal issues, the lines between internal and external communication are blurred, thus adding to internal-external synergy. The key to this strategy is authentic CEO communication via effective storytelling and credible actions aligned with corporate

values. This can be challenging for CEOs of multinational companies, given the national cultural factors discussed earlier.

In cases of public and more adversary forms EA, especially prevalent in the U.S.A. employee activism landscape, risk management efforts and crisis prevention focused strategies are essential, as reckoned by participants across the board: (1) managing union relations as the union serves as an intermediary between organizations and dissenting employees, playing a key role in escalating or resolving issues; (2) fostering/restoring trust through one-on-one interactions with dissenting employees, providing opportunities for open dialog; (3) having a system and trained team ready to respond to disruptions (including crisis triggered or amplified by adversary activism) if and when it does occur.

In sum, proactive employee activism communication management entails trust building, openness fostering, involvement encouraging, which can lead to higher employee satisfaction (McCown, 2007). By joining internal and dialogic communication in listening and structured solicitation of employee voice (even when they are engaged with dissenting employee activism activities) can provide organizations a unique advantage in anticipating and mitigating employee activism risks (Krishna et al., 2023), as well as shaping better organizational culture via opportunities employee activism might bring forth.

Theoretical implications

Built upon the conceptual foundation laid by scholars (see Table 1), this study provides an advanced conceptual definition of employee activism from an organizational perspective, which regards employee activism as a complex, dynamic, and ongoing process influenced by and forming pressure between organizations and their employees on socially relevant issues essential to employees' internal values and identity. The forms and fluctuations of EA, as experienced by interviewed senior international communication executives in Italy and the U.S.A. who participated in this study, provide a solid framework for further employee activism communication management measurement and performance benchmarking. The current employee activism tactics and

strategies practiced by organizations provide valuable insights for strategic communication scholars and practitioners.

Activists have often been unfairly portrayed as obstacles to be controlled rather than valuable contributors to communication strategies (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023). Different ways of managing EA, such as organization-centric or de-organization centric, seem feasible depending on the nature and forms of EA, the influencing factors at play, and how employee activism issues in focus are communicated and managed by the organization. In light of these findings, this study advocates for the value of integrating interdisciplinary theories, such as the safety valve theory (e.g. Emerson, 1963) in future employee activism research especially when it comes to managing dissent communication. The strategies discussed earlier regarding whether and how to open the valve, via different strategies, such as voice regulation, internal-external regulation (e.g. employee ambassadorship), CEO activism, and union relations management, aimed to manage dissent expression, foster positive disruption and create (co-create with employees) positive organizational and social changes.

Managerial implications

Organizational decision-makers and communication professionals play a particularly important role in this process as: “They are not only responsible for elaborating and implementing an intelligent communication strategy in case of employee activism; by engaging in issue management, they can also reduce the risk that employee turn to external audiences” (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023, p. 152). One of the interesting findings of this study is that while social issues prompted organizations to act through DEI or ESG policies, political and social issues triggered activism much more often. Therefore, how can organizations play a positive and proactive role in managing employee activism with socially relevant issues and internal value alignment at its core? This study argues that it is time to bring corporate back to employee activism and communication management.

This cross-national study offers important implications for organizations and their strategic communication management in different forms and shapes of employee activism and varied levels of pressure. In addition to the themes and theme-based takeaways elaborated earlier, strategic communication practitioners should keep in mind these three

key areas: (1) risk management and communication to deal with dysfunctional forms of employee activism while supporting organic activism that drives positive change for both the organization and broader society; (2) internal communication and voice climate to support employees to constructively raise their voices and contribute to the well-being of society; and (3) the potential of corporate activism and CEO activism that work in harmony with employee voices to realize a truly purpose-driven organization.

Limitations and future directions

While the findings of this study provide an initial conceptualization of employee activism from an organizational perspective, with identified employee activism forms and tactics and communication management strategies as currently observed and practiced, there are limitations that need to be addressed in future research. First, participants of this study came from Italy and the U.S.A. Given employee activism as a global phenomenon affecting an increasing number of countries worldwide, perspectives and experiences from organizations from other parts of the world are needed to expand the conceptual and empirical foundation of the current work. Second, the perspectives from employees will need to be further examined, ideally via a survey among a larger sample size with global representation, reflecting demographic, geographic, and cultural diversity as the three-tier influential factor model entails. Third, given the nature of the qualitative research, the findings cannot be generalized to larger industry areas and practitioner populations. Future research should consider additional regional and global practitioner interviews and surveys to further gauge and refine EA, continually identifying effective and ethical approaches for organizational communication management aimed to foster positive change for organizations and society at large. Lastly, although these qualitative data did not render evidence regarding specific roles internal communication guidelines played in driving different forms of employee activism activities nor rendered significant concerns about artificial intelligence (AI) in managing EA, these are important topics to be explored further in future scholarly research agendas.

6 Employee activism: A survey-based study

Activism is increasingly shaping social and political arenas and influencing the corporate world. Following the cross-national study that provided an initial perspective on employee activism in Italy, the research shifted to a deeper investigation of the Italian context, with a focus on the perspectives of employees. As already anticipated, this study was conducted in collaboration with Yijing Wang, Professor and Chair of Strategic Communication at the Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands, and Silvia Ravazzani, Associate Professor in Management at the Department of Business LECB “Carlo A. Ricciardi”, Università IULM, and resulted in a journal article published in the *International Journal of Business Communication*².

This study is the result of a joint effort by all co-authors. As part of this joint effort, I led the research process serving as corresponding author, and I was particularly involved in the conceptualization, design of the methodology, data collection and drafting of the first version of the manuscript. I also contributed to the data analysis, visualization, and revision and editing phases. While the article reflects the collective contributions of the team, my involvement was central, which is the reason why it was included in this dissertation.

This research examines the factors that drive employee activism within organizations, focusing on how organizational and individual factors influence both communicative and actionable activism intentions. Drawing on a survey of 324 Italian public and private sector employees, this study investigates the impact of: a) organizational factors, specifically climate of voice, transparent leadership communication, and perceived corporate authenticity; and b) individual factors, specifically perceived external prestige,

² Conti, S., Wang, Y., and Ravazzani, S. (2025). From Voice to Action? A Survey on Organizational and Individual Factors Impacting Employee Activism Intentions. *International Journal of Business Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23294884251384721>

See Attachment 2 for the authorship statement and for the published version of the study.

organizational identification, and employee engagement. Additionally, this study explores the moderating role of c) corporate and CEO activism, as leaders' active involvement in social, political, and environmental issues may influence employee activism intentions. Findings underscore that a supportive voice climate, authentic alignment of corporate values, and transparent leadership communication empower employees toward activism. This study provides strategic implications for integrating purpose-driven values into internal communication and leadership practices to cultivate an organizational culture that encourages proactive employee engagement and advocacy.

6.1 Theoretical framework

As discussed at the beginning of Chapter 4 (see par. 4.4), organizations are increasingly moving towards purpose-driven models, encouraged by rising stakeholder expectations and socio-political pressures (Adi, 2019; Kent and Taylor, 2021). A key theme emerging in this area of research is the growing role of employees as active stakeholders, voicing their concerns on critical societal issues such as climate change, inequality and diversity (Herbert Smith Freehills, 2019; Rheinhardt et al., 2023). This shift signals a move away from traditional, hierarchical communication and turns employees into agents of change, driving companies to align themselves with broader social and ethical responsibilities (Adi, 2019).

In this context, employee activism has gained increasing academic and managerial attention. Defined as “purposeful efforts organized and negotiated by individuals and/or groups of employees to advocate internally and/or externally for or against company policies and/or decision making in order to bring about social change” (Krishna, 2021, p. 119), employee activism encompasses a spectrum of communicative behaviors ranging from internal advocacy and lobbying to external campaigns, strikes, and digital activism (Belfield, 2020; Krishna et al., 2023). While such actions can drive innovation and organizational change, they also pose a challenge if the organizational climate does not provide the psychological safety required for open dialog (Frazier and Bowler, 2012).

As highlighted in the literature, employee activism does not exist in isolation, but overlaps with other forms of organizational activism, such as corporate activism (Eilert and

Nappier Cherup, 2020) and CEO activism (Hambrick and Wowak, 2021). These interrelated forms of activism influence organizational reputation, stakeholder trust, and employee engagement (Villagra et al., 2022; Chatterji and Toffel, 2019). However, while corporate and CEO activism is largely top-down and strategic, employee activism is bottom-up, emerges from the workforce itself, and is shaped by internal tensions, cultural dynamics, and employees' value-driven motivations (Cycyota, 2023; Krishna, 2021).

Despite the increasing importance of this topic, the literature lacks an integrative framework that connects the organizational and individual drivers of employee activism. Building on these theoretical insights, this study attempts to fill this gap by examining employee activism from both a communicative and behavioral perspective. It does so by developing a research model to test the influence of organizational and individual factors on such intentions and to advance theoretical and practical understanding of cultivating employee activism as a core driver of a cohesive and purpose-driven organization.

Employee activism intentions

When studying employee activism, it is essential to focus on employee activism intentions as they provide insight into what influences employees' decision to engage in activism. This helps organizations align their values with policies and effectively manage activism to support business goals and social impact. Employee activism intentions are defined as "employees' intentions to participate in collective actions with other coworkers to influence their organization" (Lee, 2022, p. 6). This definition highlights the collective nature of activism, where employees collaborate with colleagues through coordinated efforts to drive organizational change. However, employee activism involves more than just communication but also concrete actions to achieve this influence. Hence, in this study, a distinction is made between communicative and actionable intentions. The communicative intentions of employee activism refer to employees' motives to voice their concerns or support for activism in the organizational context. This includes raising awareness, participating in discussions, and advocating for change. These communicative intentions often serve as precursors to employee activism concrete actions, that involve direct and observable efforts, such as participating in protests, signing petitions, or organizing collective initiatives. By distinguishing these two behaviors, this study aims

to provide a comprehensive understanding of employee activism and highlight both verbal and action-oriented contributions to employee activism.

In this study, employee activism intentions are conceptualized as the active and intentional involvement of employees in promoting social change through collective actions that have public visibility for common social, political, or environmental issues. These intentions are closely related to their communication behavior within the company and can lead to concrete actions by employees. In this context, especially in companies that actively promote employee voice, employees' intentions towards activism may vary due to a number of organizational and individual factors, which are described in the following section.

Before discussing these organizational and individual factors, it is important to consider some conditions that positively or negatively influence the emergence of employee activism.

First, organizational culture emerges as key in framing how activism is perceived and expressed within the workplace. It refers to the shared norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions developed to address problems of adaptation and integration, forming a framework for socializing new members into the organization's norms (Schein, 1985). Research has consistently demonstrated that a strong, healthy workplace culture significantly contributes to organizational success, by improving effectiveness, employee performance, cohesiveness, and identification (Yue et al., 2021). These characteristics make organizational culture a crucial element in fostering an environment in which activism can thrive.

Second, internal communication plays an important role in supporting employee activism, which can have a positive impact on the organization. Effective internal communication and participative decision-making play a critical role in fostering a culture of openness where communication between an organization and its employees is symmetrical and mutually beneficial (McCown, 2007). Symmetrical communication in organizations promotes positive outcomes for employees by prioritizing trust, credibility, openness, and a willingness to allow for different perspectives and negotiations (Yue et al., 2021). By empowering employee voice and encouraging feedback, a symmetrical communication

system creates an environment where employees feel valued and can participate in decision-making processes (Yue et al., 2021), which also encourages activism.

Finally, leadership has a significant impact on how activism is expressed in organizations. Managers and hierarchical structures can either encourage or hinder activist practices, with leadership practices shaping pathways for activism (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016; Morrill et al., 2003; Ramirez and Islam, 2022). Rather than attempting to suppress employee activism, managers could improve organizational effectiveness by nurturing employees' activist motivations. This approach is not only consistent with the social mission but also opens promising avenues for collaboration with activist researchers to drive meaningful social change (Ramirez and Islam, 2022).

Activism is often viewed negatively in the workplace, making people reluctant to embrace it. Many associate the term with conflict, disruption, or questioning authority, leading to discomfort with these issues. McCown (2007) found that while participants avoided labeling themselves as activists, they still wanted to take action to address communication deficits and bring these issues to the attention of leaders. This shows that despite the negative perception of activism, there is a desire for change. Uncertainty is a critical factor in the workplace, especially when employees are considering speaking up. A complex interplay of individual, interpersonal and organizational factors therefore influences their decisions. In this study, the modified ecological model of information disclosure decision-making from Li and Lee (2020) is used to examine how individuals cope with perceived uncertainty at different levels of influence. The model highlights the interaction between these levels and emphasizes how factors such as perceived risks and benefits, social capital, and organizational culture influence disclosure uncertainty (Li and Lee, 2020).

Organizational factors

This study examines the role of climate of voice, transparent leadership communication, and authenticity as key organizational factors that can influence employees' intention to actively engage in activism. These factors were selected because they are critical to cultivating an organizational culture that encourages employees to speak up (e.g. Kim et al., 2022; Knoll and Van Dick, 2013; Morrison et al., 2011). It is believed that such a

culture is also crucial for encouraging extra-role voice behaviors (e.g. Van Dyne and Le Pine, 1998), such as activism, especially when it comes to socially relevant issues in the workplace.

Climate of voice. Before deciding to engage in voice behaviors, individuals weigh the potential risks and benefits associated with speaking out (Detert and Burris, 2007). The concept of climate refers to employees shared perceptions of practices, norms, and behaviors that are supported in a work environment (Morrison et al., 2011). Organizations can shape this climate to either encourage or inhibit open communication and expression (Morrison and Milliken, 2000), with workgroup climate significantly influencing individual behavior (Morrison et al., 2011). Employees who actively share ideas and suggestions in the workplace demonstrate a proactive attitude, which is encouraged by a supportive voice climate within their teams (Frazier and Bowler, 2012; Morrison, 2011). This climate of expression is largely shaped by the behavior of leadership and creates an environment in which employees feel comfortable expressing their opinions without fear of repercussions (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Morrison et al., 2011). An important component of this climate is psychological safety (Frazier and Bowler, 2012), which allows employees to speak out freely without fear of negative consequences, increasing the likelihood that they will advocate for social causes. In addition, workplaces that promote respect, open communication, and mutual support from colleagues and supervisors further encourage employees to express their opinions (Morrison, 2014). Employees are particularly motivated to voice their opinions when they play a central role in the team's work processes and social networks, a tendency that is reinforced when team leaders also hold influential positions (Venkataramani et al., 2016).

All this considered, a positive climate of voice empowers employees to engage in constructive activism and potentially minimizes adversarial approaches to employee activism. Hence, this study posits that:

Hypothesis 1a: A positive climate of voice within the organization is positively associated with employee activism communicative intentions.

Hypothesis 1b: A positive climate of voice within the organization is positively associated with employee activism actionable intentions.

Transparent leadership communication plays a critical role in fostering social change by enabling open information sharing, promoting accountability, and strengthening stakeholder relationships (Ji and Hong, 2023). This communication approach goes beyond superficial interactions and focuses on consistently providing timely, reliable, and relevant information as it builds trust and increases credibility in various situations, such as social responsibility efforts, organizational change, and crisis management. Transparent communication helps leaders create an environment of mutual understanding, strengthen employee-organization relationships, and enhance organizational reputation and stakeholder engagement (Jin and You, 2023). Leadership communication literature emphasizes the importance of transparency in fostering employee trust, shaping a positive organizational culture, and improving internal relationships (Men and Stacks, 2014; Rawlins, 2009). Leaders who value transparent communication bridge information gaps, cultivate trust, and support the legitimacy of social engagement within the organization. Key components of transparent communication include active participation, which is the inclusion of stakeholders in the decision-making process; accountability, which ensures that leaders take responsibility for their actions and messages; and substantiality, which focuses on providing information that is accurate, relevant, and meaningful. When leaders encourage open and honest communication, they not only boost their employees' self-esteem but also contribute to a healthier work environment (Hong and Ji, 2022; Ji and Hong, 2023).

Acknowledging the importance of transparent leadership communication in shaping trust relationships and a culture of open voice, this study advances the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: Transparent leadership communication is positively associated with employee activism communicative intentions.

Hypothesis 2b: Transparent leadership communication is positively associated with employee activism actionable intentions.

Authenticity in corporate behavior reflects the extent to which a company's actions are consistent with its stated values and principles (Schallehn et al., 2014). It is characterized by three dimensions: consistency, i.e., the fulfillment of commitments; continuity, i.e., the adherence to fundamental values over time; and individuality, i.e., the expression of

the company's unique identity (Schallehn et al., 2014). Authenticity plays a crucial role in shaping organizational outcomes and employee behaviors. Companies that are perceived as authentic are often considered to be deeply value-driven, led by intrinsically motivated leaders who engage in transparent and reliable communication while demonstrating a strong social commitment (Gambetti and Biraghi, 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Men and Hung-Baesecke (2015) argued that employees who perceive their organization as authentic are more likely to become vocal advocates for the company. Shen and Kim (2012) found that employees' perceptions of an organization's authenticity have a strong influence on how they communicate about the organization, depending on how strong their relationship with the organization is. This alignment between organizational authenticity and employee behavior highlights how promoting authentic practices can encourage employees to support and promote their organization's values, especially in the context of employee activism.

Grounded in this framework, this study posits the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a: Perceived corporate authenticity is positively associated with employee activism communicative intentions.

Hypothesis 3b: Perceived corporate authenticity is positively associated with employee activism actionable intentions.

Individual factors

In this study, perceived external prestige, organizational identification, and employee engagement are identified as key individual factors that affect employees' activism intentions. These factors were selected because they contribute significantly to influencing employees' sense of belonging, motivation, and alignment with organizational values (e.g. Einwiller et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2010), which in turn are critical to their willingness to engage in activism.

Perceived External Prestige (PEP) refers to employees' perceptions of how their organization is viewed by external parties (Kim et al., 2010). PEP is an important factor that indirectly shapes the external image of the organization, as it fulfills employees'

intrinsic needs for self-esteem and self-worth, thus fostering pride and strong identification with the organization. Employees develop their perceptions of external prestige through external channels such as reference groups, media coverage, and word-of-mouth (Smidts et al., 2001). Since PEP is an individual-level construct, differences may occur between employees in the same organization due to different personal interpretations of external feedback. The relationship between PEP and employee activism is influenced by organizational values, workplace culture, and the level of employee engagement. A good external reputation can motivate employees to become actively engaged if this is in line with the organization's values and commitment to social responsibility. Based on these considerations, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 4a: Perceived external prestige of the organization is positively associated with employee activism communicative intentions.

Hypothesis 4b: Perceived external prestige of the organization is positively associated with employee activism actionable intentions.

Organizational identification reflects the emotional and psychological connection that employees develop to their workplace, which influences their alignment with the organization's goals and their supportive behavior (Smidts et al., 2001). It occurs when individuals see themselves as an integral part of their organization. It encompasses a sense of belonging and emotional pride that is determined by the need for self-categorization and self-worth (Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Smidts et al., 2001). Employees with a strong identification with the organization internalize its values, align their behavior with its goals, and demonstrate positive attitudes such as trust, commitment, and cooperation (van Knippenberg and van Schie, 2000). This identification brings numerous benefits, including higher employee retention, higher job satisfaction, and stronger organizational citizenship behavior (Yue et al., 2021). Several factors contribute to the promotion of organizational identification, including effective communication, strong leadership, perceived organizational support, perceived external prestige, and individual characteristics (Yue et al., 2021). This bond is particularly strengthened by effective communication practices that emphasize message clarity and quality and promote a positive communication climate that fosters openness, trust, and active participation so

that employees feel valued and included in organizational decision-making. When employees feel that their personal values are aligned with those of the organization, their sense of connection is strengthened, and a shared sense of purpose and community is fostered. In addition, perceived external prestige increases identification with the organization by instilling pride and enhancing employees' self-esteem (Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Smidts et al., 2001). Therefore, this study assumes that a high degree of organizational identification not only motivates employees but is also a catalyst for constructive activism within the organization.

Based on these foundations, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 5a: Employee organizational identification is positively associated with employee activism communicative intentions.

Hypothesis 5b: Employee organizational identification is positively associated with employee activism actionable intentions.

Employee engagement is an enduring motivational and psychological state in which employees are cognitively, physically, and emotionally invested in their work. This state is characterized by energy, enthusiasm, involvement, efficacy, and deep connection. As a dynamic and evolving process, engagement is influenced by personal traits and situational factors and leads to cognitive absorption, emotional dedication, and vigor (Mazzei, 2018b; Schaufeli et al., 2006). The effects of employee engagement benefit both the organization and the employee, leading to improved performance, competitive advantage, innovation, retention, and long-term success (Einwiller et al., 2021; Mazzei, 2018b). Engaged employees contribute positively to organizational performance through behaviors that promote innovation, advocacy, and loyalty. In addition, engaged employees often act as catalysts for organizational growth and foster an environment where collaboration and innovation thrive (Einwiller et al., 2021).

Building on these aspects, this study examines whether highly engaged employees are more inclined to participate in activism, especially in contexts that promote open dialog, transparent communication, and supportive leadership. The study proposes that:

Hypothesis 6a: Employee engagement is positively associated with employee activism communicative intentions.

Hypothesis 6b: Employee engagement is positively associated with employee activism actionable intentions.

The moderating role of corporate activism and CEO activism

Corporate and CEO activism are both an external expression of corporate values and an internal driver that encourages employee activism when aligned with core principles. This alignment reinforces a purpose-driven culture and motivates employees to support and advocate for the organization's goals (e.g. Hong and Ji, 2022; Ji and Hong, 2023; Villagra et al., 2022). Corporate activism encompasses social, political, and reactionary forms that address societal problems, political discourse, and government failures, respectively (Villagra et al., 2022). CEO activism also shapes corporate strategy and public perception, especially when it is seen as ethical and value-driven (e.g. Briscoe et al., 2014; Chatterji and Toffel, 2019; Lee and Tao, 2021). Building on this, this study examines whether corporate and CEO activism can support the selected organizational and individual factors (climate of voice, transparent leadership communication, authenticity, perceived external prestige, organizational identification, and employee engagement) in fostering employees' activism intentions.

This study considers corporate and CEO activism as moderators rather than main variables in studying employee activism because they shape the environment in which employee activism occurs. They can promote a positive orientation or reinforce resistance (e.g. McKean and King, 2019; Wowak et al., 2022). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 7a: Corporate activism moderates the impact of organizational and individual factors (H1-6) driving employee activism communicative intentions. With stronger corporate activism, the influence of these six factors on employee activism communicative intentions will be strengthened.

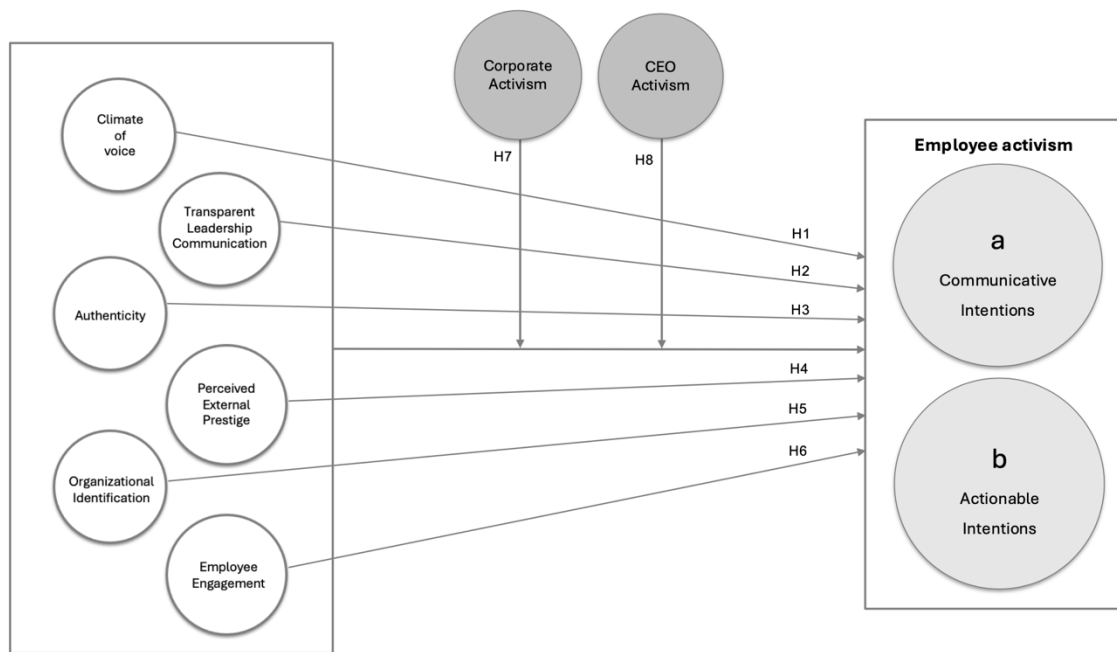
Hypothesis 7b: Corporate activism moderates the impact of organizational and individual factors (H1-6) driving employee activism actionable intentions. With stronger corporate activism, the influence of these six factors on employee activism actionable intentions will be strengthened.

Hypothesis 8a: CEO activism moderates the impact of organizational and individual factors (H1-6) driving employee activism communicative intentions. With stronger CEO activism, the influence of these six factors on employee activism communicative intentions will be strengthened.

Hypothesis 8b: CEO activism moderates the impact of organizational and individual factors (H1-6) driving employee activism actionable intentions. With stronger CEO activism, the influence of these six factors on employee activism actionable intentions will be strengthened.

All in all, Figure 12 illustrates the research model for this study, which has two distinct outcomes: Model (a) focuses on employee activism communicative intentions, while Model (b) deals with employee activism actionable intentions. The model hypothesizes that the selected organizational factors (i.e., climate of voice, transparent leadership communication, and authenticity) and individual factors (i.e., perceived external prestige, organizational identification, and employee engagement) positively influence these two different outcomes. Additionally, corporate and CEO activism are positioned as moderators to examine how they influence the relationships between these factors and the two types of employee activism intentions.

Figure 12. Research Model



Source: authors' elaboration

6.2 Methodology

Sample

To test the hypotheses, a survey was conducted among Italian employees currently employed in public and private companies. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of one of the researchers' Institution (approval no. 0025278). The survey was outsourced to SWG S.p.a. (<https://www.swg.it>), and the questionnaire was administered through the survey company on its proprietary platform. The data was collected between June and July 2024, with a total of 324 employees participating and completing the questionnaire. After data cleansing, the final dataset consisted of 324 valid responses.

The demographics of the participants, detailed in Table 11, show a gender split of 55% male and 45% female respondents. In terms of generational breakdown, 25% of participants were born between 1946 and 1964, 43% between 1965 and 1979, 26% between 1980 and 1996, and 7% from 1996 onwards. In terms of job positions, 73% of

respondents were professionals or staff, 17% were employees, and 10% held a managerial or supervisory position. Employee tenure varied: 57% had more than 10 years' experience, 17% between 5 and 10 years and a smaller percentage had a shorter length of service. Education levels were diverse: 40% had a high school diploma, 22% had a master's degree, and smaller percentages in other categories, including 2% with a PhD.

Company demographics show that 66% of respondents worked in the service sector, while 10% worked in manufacturing and other industries. The product sector was led by travel and transportation (28%) and citizen services (24%), with other sectors such as information and communication (11%) and personal services (7%) also represented. Company size was spread out, with 28% working in companies with less than 50 employees and 21% in those with more than 5,000 employees. Finally, 60% of participants worked in private companies, 31% in public and 6% in publicly held organizations. The vast majority of companies (92%) were Italian-owned.

Table 11. Participants and company's demographics

Participants' demographics		
	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	178	55%
Female	146	45%
<i>Generation</i>		
1946 to 1964	80	25%
1965 to 1979	138	43%
1980 to 1996	83	26%
1996 onwards	23	7%
<i>Position</i>		
Professional/Staff	236	73%
Employee	54	17%
Manager/Supervisor	34	10%

<i>Employee tenure</i>		
Less than 1 year	15	5%
1 to 3 years	41	13%
3 to 5 years	28	9%
5 to 10 years	55	17%
More than 10 years	185	57%
<i>Education</i>		
High School Diploma	131	40%
Some years of university, without degree	38	12%
Bachelor's Degree (3-year undergraduate degree)	31	10%
Master's Degree (4-year undergraduate degree or postgraduate degree)	71	22%
Master's Degree or Specialization	32	10%
PhD	8	2%
Professional Certification	9	3%
other	4	1%
Companies' demographics		
	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Industrial Sector</i>		
Manufacturing	34	10%
Other Industries	32	10%
Services	214	66%
I don't know/prefer not to answer	44	14%
<i>Product Sector</i>		
Furniture	8	2%
Automotive, mechanical and metallurgy	13	4%
Banking and Insurance	18	6%
Chemicals and Pharmaceuticals	11	3%

Construction	11	3%
Electronics and Home Appliances	7	2%
Energy, gas, hydrocarbons	7	2%
Fashion and Luxury	7	2%
Food and Beverage	12	4%
Information and Communication	37	11%
Citizen services	79	24%
Personal Services	22	7%
Travel and Transportation	92	28%
<i>Company Size</i>		
Up to 50	90	28%
51 to 250	55	17%
251 to 500	27	8%
501 to 750	17	5%
751 to 1,000	22	7%
1,001 to 2,000	16	5%
2,001 to 5,000	30	9%
Over 5,000	67	21%
<i>Nature</i>		
Private	196	60%
Public	100	31%
Publicly held	18	6%
Cooperative	9	3%
Don't know/ prefer not to answer	1	0%
<i>Ownership</i>		
Italy	297	92%
North-central Europe	9	3%
South of Europe	1	0%
East of Europe	1	0%
U.S.	10	3%
China	1	0%

Japan	1	0%
Don't know/ prefer not to answer	4	1%

Source: own elaboration

Data analysis

The statistical analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS (version 29.0) with the Macro PROCESS extension (version 4.2).

Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations were calculated for all variables. Previously validated scales were used in the study, and the reliability of all scales was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (α) to ensure internal consistency.

The relationship between the variables in the study was first examined by correlation analysis. Linear regression analysis was applied to test H1–H6, both a and b. Then, a moderation analysis was conducted using Model 1 in PROCESS to test the moderation effect of corporate activism and CEO activism (H7–H8, both a and b).

Measures

Dependent variables

Previously validated measures were used and adapted them to suit the specific context of the study. All scales were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, except for the employee engagement scale, which was assessed using a 7-point Likert scale.

Employee activism communicative intentions were measured by adapting 9 items from the validated scale of Lee (2022) on communication behaviors (e.g. “As an employee, while thinking of social, environmental or political issues I am concerned with, I would express my opinions actively in discussion with my company”).

Employee activism actionable intentions were measured using the 4-item validated scale of Lee (2022) on activism intentions (e.g. “I intend to join the walk out with other employees”).

Independent variables

Climate of voice was measured by adapting a 6-item scale developed by Frazier and Bowler (2012), which in turn was adapted from LePine and Van Dyne (1998). An example of an item is: “The members of my work group are encouraged to speak up and encourage others in this group to get involved in issues that affect the group”.

Transparent leadership communication was measured using a 9-item scale adapted from Rawlins (2009) and Men and Bowen (2017). The scale assessed the three dimensions of transparent leadership communication: participation (e.g. “My leaders ask for feedback from people like me about the quality of its information”), substantiality (e.g. “My leaders are prompt when responding to requests for information from people like me”), and accountability (e.g. “My leaders are open to criticism by people like me”).

Perceived corporate authenticity was measured by adapting one item from Tran and Keng (2018) (“I perceive my company as authentic in its statements and actions”) and 4 items adapted from Alhouti et al. (2016). An example of an item is: “My company’s actions are in accordance with the company’s values and beliefs”.

Perceived external prestige was measured through 5 items selected and adapted from Mael and Ashford (1992). Examples are “People in my community think highly of my company” and “It is considered prestigious to be an employee of my company”.

Organizational identification was measured through a 5-item scale adapted from Mael and Ashford (1992). Examples of items are: “When someone criticizes my company, it feels like a personal insult” and “When I talk about my company, I usually say ‘we’ rather than ‘they’”.

Finally, *employee engagement* was measured using the scale from Schaufeli et al. (2006) to investigate employee engagement in its three components of cognitive absorption (e.g. “I am immersed in my work”), emotional dedication (e.g. “I am enthusiastic about my job”), and vigor (e.g. “At my work, I feel bursting with energy”).

The reliability of the variables was assessed by calculating Cronbach’s Alpha (α) for each of the dependent, independent, and moderating variables. In the case of perceived external prestige, one item had to be removed (“My company does not have a good reputation in my community (R)”) to improve the reliability of the scale.

Moderators

Corporate activism was measured by adapting 7 items from the scale of Villagra et al. (2022) and one item adapted from Paul et al. (1997). Through this scale it has been possible to measure corporate activism through the nuances of *corporate social activism* (e.g. “My company has an ethical obligation to promote social change”), *corporate political activism* (e.g. “My company positions itself politically”), *corporate reactionary activism* (e.g. “When the government does not solve the citizens’ problems, my company takes the initiative”), and *corporate environmental activism* (e.g. “My company has an obligation to encourage environmentally responsible behaviors” from Villagra et al. 2022, and “My company promotes good environmental practices” from Paul et al., 1997).

In line with the measures of corporate activism, *CEO activism* was measured using the same items for corporate activism, replacing the word “corporate” with “CEO”. Hence using the 7 items adapted from Villagra et al. (2022) and one item adapted from Paul et al. (1997). Also in this case, it was possible to measure CEO activism in its nuances, hence *CEO social activism* (e.g. “My CEO has an ethical obligation to promote social change”), *CEO political activism* (e.g. “My CEO positions itself politically”), *CEO reactionary activism* (e.g. “When the government does not solve the citizens’ problems, my CEO takes the initiative”) and *CEO environmental activism* (e.g. “My CEO has an obligation to encourage environmentally responsible behaviors” from Villagra et al., 2022, and “My CEO promotes good environmental practices” from Paul et al., 1997).

Table 12 provides a comprehensive report of the descriptive statistics.

Table 12. Descriptive statistics

Construct (n item)	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Climate of Voice (6)	3.190	1.112	.955
Transparent Leadership Communication (9)	2.919	1.049	.952
Authenticity (5)	3.101	1.062	.936
Perceived External Prestige (5)	3.016	.838	.694
Organizational Identification (6)	3.103	.960	.876
Employee Engagement (9)	3.629	1.360	.953
Employee Activism Communicative Intentions (7)	3.746	.852	.916
Employee Activism Actionable Intentions (4)	3.332	1.060	.895
Corporate Activism (8)	2.830	.858	.840
CEO Activism (8)	2.672	.949	.892

Source: own elaboration

Table 13 (Appendix B) provides the full questionnaire for the research.

6.3 Results

This section presents the results of the correlation and regression analyses, highlighting the key relationships between the constructs in the study. In addition, results are provided on how corporate and CEO activism moderates these relationships.

Main effects

The results of the correlation analysis, which are shown in Table 14, reveal several significant relationships among the study's key constructs.

Employee activism communicative intentions are positively correlated with actionable intentions ($r = .444, p < 0.01$) as well as with corporate activism ($r = .317, p < 0.01$), suggesting a relationship between communicative engagement and both actionable intentions and efforts of organizational activism.

Corporate activism is also strongly correlated with CEO activism ($r = .858, p < 0.01$), highlighting the correspondence between these two forms of leadership-driven activism.

The climate of voice shows a significant positive correlation with both corporate activism ($r = .543, p < 0.01$) and CEO activism ($r = .549, p < 0.01$), indicating the value of a supportive communication climate in fostering activism.

In addition, transparent leadership communication correlates significantly with corporate activism ($r = .582, p < 0.01$), CEO activism ($r = .585, p < 0.01$), and climate of voice ($r = .749, p < 0.01$), underscoring the role of transparent communication from leadership in creating an environment that fosters to activism and open dialog.

Other notable relationships include positive correlations between authenticity and corporate activism ($r = .536, p < 0.01$), CEO activism ($r = .560, p < 0.01$), climate of voice ($r = .672, p < 0.01$), and transparent leadership communication ($r = .753, p < 0.01$), suggesting that authenticity in leadership promotes both activism and communication effectiveness.

Finally, perceived external prestige correlates positively with authenticity ($r = .627, p < 0.01$), and organizational identification is positively associated with both authenticity itself ($r = .680, p < 0.01$) and employee engagement ($r = .626, p < 0.01$).

Table 14. Correlation matrix

	Employee Activism Communicative Intentions	Employee Activism Actionable Intentions	Corporate Activism	CEO Activism	Climate of Voice	Transparent Leadership Communication	Authenticity	Perceived External Prestige	Organizational Identification	Employee Engagement
Employee Activism Communicative Intentions	1									
Employee Activism Actionable Intentions	.444**	1								
Corporate Activism	.317**	.260**	1							
CEO Activism	.281**	.245**	.858**	1						
Climate of Voice	.434**	.124*	.543**	.549**	1					
Transparent Leadership Communication	.383**	.130*	.582**	.585**	.749**	1				
Authenticity	.296	.075	.536**	.560**	.672**	.753**	1			
Perceived External Prestige	.301**	.107	.544**	.551**	.546**	.594**	.627**	1		
Organizational Identification	.351**	.139*	.417**	.431**	.560**	.567**	.680**	.546**	1	
Employee Engagement	.267**	.088	.355**	.368**	.511**	.562**	.654**	.447**	.626**	1

Note(s) ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level, * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Source: own elaboration

Results of the multiple linear regression analysis can be found in Table 15. In Model a, with employee activism communicative intentions as the dependent variable, the climate of voice proves to be a strong positive predictor ($B = .238, p < 0.001$), and organizational identification also shows a positive association ($B = .165, p < 0.05$), supporting respectively H1a and H5a. Transparent leadership communication shows a marginally significant relationship ($B = .125, p < 0.1$), confirming H2a, while authenticity is negatively associated ($B = -.158, p < 0.05$), rejecting H3a. In this model, neither perceived external prestige nor employee engagement significantly predict communicative intentions, rejecting H3a and H6a. In contrast, Model b, in which employee activism actionable intentions is the dependent variable, shows no significant predictors, rejecting hypotheses from H1b to H6b.

Table 15. Linear regression analysis

Variable	Model a Employee activism communicative intentions	Model b Employee activism actionable intentions
	<i>B (Std Error)</i>	<i>B (Std Error)</i>
(Constant)	2.405 (.173)	2.731 (.240)
Climate of Voice	.238*** (.060)	.046 (.083)
Transparent Leadership Communication	.125 † (.072)	.116 (.099)
Authenticity	-.158* (.073)	-.159 (.102)
Perceived External Prestige	.058 (.068)	.049 (.094)
Organizational Identification	.165* (.065)	.147 (.091)
Employee Engagement	.005 (.044)	.002 (.061)
R-squared	.221	.032
F-Value	14.948***	1.730
Note(s): *** $p < 0.001$, * $p < 0.05$, † $p < 0.1$		

Source: own elaboration

Moderating effects

The moderation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS Macro in SPSS. The results suggest that both corporate and CEO activism can increase the strength of associations, particularly in relation to employee activism and communicative intentions.

Corporate activism strengthens the positive relationships between all independent variables and employee activism communicative intentions, suggesting that employees feel more encouraged to support and participate in activism when companies actively engage in activism, confirming H7a. For example, the relationship between the climate of voice and employee activism communicative intentions is significantly stronger when corporate activism levels are high ($p = .002$). In addition, transparent leadership communication has a stronger influence on communicative intentions in the presence of corporate activism ($p = .008$). Similarly, corporate activism enhances the effects of authenticity and organizational identification on communicative intentions, with significant results for authenticity ($p = .000$) and organizational identification ($p = .013$). However, not all moderation effects of corporate activism are significant, rejecting H7b. The relationship between the climate of voice and actionable intentions does not reach significance for corporate activism ($p = .533$), nor does the moderation effect between perceived external prestige and actionable intentions ($p = .067$).

CEO activism also moderates critical relationships in relation to employee activism communicative intentions, particularly with perceived authenticity ($p = .000$) and organizational identification ($p = .016$). CEO involvement in activism increases the effect of transparent leadership communication ($p = .011$) and climate of voice ($p = .001$) on communicative intentions, confirming H8a. However, the impact on actionable intentions remains inconsistent, with non-significant results for both the climate of voice ($p = .179$) and perceived external prestige ($p = .121$), rejecting H8b. These results emphasize that while leadership-driven activism fosters a supportive environment for activism-related communicative intentions, its effect on actionable intentions is more nuanced and may be influenced by additional situational, individual, or external factors.

6.4 Discussion

The results provide important insights into how organizational and individual factors influence employee activism, which is reflected in employees' intentions. The significant positive correlations between communicative and actionable intentions and corporate activism suggest that a positive communicative environment can not only encourage employees to express activism but also potentially act upon it.

When examining individual and organizational factors, the *climate of voice* is essential in both corporate and CEO activism. This involves an environment where employees feel valued and inspired by the leadership's stance on socially relevant issues. This sense of psychological safety and empowerment encourages employees to voice their concerns and ideas without fear of retaliation (Detert and Burris, 2007) and therefore engage in communicative forms of activism. Voice climate is directly related to the idea of activism as it encourages open dialog and makes employees feel that they have an impact on organizational outcomes (Morrison, 2014). This reinforces the idea that a strong voice climate fosters not only open dialog but also aligns with the core purpose of activism: to drive social change through communication and self-expression (Krishna, 2021). *Transparent leadership communication*, which is closely linked to corporate and CEO activism and the climate of voice, also plays a reinforcing role, as the idea that open, trust-building dialog promotes employee alignment with organizational goals (Men et al., 2021) can inspire activism-oriented intentions. *Authenticity* has also emerged as key, suggesting that employees who perceive their leaders and organizations as authentic are more likely to engage in activism-related communication. Furthermore, the positive correlations between perceived external prestige and organizational identification are consistent with studies showing that employees are more likely to advocate for or against organizational practices when they perceive the organization as reputable and aligned with their personal values (Ashforth et al., 2008). However, *employee engagement* did not significantly predict communicative intentions, suggesting that emotional and cognitive connection to work may not directly lead to activism. This finding aligns with Saks (2006), who asserts that engagement alone may not drive discretionary behaviors like activism.

The regression analysis in relation to Model (a) (Figure 12) confirms the significant role of *climate of voice* and *organizational identification* in predicting communicative intentions but also highlights the complexity of authenticity. Higher perceptions of *organizational authenticity* may reduce employees' need for activism. One possible explanation for this is that employees who perceive their organization as authentic have a lower sense of urgency or moral obligation to speak up because the organization is already addressing the relevant social or political issues. In this sense, authenticity can act as a substitute for a corrective voice by signaling that leadership is responsive and fulfilling stakeholder expectations, reducing the need for employee intervention. This is consistent with social identity theory (e.g. Hogg et al., 1995), which suggests that strong identification with a positively perceived organization can lead to greater trust in leadership and greater confidence in the organization to implement positive change. Employees may therefore exhibit a form of passive engagement, where trust in the organization's values and practices reduces their motivation to voice their concerns as activists.

At the same time, employees who feel a sense of belonging and identification with the organization are *likely to advocate for causes that align with its identity and mission*, as they view such activism as part of their commitment to the organization's success.

Moreover, the regression analysis shows that transparent leadership communication seems to *overlap with the climate of voice*, albeit only marginally significant: although both are important for fostering a communicative and open culture, climate of voice might be more strongly related to employees' activism communicative intentions because it is directly related to their sense of empowerment and autonomy.

Finally, perceived external prestige and employee engagement do not significantly predict communicative intentions in Model (a). As mentioned earlier, the lack of significant effects for perceived external prestige and employee engagement on communicative intentions suggests that these constructs likely influence outcomes such as loyalty, satisfaction, or retention more strongly than activism-related behaviors. While *perceived external prestige* is important for overall organizational reputation (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994), it may not directly influence employees' willingness to engage in activism communication because activism is often driven by internal motives and the desire to align organizational practices with personal values (e.g. Davis and

White, 2015; Lee 2022). In terms of *employee engagement*, activism often involves challenging the status quo (Curtin et al., 2015; King, 2016), and employees who are highly engaged or who view their organization as representative may be less likely to voice dissenting opinions if they perceive the current direction of the organization to be in line with their expectations. Highly engaged employees in particular may prioritize maintaining organizational stability and therefore feel less compelled to advocate for change, especially if they trust that the company is already moving in the right direction.

The non-significance of all predictors of actionable intentions (Model b) (Figure 12), in contrast to the predictors of communicative intentions, indicates the presence of an intention–behavior gap (Sheeran and Webb, 2016), which refers to the discrepancy between individuals' stated intentions and their actual behavior. While employees feel motivated to express their opinions verbally, the move to concrete action may be associated with higher perceived risks and costs. These include concerns such as job security, fear of retaliation and reputational consequences that may prevent action despite strong attitudinal support. This disconnect is particularly relevant in activism, where employees express support but are reluctant to act due to perceived risks or lack of enabling conditions.

Furthermore, actionable activism often depends on group dynamics and collective coordination, pointing to the potential role of collective efficacy, i.e. the belief that a group can effectively bring about change (Bleh et al., 2024; Politi et al., 2022). Similarly, self-efficacy and feeling that an issue is personally important or relevant can influence whether someone decides to act (e.g. Bleh et al., 2024). For some employees, communicative engagement can already be a significant step, an example of aspirational talk, especially in environments where activism is stigmatized or controversial. The transition from voice to action can also be influenced by politicized identification, i.e., seeing oneself as part of a group that actively advocates for or supports social change (e.g. Bleh et al., 2024). Moreover, personal core values offer important insights into the reasons why people may want to participate in a wide range of sociopolitical behaviors (Vecchione et al., 2015). These values interact with individual characteristics and broader social, economic and cultural contexts to influence action. Research consistently shows that personal values have a significant impact on sociopolitical engagement, although cultural factors may influence the way these values are expressed (Vecchione et al.,

2015). As per the Italian socio-cultural context, for example, the tradition of trade unionism tends to canalize activism through formalized structures, making voice more culturally acceptable and less risky than individual action, thus reducing the prevalence of spontaneous employee activism (Armaroli, 2020).

The moderation analysis emphasizes the influence of corporate and CEO activism on the reinforcement of communicative intentions. The strengthening effect of *corporate activism* on employee activism communicative intentions suggests that employees feel more motivated to engage in activism communication when organizations are visibly committed to social or ethical causes, as has been found in previous studies (e.g. Rheinhardt et al., 2023). This visible engagement fosters an environment in which an open climate of voice has a stronger influence (e.g. Frazier and Bowler, 2012) and encourages employees to express activism. Consequently, an organization's external stance on activism can significantly influence its internal communication dynamics and enhance the impact of a supportive communication culture (e.g. Lee and Tao, 2021; Rheinhardt et al., 2023; Wowak et al., 2022). The interaction between corporate activism and transparent leadership communication also shows that open communication combined with active corporate engagement can inspire employees. Similarly, the increased influence of authenticity and organizational identification on communicative intentions in corporate activism underscores that employee perceptions of genuine leadership and shared values are critical to fostering activism.

CEO activism, with its symbolic and strategic meaning, further motivates employees to advocate, especially when it is accompanied by authenticity and identification. This aligns with the idea that leadership visibility in social causes serves as a role model and motivator for employees (e.g. Lee and Tao, 2021).

However, similarly to communicative intentions, the non-significance of certain moderation effects for actionable intentions indicates that while corporate and CEO activism can strengthen the climate of voice, they do not automatically lead to concrete actions. This may be due to various factors such as organizational barriers, perceived risks, or insufficient empowerment mechanisms (e.g. Hug and Zhang, 2024; Lee, 2022; Ramirez and Islam, 2022) that prevent employees from moving beyond communicative intent to actual behavior, but it is also linked to psychological reasons linked to the attitude-behavior gap (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000). This finding further underscores

the persistence of the intention–action gap. One interpretation is that leadership activism plays a critical role in shaping a cultural climate that legitimizes voice (e.g. Mkrtchyan et al., 2024), but this symbolic influence may not be sufficient to enable concrete activist behaviors. While leaders can foster a culture of expression, it is important to consider whether they are also addressing the practical and psychological barriers that prevent employees from translating their intentions into action. In addition, alignment between the specific causes championed by corporate or CEO activism and employee activist causes may be necessary for this moderating effect to translate into actionable behaviors. Without this alignment, leadership activism can be an important signal for dialog, but not a sufficient catalyst for employee-led action.

Theoretical implications

The findings of this study broaden the understanding of employee activism in organizations by highlighting the critical role of individual, organizational, and leadership dynamics in fostering employee activism intentions and presenting both theoretical insights and practical recommendations for managers.

Theoretically, the findings enrich research on employee activism by highlighting the different influences of communicative and actionable intentions. This nuanced understanding illustrates how especially the climate of voice and organizational identification act as fundamental elements that enable employees to communicate activism. In addition, the role of leadership, particularly through a climate of voice, transparent communication, and perceived authenticity, plays a critical role in shaping an environment that fosters activism. This study also advances the academic discourse on corporate and CEO activism by demonstrating their moderating effects on employee activists' intentions to act and emphasizing that visible and aligned leadership activism not only strengthens employee engagement but also aligns corporate strategies with social responsiveness.

Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings underscore the strategic importance of leaders' visibility in activism and their alignment with organizational values to inspire

employee activism. Companies should prioritize cultivating a supportive climate of voice and transparent leadership communication, as this is critical to fostering employee empowerment. Anchoring authenticity in corporate strategies through consistent purpose orientation can strengthen employees' identification with corporate goals and motivate them to engage in constructive activism. To close the observed gap between communicative and actionable intentions, managers should also consider tangible mechanisms such as resource support, formal channels for advocacy, or employee resource groups and practices that enhance platform accessibility, openness to social issues, and visibility of activism efforts to external stakeholders (e.g. Rheinhardt et al., 2023). Such measures are critical for organizations seeking to transition to purpose-driven models (e.g. Rey et al., 2019) that leverage internal advocacy to align with broader societal expectations. By creating a psychologically safe environment for dialog, managers can use activism as a strategic resource rather than a disruptive force (Briscoe and Gupta, 2021). These findings underscore the need for leaders to embody the principles of corporate and CEO activism and ensure coherence between internal and external practices to effectively inspire and support employee activism.

Limitations and future directions

Despite its contributions to theory and practice, this study is not without limitations. First, the focus on Italian employees limits the generalizability of the results to other cultural or economic contexts. Future research should broaden the scope to include different geographical and cultural settings to examine how varying national cultures and societal norms may shape the dynamics of employee activism. The specific Italian socio-cultural context may have influenced the results. Italy has a long history of strong trade unionism, where activism is often institutionalized through formal channels rather than initiated informally by individual employees (Armaroli, 2020). This dynamic may help explain why people were more willing to express their views, since speaking up is more acceptable in the culture and less risky than taking action alone. In this context, speaking out can act as a symbolic way to show support, while actual actions usually happen through unions or formal agreements. This may make individual or spontaneous activism less likely.

Second, the study focuses primarily on organizational and individual factors without specifically addressing external pressures or societal influences that may affect employees' activism communicative intentions and actions, apart from perceived external prestige, which may act as external pressure. For example, external factors such as the rise of prominent social movements such as climate justice initiatives and LGBTQ+ rights advocacy or evolving public opinion, media coverage of activism, and changes in the regulatory environment can strongly influence employees' willingness and ability to engage in activism. Future research could therefore explore the interplay between internal organizational dynamics and external societal pressures.

Further research is also needed to understand the underlying factors that facilitate or hinder the transition from employee activism intentions to actions. In particular, variables such as self-efficacy, perceived risks, social norms, collective efficacy or politicized identification can help explain the gap between communicative intentions and actionable activism. These factors, as well as organizational support mechanisms (e.g. dedicated advocacy channels, employee resource groups, leadership support) and individual motivators are likely to determine whether employees may close this gap. In this regard, while this study has demonstrated the moderating effects of corporate and CEO activism on employee activism intentions, further research is needed to understand the mechanisms by which these forms of activism, together with other organizational characteristics (e.g. organizational type and size, type of issue), may influence employees' transition from communicative to actionable activism.

Finally, the inclusion of other factors, such as generational differences, technology usage, or external stakeholder influences, could contribute to a better understanding of the complex nature of employee activism. Furthermore, given the cross-sectional design of this study, it is not possible to draw causal conclusions from the observed relationships. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to better examine how activism intentions evolve over time and whether they lead to concrete actions, especially as new generations enter the workforce and potentially reshape norms related to employee voice and activism.

7 Toxic work environments and employee communicative responses

High-profile scandals in politics, finance, entertainment, and business have shown how pervasive toxic workplace cultures, i.e., organizational environments in which unethical, abusive, or harmful behavior are normalized and embedded in corporate life (Cannon, 2022). Toxic work environments (TWEs) have become an important subject of investigation in organizational psychology and management studies due to their negative impact on employee well-being, job satisfaction, and overall organizational performance (e.g. Einarsen et al., 2016). These environments are typically characterized by persistent negative behaviors such as bullying, harassment, exclusion and excessive micromanagement, which foster a climate of anxiety, stress and disengagement (Rasool et al., 2021). These situations are often reported in the media. For example, in April 2025, an independent investigation into workplace culture at the BBC found that some powerful individuals, both inside and outside broadcasting, were abusing their position and making the lives of their colleagues “unbearable”. While the overall culture was not described as toxic, one report highlighted bullying, misconduct and late intervention by senior managers in several prominent cases involving presenters. The findings induced the BBC to announce a major internal reform to improve accountability and prevent abuse (Savage, 2025).

While toxic workplaces are often attributed to individual “bad apples” such as unethical managers or abusive colleagues, this oversimplifies the problem and obscures the deeper dynamics in the organization. As Love et al. (2011) argue, errors in complex systems are less likely to be the result of isolated individuals and more likely to be symptoms of latent conditions in the organizational environment. These latent conditions, such as production pressures, conflicting goals, inadequate monitoring, or poorly designed systems, provide ground for the emergence and normalization of harmful behaviors. From this perspective, toxicity in the workplace is caused by individual misconduct and also by deeper problems in the structure, culture and leadership of the organization that allow, support and conceal harmful behavior over time.

One of the most profound consequences of toxicity in the workplace is the impact on personal and professional lives of employees, particularly in terms of shaping their behavior and communicative responses. In this context, employees are not just passive recipients of toxicity but are forced to make strategic decisions about how to handle this environment, in terms of how, when, to whom and whether to communicate their concerns. The suppression of employee voice is particularly damaging. In toxic environments, employees often withhold concerns, observations, or criticisms because they fear retaliation, ostracism, or a sense of futility of organizational change (Detert and Edmondson, 2011; Morrison and Milliken, 2000). This climate of silence undermines psychological safety, organizational learning and accountability. But silence is not the only response. Research shows that employees can also practice a form of resistance by expressing their dissatisfaction through overt and subtle communicative strategies aimed at challenging toxic norms and asserting themselves in oppressive systems (Kassing, 2002).

In parallel, the growing discourse on “meaningful work” has emphasized the alignment between individual purpose and organizational mission, making the existence of toxic work environments increasingly untenable and highly relevant in today’s landscape. Meaningful work is understood as work that provides value to both the organization and society in the eyes of employees (Chamberlain and Hodson, 2010), creating critical tensions between personal values and organizational dysfunction.

This study examines employee voice, silence and exit as communicative responses to toxic work environments. The theoretical framework explores the nature of toxicity in the workplace, including its micro- and macro-organizational causes, such as poor leadership, cultures or antisocial behaviors that negatively affect employees at the personal- and work-related level. By linking toxicity and communication responses, the study aims to understand how toxic environments emerge and persist, and how they influence individual and collective strategies. Based on this framework, an empirical study is conducted using mixed methods: an exploratory quantitative survey developed based on the existing literature and administered across relevant online communities, and a qualitative content analysis of employees’ narratives resulting from the survey itself. This combined method helps to explain how employees experience and react to toxic workplaces, both internally and externally.

As per the methodology used for the review of this literature, systematic searches were conducted in Scopus using advanced Boolean queries that combined keywords related to toxic work environments (e.g. “toxic work environment”, “abusive supervision”, “antisocial behaviors”, “psychological safety”, “retaliation”), and psychological and organizational consequences (e.g. “mental health issues”, “burnout”, “work-life balance”, “career dissatisfaction”). These keywords were chosen to identify studies at the intersection of workplace toxicity, communication behaviors, and employee well-being. The full Boolean used is: TITLE-ABS-KEY (((“toxic work environment”) OR (“toxic workplace”) OR (“workplace toxicity”) OR (abusive supervis*) OR (leadership) OR (“antisocial behaviors”) OR (“incivility”) OR (“bullying”) OR (“mobbing”) OR (“harassment”) OR (“micromanagement”) OR (“controlling”) OR (“intimidation”) OR (retaliat*) OR (“psychological safety”) OR (“wellbeing”) OR (voice climate) OR (“communication climate”) OR (“transparent communication”) OR (“employee voice”) OR (“employee dissent”) OR “employee silence”) OR (turnover) OR (retention) OR (“work-life balance”) OR (employee engagement) OR (“discrimination”) OR (“diversity equity inclusion”) OR (career dissatisfaction))). The academic databases consulted were Scopus and Google Scholar, from which 76 articles published between 1970 and 2025 were included in the review. This overview forms the basis for a mixed-methods empirical study examining how employees experience and respond to toxic work environments.

7.1 Conceptualization of toxic work environments

The work environment encompasses several dynamics that shape daily experiences of employees. Previous research has identified two types of environments (Wang et al., 2020b): the collaborative work environment (CWE) and the toxic work environment (TWE). CWE is characterized by positive social interactions, mutual empathy, employee engagement and organizational citizenship behaviors and promotes a sense of well-being and productivity. In contrast, a TWE is increasingly recognized for its damaging effects on employee well-being, job satisfaction and organizational performance (Einarsen et al., 2016). They are typically characterized by persistent negative behaviors such as bullying, harassment, exclusion, abusive leadership, and excessive micromanagement that create a

climate of stress, anxiety, and disengagement (Rasool et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020b). These dynamics often lead to burnout, emotional distress and reduced organizational effectiveness.

Toxic work environments are defined by employees' persistent experience of negative emotions, typically arising from conflictual, oppressive or dysfunctional interpersonal, work-related and organizational dynamics (McCulloch, 2016). Such environments undermine employee motivation, lower morale, increase turnover and decrease overall productivity. Employees working in toxic conditions often suffer from mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, chronic stress and burnout, which in turn reduces organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Rasool et al., 2021).

According to Rasool et al. (2021), toxic environments persist because employees are reluctant to report workplace mistreatment. As a result, many cases of toxicity in the workplace remain undocumented, making it difficult for companies to implement necessary reforms. For this reason, scholars (e.g. Appelbaum and Roy-Girard, 2007) agree that the biggest challenge in addressing workplace toxicity is recognizing its existence. Identifying toxic dynamics requires careful monitoring of organizational indicators, including turnover rates, leadership language patterns (e.g. excessive blame or individual focus), and employee feedback. When toxic leadership is prevalent in the upper levels, intervention becomes more complex. However, when toxicity is confined to specific individuals, corrective action may be easier to implement. A proactive and effective corporate strategy helps to cultivate a culture that clearly stands against toxic behavior and supports cooperation and respect (Appelbaum and Roy-Girard, 2007).

In such hostile contexts, deviant behavior often occurs in the workplace. Robinson and Bennett (1995, p. 556) define deviant behavior in the workplace as “voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both”. These behaviors reflect either a loss of motivation to conform or a conscious decision to violate organizational expectations. Unlike general ethical misconduct, deviant behavior in the workplace is specific to the organizational context and should be understood in the context of the norms in place in a particular organization (Robinson and Bennett, 1995).

While conflict is a natural element of organizational life, in toxic environments it often escalates into persistent and damaging behaviors that undermine trust and stability (e.g. Stalcup, 2012). Toxicity in the workplace often arises from unchecked power dynamics, competitive pressures and factors such as budget constraints and workplace tensions. Toxicity can manifest itself in the form of reputational damage, professional isolation and systematic exclusion from decision-making processes. Individuals in such environments often feel that their contributions are undervalued, their voices are ignored or their professional reputation is deliberately weakened.

7.1.1 Key attributes of toxic work environments

Toxic work environments are characterized by persistent interpersonal conflict, low employee autonomy, organizational disorder, and a general breakdown of healthy workplace dynamics (Wang et al., 2020b). These environments are widespread, affect millions of workers worldwide and often have serious health consequences (Wang et al., 2020b). According to Chamberlain and Hodson (2010), seven out of ten workers in such environments report frequent negative health effects. For organizations looking to attract and retain top talent, addressing toxicity in the workplace is critical. Understanding the factors that contribute to toxicity and identifying ways to mitigate its negative effects are critical to improving individual well-being and organizational success (Chamberlain and Hodson, 2010).

Toxic organizational cultures often begin with the normalization of incivility, which, once tolerated or justified, can escalate into widespread harmful behaviors (Cannon, 2022). In contemporary complex, high-pressure environments, such behaviors are increasingly visible across all sectors, driven by stress, uncertainty and deteriorating social norms. The roots of toxicity may lie in individual psychology, such as stress reactions and trauma, or in broader sociological forces, including poor leadership, rigid hierarchies and exploitative business models (Cannon, 2022). Cultural toxicity is perpetuated when organizations reward performance over ethics, fail to align values and actions, or suppress dissent through fear and retribution (Cannon, 2022). Prominent cases, such as those of Sony Music and Amazon, show that even successful companies can exhibit deep dysfunction (Cannon, 2022). In 2025, former Meta director Kelly Stonelake filed a

lawsuit against the corporation, complaining of a toxic workplace culture characterized by gender discrimination, retaliation, and the silencing of dissenting voices. After a 15-year career, Stonelake claimed she was fired while on medical leave after previously reporting sexual harassment and concerns about the impacts of a product on minors. Her allegations shed light on a broader marginalization and disrespect for women within the company. The case attracted more attention after CEO Mark Zuckerberg publicly called for more “masculine energy” in corporate culture and a decrease of diversity and inclusion efforts (Nolan, 2025). In 2025, three former Ubisoft executives were found guilty of fostering a toxic workplace culture characterized by sexual harassment and bullying. The trial revealed a long history of harmful behavior at the branch of the company in Montreuil, including bullying, sexism and threats. Employees spoke of an atmosphere like a “boys’s club” where women felt insecure and had little power. Some managers were accused of frightening employees, embarrassing them in front of others and behaving in a sexist manner. Some were even given suspended prison sentences. The trial marked a turning point and exposed deep flaws in the leadership and organizational culture of Ubisoft (Chrisafis, 2025).

At the same time, there are several individual attributes that make it more likely that employees will become toxic workers. One key characteristic is *overconfidence*, as individuals who overestimate their abilities are more likely to engage in unethical behavior because they believe they can avoid detection or negative consequences (Housman and Minor, 2015). Another characteristic is *self-serving behavior*, in which employees put their own needs above those of their colleagues or the company, making them more likely to engage in selfish or unethical behavior (Housman and Minor, 2015).

Personality traits play an important role in shaping toxic workplace cultures, particularly through the influence of the “dark triad”: *Machiavellianism*, *narcissism* and *psychopathy*. These traits are characterized by manipulateness, self-interest, lack of empathy and disregard for ethical norms (Cannon, 2022). Individuals with a high level of *Machiavellianism* tend to act strategically, cheat and have no regard for morality. Housman and Minor (2015) note a paradox: employees who indicate in their pre-employment assessment that they strictly follow the rules are more likely to engage in toxic behavior once hired. The authors (2015) suggest that this may indicate Machiavellian tendencies, where individuals manipulate perceptions to secure

employment while disregarding ethical standards in practice. *Psychopathy* manifests in traits such as superficial charm, emotional detachment and impulsiveness and can be particularly damaging in organizations, where such individuals may achieve short-term success but cause long-term damage. Their lack of empathy and conscience allows them to manipulate and divide teams, encourage unethical behavior and undermine organizational integrity. *Narcissistic and sociopathic leaders* often dominate through intimidation or grandiosity, and their behavior can become pervasive and foster a broader culture of toxicity. Although such personalities can thrive in highly competitive sectors such as finance or media, their presence undermines collaboration, morale and sustained performance (Cannon, 2022).

7.1.2 Behaviors of toxic workers

Toxic work environments promote stress and disengagement and increase the likelihood of deviant behavior among employees. In this sense, deviant behavior can be seen as both a symptom and a cause of toxicity in the workplace.

Toxic employees are often highly productive, making organizations reluctant to fire them despite their negative impact (Housman and Minor, 2015). However, these employees tend to produce low-quality work, which means that their efficiency comes at the price of more mistakes or customer dissatisfaction (Housman and Minor, 2015). According to Housman and Minor (2015), this duality suggests that companies are called to carefully weigh the short-term productivity gains against the long-term risks associated with toxic behavior. A key finding is that the financial costs of retaining a toxic employee outweigh the benefits of hiring a superstar (Housman and Minor, 2015). In addition, toxic employees contribute to higher turnover among their peers, which further increases hiring and training costs for the organization (Housman and Minor, 2015).

Mitchell and Holloway (2009) identified three types of toxic employee behaviors in their study: *shaming*, *passive hostility* and *team sabotage*.

Shaming behavior is a form of toxic behavior characterized by humiliation, sarcasm, public embarrassment, and verbal hostility. Although sometimes presented as constructive feedback or assertive leadership, actions such as condescending remarks or

exposing mistakes undermine trust and erode emotional safety. Although less overt than direct aggression, shaming causes comparable psychological damage and is difficult to recognize or address. Cumulative effects include lower self-esteem, increased engagement and a breakdown in team cohesion. When shaming is normalized by leaders, it becomes embedded in the company culture, silencing voices and amplifying fear. Dealing with it requires clear guidelines, early intervention and leadership that is committed to promoting respect and psychological safety.

Passive hostility is an indirect but harmful form of toxic behavior in organizations characterized by indirect aggression that is often not immediately recognized. It includes passive aggressiveness, chronic mistrust, territorialism, rejection of feedback and a lack of self-awareness about the impact one has on others. Passive-aggressive individuals express their dissatisfaction through procrastination, non-compliance or discrete obstruction, which undermines trust and impairs team performance. Mistrust manifests as resistance to collaboration and skepticism of the expertise of others, undermining open dialog and innovation. Territorial behavior, often expressed through micromanagement, limits autonomy and fosters a climate of fear and learned helplessness. A particular challenge is the passive-hostile resistance of the individual to feedback, which often manifests itself in defensiveness or denial and hinders efforts to find solutions. In addition, such behavior often persists unchecked due to a lack of self-awareness and contributes to dysfunctionality, declining morale and employee turnover. Because of its insidious nature, passive hostility requires early detection and strong organizational norms of accountability and psychological safety to mitigate its effects.

Team sabotage is characterized by the intentional disruption of group cohesion, trust and productivity. This behavior often manifests itself in the form of surveillance, interference and abuse of authority, that undermine team effectiveness from within. Individuals who sabotage teams are often skillful manipulators who work covertly to monitor colleagues, withhold important information, and foster division or distrust among team members. Their strategies may include gathering personal information to exploit later, orchestrating failures by setting a trap for others, or undermining the authority of team leaders. Such behaviors create an atmosphere of fear, defensiveness and competition that prevents true collaboration. Saboteurs can further hinder team productivity by dominating discussions, directing efforts towards personal goals and disregarding collective objectives. As a

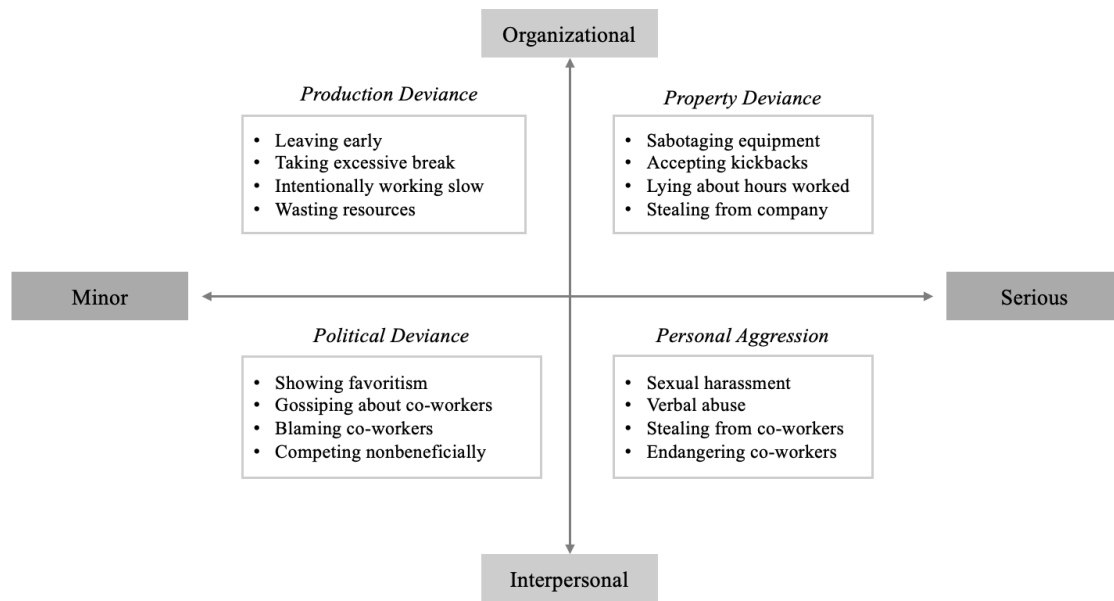
result, team dynamics deteriorate and morale drops often unnoticed until significant damage has been done, such as missed project milestones or increased employee turnover. These individuals are sometimes referred to as “troublemakers” because they repeatedly disrupt harmony in the workplace. If a saboteur is in a leadership position, the consequences are even more detrimental. They can use their position to silence dissent, marginalize perceived opponents and claim unwarranted credit while building loyal inner circles and fostering inter-team rivalry to consolidate their power. Ultimately, team sabotage undermines not only work outcomes, but also the trust and collaboration that are essential for a team to function and poses a significant threat to organizational culture and performance.

Robinson and Bennett (1995) conducted a study on the systematic classification of workplace deviant behaviors. They collected data from employees in different industries and used empirical clustering techniques to categorize deviant behavior. The study revealed two basic dimensions: minor vs. serious deviance and interpersonal vs. organizational deviance.

Minor vs. serious deviance measures the degree of harm caused by deviant behavior. Minor deviance includes actions that violate company norms but do not cause major harm (e.g. waste of company time). Serious deviance, on the other hand, includes behavior with significant consequences, such as theft or physical aggression.

In the case of *interpersonal and organizational deviance*, behaviors are differentiated according to who is harmed. Some deviant acts are directed against the organization itself (e.g. theft), while others harm employees or other individuals (e.g. harassment or verbal abuse). From these two dimensions, the authors developed a typology of workplace deviance in four categories (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Typologies of deviant workplace behaviors



Source: Own reproduction from Robinson and Bennett (1995)

Production deviance (minor and organizational) includes behaviors that reduce work productivity or efficiency without causing direct harm to the individual. Examples include leaving work early, taking excessive breaks, intentionally working slowly and wasting company resources. Although these behaviors may not seem serious in themselves, if they are widespread, they can have a negative impact on the overall performance of the company.

Property deviance (serious and organizational) includes more damaging acts involving theft, damage or misuse of company resources. Examples include sabotaging equipment, accepting bribes, lying about working hours and theft within the company. These behaviors can cause significant financial and reputational damage to the company, making them an important issue for employers.

Political deviance (minor and interpersonal) consists of harmful behaviors that undermine colleagues or create a harmful social environment. These include gossiping, spreading rumors, blaming colleagues, and favoritism. Political deviance often undermines trust between colleagues, leading to lower morale, more conflict and less collaboration.

Personal aggression (serious and interpersonal) represents the most damaging and serious forms of workplace deviance. These include sexual harassment, verbal abuse, physical violence and theft among colleagues. These behaviors directly harm individuals and can create a hostile work environment that makes employees feel unsafe, which can lead to legal and ethical violations.

7.1.3 How toxic cultures affect organizations and employees

Toxic workplace cultures often cause employees to withdraw, feel demotivated and struggle with their well-being. They can also damage the reputation of the company and threaten its long-term success (Cannon, 2022). To improve things, it is important to understand how these cultures work and focus on solutions such as ethical leadership, a safe space for employees to speak their minds and efforts to change the way the organization operates (Cannon, 2022).

Toxicity in the workplace is a harmful environment that damages self-esteem and distracts employees from their work. It is due to organizational toxins, leading to terms such as toxic leader, toxic manager and toxic culture (Appelbaum and Roy-Girard, 2007). Rasool et al. (2021) found that a toxic work environment directly reduces employee engagement by causing stress, burnout and emotional exhaustion. Employees in toxic environments are more inclined to disengagement, spreading negativity and experiencing decreased motivation. The authors (2021) also emphasize that organizational support and employee well-being play a key role in mitigating the negative effects of toxicity in the workplace. Employees who perceive strong organizational support, such as fair treatment, encouragement from leadership, and recognition, are less likely to disengage despite toxic conditions. However, employee well-being can impact this relationship: employee engagement decreases significantly when they experience high levels of stress and poor mental health. Reducing toxicity in the workplace strengthens organizational support and prioritizes employee well-being. This is done through HR policies and managerial interventions that are critical to maintaining a productive and healthy workforce (Rasool et al., 2021).

Toxicity undermines engagement and contributes to deviant workplace behavior and even violence, increasing job stress. This kind of environment fails to meet the psychological and professional needs of employees, reduces personal resources, hinders the achievement of goals and at the same time undermines social cohesion. High levels of toxicity at work contribute to problems such as high blood pressure, anxiety and increased stress in the workplace, while lower levels of toxicity help to reduce them (Wang et al., 2020b). In addition, these factors lead to lower work participation, productivity and motivation, which ultimately affects the success of projects. Studies confirm that organizations with high levels of TWE have lower project performance, further supporting the negative impact of a toxic work environment on project outcomes (Wang et al., 2020b).

Leadership strongly influences the level of toxicity in the workplace. While CEOs often receive the most attention, team leaders and middle managers also have a major impact on the work environment. When leadership style is not aligned with the needs of the organization, it can foster toxic conditions characterized by poor communication, low morale, absenteeism and high turnover. These symptoms lead to measurable financial losses, such as decreased productivity and increased benefit expenses. Conversely, organizations with strong people management and supportive leadership structures tend to perform better on both human and operational metrics (Appelbaum and Roy-Girard, 2007).

In organizations, toxic environments contribute to several problems, including absenteeism, tardiness, high turnover, low morale, poor communication and increasing mistrust among employees. Chamberlain and Hodson (2010) highlight the importance of job satisfaction, organizational commitment and meaningful work as central to individual fulfillment and organizational success. Job satisfaction reflects the overall health of the relationship between the employee and the workplace. Commitment signifies both organizational commitment and the individual maintenance of important social and economic ties. It also indicates the alignment of employee and organizational values.

Research has shown that cultural dimensions significantly influence both social and organizational effects, especially in cross-national contexts. Hofstede (1991) identifies six important cultural dimensions, such as power distance, individualism/collectivism and uncertainty avoidance, which influence attitudes towards hierarchy, authority and

decision making. For example, cultures with high power distance, such as Korea, may discourage upward feedback, which can lead to mistakes and low morale, while cultures with low power distance, such as Sweden, emphasize equality and openness. The Culture Map of Meyer (2014) highlights other dimensions, including communication styles, approaches to evaluation, leadership, decision making, trust building, disagreement and time management. The framework developed by Trompenaars (1996) introduces cultural dimensions that explain how people from different societies deal with trust, leadership and emotional expression in the workplace. The model outlines key differences between cultures, such as whether rules are applied universally or adapted to specific relationships (universalism vs. particularism), the value placed on individual performance, the appropriateness of leaders displaying emotions, the nature of social relationships (role-based vs. personal), and whether status is earned through merit or assigned through social origin.

These cultural differences help explain the roots of misunderstanding and conflict in cross-cultural environments. These cultural differences explain why organizational practices that are successful in one context may not translate effectively across borders. Inconsistencies, such as individualistic norms clashing with collectivist values, can lead to friction and misunderstandings and hinder global business operations. Recognizing and adapting to these cultural dynamics is essential to fostering effective and respectful international organizational cultures (Cannon, 2022).

Housman and Minor (2015) emphasize the need for *strategic hiring* and *workplace management practices* to prevent toxic behaviors from taking root. Employers should be cautious when hiring candidates who exhibit overconfidence, self-regarding behavior, or extreme rule-following tendencies, as these traits are associated with a higher likelihood of toxicity in the workplace (Housman and Minor, 2015). In addition, companies should focus on creating a work environment that discourages toxic behaviors by promoting ethical leadership, strong accountability measures, and a culture of transparency (Housman and Minor, 2015). The study also highlights the importance of monitoring toxic spillover effects, i.e. the presence of toxic employees increases the likelihood that their colleagues will also engage in misconduct (Housman and Minor, 2015). Dealing with toxic employees early and decisively can prevent widespread cultural damage within an organization (Housman and Minor, 2015).

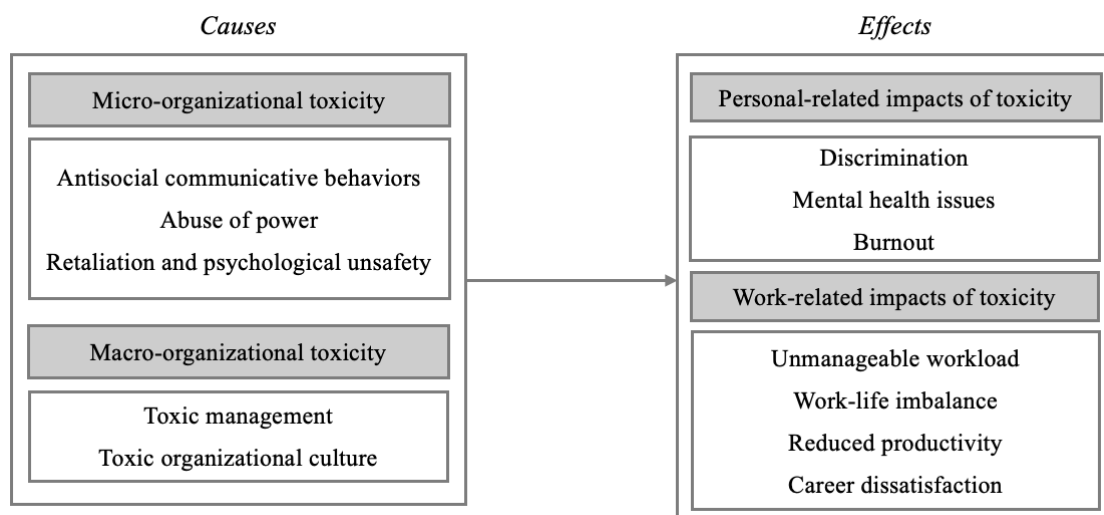
Robinson and Bennett (1995) provide specific guidance to organizations seeking to reduce deviant behaviors in the workplace and prevent toxic environments. One important recommendation is to ensure that punishments are applied consistently and fairly. Employees are more likely to perceive disciplinary action as legitimate if similar offenses result in similar consequences. For example, if two employees take excessive breaks but only one of them is punished, this inconsistency may lead to a perception of unfairness and increased deviance. Furthermore, the severity of the punishment should match the severity of the offense, for example, sabotage should result in harsher consequences than minor gossip. Importantly, the authors argue that deviant behavior can serve as an early warning sign of deeper organizational problems. Robinson and Bennett also emphasize the need for targeted interventions based on their typology of toxic traits. For example, better engagement and clarification of expectations can reduce variation in production, while ethical training and better security measures can reduce property crime. Open communication and ethical leadership are essential to counter political deviance, and a respectful workplace culture with robust reporting mechanisms is crucial to prevent personal aggression.

Culture change in organizations is a complex and emotionally charged process that requires more than changing structures or policies: it depends on changing underlying beliefs, attitudes and behaviors (Cannon, 2022). Culture tends to evolve through both planned and unplanned change. For change to last, it needs a strong emotional commitment and a clear vision. Crises or new strategies can create urgency and move people to action. At the same time, leaders need to create a climate where employees feel safe to participate, especially in toxic environments where resistance is common (Cannon, 2022). Clear communication about the mission, goals and next steps of the organization is essential. Moreover, leaders should prevent backsliding, follow ethical standards, and establish a system of accountability. Recognizing and celebrating positive behavior helps reinforce the new direction. Civility supports both well-being and performance and should be encouraged in a supportive environment. Leaders also need to be consistent and persistent to make new behaviors habitual. Ultimately, lasting cultural change depends on a combination of clear goals, respectful behavior and consistent leadership at all levels (Cannon, 2022).

7.2 Causes and effects of toxic work environments

Toxicity at work can be analyzed by distinguishing between its causes and its effects (Figure 14). In this study, the main causes are identified both at the micro-organizational level (e.g. toxic conflicts, exclusion or hostile relationships between colleagues) and at the macro-organizational level (e.g. poor leadership, lack of managerial support, excessive control). These toxic dynamics lead to negative impacts at the personal level (e.g. psychological distress, anxiety or burnout) and at the work-related level (e.g. demotivation or unmanageable work tasks).

Figure 14. Main causes and effects of toxic work environments



Source: own elaboration

This section explores in detail the main causes and effects of toxicity in organizations.

7.2.1 Causes of toxicity

Toxic work environments can have two overarching causes: micro-organizational toxicity and macro-organizational toxicity. Micro-organizational toxicity includes behaviors such as antisocial behavior, toxic dynamics with stakeholders, and retaliation and psychological unsafety, while macro-organizational toxicity includes toxic leadership practices and toxic organizational cultures.

7.2.1.1 Micro-organizational toxicity

Micro-organizational toxicity is here conceptualized as a form of toxicity at the interpersonal level in which one member engages in negative, harmful behaviors or withholds expected positive behavior from another. These behaviors can range from slight insults and exclusions to overt harassment or even violence (Cortina and Magley, 2003). One of the most important sources of micro-organizational toxicity is conflict with supervisors, which is often triggered by role conflict (i.e. unreasonable or conflicting demands) and dysfunctional interpersonal dynamics. Such conflicts are often worsened by poor leadership, ineffective communication, and unclear expectations, all of which contribute to increased stress and organizational strain (Chamberlain and Hodson, 2010).

Micro-organizational toxicity can take multiple, interconnected forms that collectively shape a hostile work climate. Behaviors such as gossip, exclusion, and microaggressions erode trust and collaboration among colleagues. Tensions may also extend beyond internal dynamics, involving external stakeholders when employees are held accountable for failures or face contradictory demands. Moreover, when individuals who speak up face retaliation, psychological safety is further compromised, reinforcing silence and deepening the toxic environment.

7.2.1.1.1 Antisocial communicative behaviors

Toxic behaviors in the workplace can manifest in a continuum of antisocial communicative interactions and significantly impact the psychological safety, productivity, and career development opportunities of employees (Chory and Hubbell, 2008; Singh and Srivastava, 2023b). These behaviors affect individual well-being and undermine team cohesion and disrupt the functioning of the organization. Their effects can lead to lower engagement, increased turnover and a breakdown in trust and collaboration. Because many of these actions are weak and ambiguous, they often go unchallenged, gradually corroding the organizational climate and weakening sense of belonging and professional legitimacy (Chory and Hubbell, 2008; Singh and Srivastava, 2023b).

The most prevalent forms of antisocial behavior in the workplace include *incivility*, i.e., offensive comments, malicious gossip, rumor spreading, sabotage, passive-aggressive

behavior and microaggressions, and *bullying*, i.e., social bullying, cyberbullying, physical violence, and covert and explicit forms of harassment.

Workplace incivility refers to “low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others” (Andersson and Pearson, 1999, p. 457). It represents a particular form of employee deviance, which in turn is a subset of broader antisocial behavior in organizations (Cortina et al., 2001). Incivility in the workplace includes actions such as offensive comments, ignoring or ostracizing colleagues, and condescending or patronizing attitudes. Such incivility often goes unchecked due to its low intensity and ambiguity, making it difficult to address through formal organizational interventions (Singh and Srivastava, 2023b). When employees experience or witness incivility, they may perceive the work environment as unsafe or unwelcoming for open communication, causing them to withdraw and remain silent (Singh and Srivastava, 2023b).

Malicious gossip, rumor-spreading, and coordinated hostility further damage these harmful dynamics. Workplace gossip is “informal and evaluative talk in an organization about another member of that organization who is not present” (Kurland and Pelled, 2000, p. 429). Gossip, especially if it is malicious or unverified, is strategically damaging to reputations, isolating the employees concerned and undermining their professional reputation and networks (Ellwardt et al., 2012).

Organizational sabotage refers to deliberate actions by a paid employee intended to harm the productivity or financial performance of the organization (Giacalone and Rosenfeld, 1987). Sabotage involves deliberately interfering with the work of colleagues by blocking resources, withholding important information and creating obstacles. A particular form of sabotage is *knowledge sabotage*, which refers to situations in which an employee deliberately withholds important information or passes on false knowledge, despite knowing that the other person needs this information and that it is crucial to their work (Serenko and Choo, 2020). Such actions are often hidden but strategically effective, resulting in the individuals concerned failing and their professional credibility being undermined (e.g. Robinson and Bennett, 1995). These behaviors often thrive in environments characterized by competitive pressures, ambiguous expectations, and perceived unfairness (Chory and Hubbell, 2008). Employees who perceive injustice in

the organization or feel mistreated often resort to covert aggression to restore a sense of fairness, perpetuating a cycle of toxicity and retaliation (Chory and Hubbell, 2008).

Passive-aggressive behaviors and microaggressions represent more subtle but equally harmful dimensions of antisocial interactions in the workplace. These behaviors are often ambiguous, indirect, and difficult to confront, and result in lasting psychological damage that undermines self-confidence and self-esteem of employees (Cortina et al., 2001). Passive-aggressive behavior is a set of actions that express the underlying aggression in an indirect or passive manner (Johnson and Klee, 2007). Examples of these behaviors include vague or non-confrontational communication, avoidance of tasks or responsibilities, resistance to change, shifting blame, and reluctance to engage. Other examples include pretending not to understand, overly following rules to impede progress, minimizing personal involvement, delaying action, withholding effort, and undermining others. Such behaviors reflect covert resistance and can disrupt the functioning of the organization without overt confrontation (Johnson and Klee, 2007). Passive-aggressive behavior, especially in the form of gaslighting, is a damaging form of psychological manipulation in organizations (Cannon, 2022). It can cause victims to doubt their own perceptions, memories and sense of reality, often leading to confusion, anxiety and reduced self-confidence. The covert nature of such behavior makes it difficult for victims to articulate their experiences or receive validation and recompense, compounding the psychological impact and enabling a culture of silence and inaction (Cannon, 2022).

Microaggressions are indirect and often unintentional comments or behaviors that convey negative or dismissive messages to individuals based on aspects of their identity, such as ethnicity, gender, age, or sexual orientation (Smith and Griffiths, 2022). These everyday insults may seem insignificant, but their cumulative effects can lead to significant emotional distress, diminished well-being and a sense of exclusion. In the workplace, microaggressions can also undermine diversity and inclusion efforts by reinforcing stereotypes and marginalizing certain groups (Smith and Griffiths, 2022).

Another problem of antisocial communication behavior is *workplace bullying*. *Workplace bullying* is the repeated and regular harassment, insult, or social exclusion of individuals in the workplace (Krishna et al., 2024). This behavior usually occurs once a week over about six months and involves a variety of negative actions ranging from jokes to explicit

threats. A crucial element of workplace bullying is the presence of power differences between the bully and the victim, either actual, such as hierarchical differences, or perceived, such as differences between peers (Krishna et al., 2024). In professional settings, both peer bullying and bullying between superiors are common and are often intensified by organizational hierarchies and a competitive environment. These factors contribute to an atmosphere in which aggressive and bullying behavior can thrive.

Social bullying in the workplace refers to deliberate actions aimed at damaging the reputation and professional standing of an individual (Stalcup, 2012). This may include excluding the person from important conversations and thus minimizing their role, spreading false or misleading information about their work or abilities, or publicly humiliating them. Such toxic behaviors are a common tactic of workplace bullies and worsen over time if not addressed, regardless of whether the target attempts to withdraw or comply. Individuals who have previously experienced such treatment are often marginalized and their authority is constantly ignored, questioned or overridden when important decisions are made (Stalcup, 2012).

Definitions of *cyberbullying* commonly emphasize the use of digital technologies to carry out harmful behavior, which typically involves repeated actions, intent to cause harm, and an imbalance of power between the aggressor and the target (Farley et al., 2016). Cyber-incivility refers to disrespectful or inappropriate communication in digital interactions in the workplace that violates norms of mutual respect and is similar to face-to-face incivility, which involves low-level, ambiguous behaviors that may or may not cause harm (Anderson and Pearson, 1999). In contrast, cyberaggression is the intentional use of information and communication technologies to express harmful intentions towards others (Farley et al., 2016).

Covert and explicit forms of harassment involve persistent psychological manipulation aimed at creating self-doubt and insecurity in the target. *Sexual harassment* is a particular form of harmful behavior in the workplace that is based on a power imbalance (McDonald, 2012). Like general bullying, mobbing, racial harassment and gender-based exclusion or verbal abuse, it reflects underlying hierarchical dynamics. Unlike harassment based on ethnicity or disability, it is characterized by behavior that contains a sexual tone or suggestion (McDonald, 2012). *Mobbing* refers to a prolonged and repeated hostile behavior by a small group of individuals directed at one person, often occurring daily

over several months, with the intent or effect of isolating and disempowering the victim, possibly leading to his or her exclusion from the workplace (Leymann, 1996).

Harassment and bullying have long been issues in companies. This is often due to a lack of leadership, a high-pressure environment and stress in the workplace. These behaviors can take overt and covert forms, including unrealistic demands, abusive language, humiliation and coercion (Stephens, 1999). Bullying undermines team cohesion and individual well-being, with the effects extending beyond the workplace and into personal lives of employees. Victims may blame themselves or stay quiet because they are afraid of being punished, while others who see the behavior often do nothing, which helps the toxic culture continue (Cannon, 2022). Although bullying is sometimes misrepresented as “strong management”, it is characterized by disrespectful, unreasonable demands driven by the frustration or need for control of the bully (Cannon, 2022). In contrast, legitimate strong management involves constructive, respectful feedback. In toxic cultures, bullying may generate short-term approval, but in the long term, it fosters resentment, disengagement and resistance and ultimately damages organizational performance and morale (Cannon, 2022).

7.2.1.1.2 Toxic dynamics with stakeholders

Toxicity in the workplace can originate from different stakeholders within and outside the company.

Toxic conflict with supervisors represents a major component of toxicity in the workplace, particularly due to the inherent power imbalance in hierarchical structures. When supervisors abuse their authority, it creates an unfair dynamic in the workplace that significantly affects the psychological well-being, self-esteem and job satisfaction of employees (Tepper, 2000). Several factors contribute to the persistence of abusive relationships. Victims may stay because of perceived powerlessness, economic dependence, fear of uncertainty after separation, or temporary positive reinforcement from the abuser that provides hope for recovery (Tepper, 2000). Abusers rarely admit or correct their behavior, which limits the effectiveness of interventions (Tepper, 2000). In organizational contexts, abusive supervision manifests through public criticism, angry outbursts, rudeness, inconsiderate actions, and coercion (Tepper, 2000).

Such abuse of power manifests itself in various harmful behaviors, including *micromanagement*, which is a toxic leadership style characterized by excessive supervision and control over minute details in the workplace (Allcorn, 2022). Employees who are exposed to micromanagement lose their personal autonomy, self-confidence and self-efficacy, leading to psychological stress and diminished interpersonal boundaries (Allcorn, 2022). Closely related to this is *controlling management*, where overly rigid and inflexible supervision restricts the freedom of choice and professional development of employees.

In addition, the power dynamic can lead to damaging forms of psychological manipulation, such as gaslighting. Sweet (2019) conceptualizes *gaslighting* as a form of sociological abuse rooted in social inequalities. It involves the abuser manipulating employees into doubting their perceptions, memories or even their mental health, thus reinforcing their subordinate status and reducing their ability to resist or challenge toxic treatment effectively.

Farrell et al. (2015) identify four key facets of power in relationships that are highly relevant to organizational contexts: *domain-specific influence, control over decision making, the role of interdependence, and the ability to resist influence*, which can sometimes manifest as subversive behavior. These dimensions of power can provide fertile ground for coercion and toxicity, especially when reciprocity is no longer present. Power mapping, proposed by Tang (2022), is a useful tool to visualize influence and support in organizations and highlight imbalances that can lead to dysfunction. Power in organizations is exercised both formally, through rules, policies and authority, and informally, through access to resources, knowledge and networks. While contemporary leadership increasingly relies on soft power, the latent threat of sanctions remains pervasive. The imbalance in the relationship between effort and reward, particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, has led to a sense of injustice and growing unrest. The dimension of power distance of Hofstede also illustrates how unequal power dynamics can favor entitlement or authoritarian leadership (Hofstede, 1991). Overcontrolling leaders, often driven by fear or arrogance, suppress innovation and undermine team morale by limiting initiative and adaptive thinking (Cannon, 2022).

Favoritism is the granting of privileges in employment, career advancement, and personnel decisions based on personal relationships, including nepotism (i.e. favoring

relatives) (Arasli and Tumer, 2008). Such practices have a negative impact on the recruitment and selection of employees, as relationships are prioritized over competence, resulting in the hiring of individuals who do not have sufficient skills and knowledge. This undermines organizational fairness, reduces employee motivation, disrupts workplace harmony and leads to inefficiencies in training and development (Arasli and Tumer, 2008). In addition, favoritism can lead to conflict between existing employees and new employees who benefit from personal relationships. Problems with pay structures, incentives and benefits can worsen employee relations, performance and morale, potentially leading to resignations and negative word of mouth from disgruntled employees. Ultimately, favoritism does significant damage to the operations and reputation of the company (Arasli and Tumer, 2008).

Supervisors may also *strategically use exclusion and poor communication* to maintain control, which fosters an environment characterized by uncertainty, mistrust, and lower organizational commitment (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). Finally, *misattribution of work*, such as, when supervisors take credit for successes of their subordinates or blame them for failures, further deteriorates organizational relationships and increases feelings of unfairness and emotional exhaustion among employees (Crant and Bateman, 1993).

Toxic conflict between colleagues is another common form of interpersonal toxicity in the workplace. These conflicts can arise from competition for resources, different work styles, misunderstandings or conflicting values. In high-pressure environments, competition among colleagues can escalate into rivalry, exclusion or sabotage, especially if the corporate culture emphasizes individual performance over collaboration. Tensions can also arise from an unfair distribution of workload, favoritism or lack of recognition. If left unresolved, conflicts among colleagues can undermine team cohesion, foster resentment and damage trust between employees. In some cases, this leads to passive-aggressive behavior, gossip or withdrawal of social support, further isolating employees and undermining psychological safety.

On the other hand, *positive coworker relationships* can be an important buffer against dissatisfaction and stress in the workplace. Well-integrated networks of colleagues contribute to higher job satisfaction and less stress. Such peer support promotes greater job satisfaction, lower stress levels and higher engagement. Structured opportunities for

employee involvement and autonomy are also associated with higher self-efficacy, motivation and general well-being (Chamberlain and Hodson, 2010).

Micro-organizational toxicity can also occur in positions where people interact with people outside the organization, especially in jobs that involve frequent contact with customers. In these situations, employees often have to control their emotions and hide how they really feel in order to follow company rules. This emotional effort can lead to exhaustion and additional stress (Chamberlain and Hodson, 2010). Tension can also arise from interactions with people outside the organization, such as customers, suppliers, regulators, or community members. These groups may have different demands or create pressures that make tasks of employees more difficult. If these relationships are not managed well, employees may become frustrated, face ethical issues or be unsure of their responsibilities, especially if expectations are unclear or company actions are inconsistent. To reduce conflict and protect psychological well-being, it is important to communicate respectfully and transparently both inside and outside the organization.

7.2.1.1.3 Retaliation and psychological unsafety

Workplace retaliation discourages employees from openly voicing concerns or dissenting opinions and creates a climate of fear and silence. Retaliation, which ranges from explicit punishments such as demotions or firings to more slight forms such as ignoring or ostracizing employees who speak up, has a profound impact on organizational transparency, employee morale, and ethical behavior (Cortina and Magley, 2003). Morrison and Milliken (2000) argue that widespread silence can occur in organizations when employees expect negative consequences for voicing concerns, so critical issues are not addressed for fear of retaliation, which greatly hinders organizational learning and adaptation. Similarly, Morrison (2014) emphasizes the importance of *psychological safety*, highlighting that the perceived risk of retaliation significantly limits the proactive voice of employees, which ultimately weakens organizational effectiveness and innovation. Perceived psychological safety refers to how safe people feel when they speak up without fear of negative consequences. When people feel psychologically safe, they are less likely to remain silent. In an environment where employees feel safe, there tends to be less collective silence (Perlow and Williams, 2003). People tend to remain silent to avoid situations where they could be embarrassed or drawn into confrontation. Silence

serves as a protective mechanism to maintain personal and professional decorum (Perlow and Williams, 2003). Consequently, a retaliatory organizational climate harms individual employees and also undermines the health of the organization in general. This underscores the need to develop structures and cultures that actively promote safe and open communication (Detert and Burris, 2007). Dealing with retaliation is therefore critical to fostering healthy communication dynamics and strengthening the integrity of the organization.

Employees may experience retaliation when they perceive negative actions against them as a direct response to their opposition to an employment practice. Retaliation is divided into two categories (Cortina and Magley, 2003): *Workplace Retaliation Victimization (WRV)* and *Social Retaliation Victimization (SRV)*. WRV refers to adverse, tangible work-related actions such as dismissal, demotion, involuntary reassignment, or denial of opportunities, usually taken by supervisors or individuals in positions of authority with the goal or effect of negatively changing the job of the target. Cortina and Magley (2003, p. 248) define it as “adverse work-related actions that have the purpose or effect of negatively altering the target’s job and that are intended by the instigator or perceived by the target to be a reprisal for the target’s behavior”. In contrast, SRV includes less formal, often undocumented antisocial behaviors such as harassment, ostracism, threats, or silence that damage the interpersonal relationships of the target within the organization. According to the authors (2003, p. 248), “social retaliation victimization (SRV) involves antisocial behaviors that have the purpose or effect of negatively altering the target’s interpersonal relations with other organizational members and that are intended by the instigator or perceived by the target to be a reprisal for the target’s behavior”.

7.2.1.2 Macro-organizational toxicity

Macro-organizational toxicity refers to broad organizational issues that create a harmful organizational culture and environment, including leadership and organizational decisions, policies and norms that contribute to negatively affect the organization. Indicators of toxic macro-organizational cultures are often the suppression of open dialog and the presence of dysfunctional dynamics that hinder performance (Cannon, 2022). In environments dominated by narcissistic leaders, honesty is often discouraged, leading to

servile behavior and fear-driven obedience among subordinates (Cannon, 2022). Toxicity is aggravated when cultural frictions, manifested in excessive bureaucracy, rigid norms or pronounced power imbalances, disrupt the alignment between organizational culture and strategic goals (Cannon, 2022). Harrison (1972) distinguishes four orientations in his typology of organizational cultures: *power*, *role*, *task* and *people*. *Power-oriented cultures* emphasize control, often through positional authority or charisma; *role-oriented cultures* rely on hierarchical structures and formal rules; *task-oriented cultures* prioritize flexibility and goal achievement; and *people-oriented cultures* emphasize collaboration and mutual respect. When these orientations are unbalanced or misaligned, especially in power- or rigid role-oriented systems, the risk of toxic behaviors and organizational inefficiency increases.

According to Cannon (2022), various organizational indicators such as turnover, absenteeism and grievances can indicate the presence of a toxic workplace culture. High turnover can indicate a dysfunctional climate, especially when exit reasons such as “personal problems” or “better pay” mask a deeper dissatisfaction with leadership or the organizational environment. Similarly, absenteeism, while not always illness-related, is often a sign of lack of commitment, low morale or resistance to toxic dynamics such as office politics, lack of autonomy or excessive performance demands. Patterns in absenteeism, such as spikes on Mondays and Fridays or avoidance behavior during probationary periods, may reflect negative cultural norms or fear-based management. A study by Pfeiffer (2010) examined the relationship between absenteeism and income and found that the impact of absenteeism varies depending on the type of job. In terms of operations, absenteeism can cause significant disruption, especially when it comes to critical employees at key stages of their work, which ultimately affects the performance of the organization. In parallel, the shift from presenteeism toward results-based appraisals has brought new stressors to many workplaces, particularly in hyper-connected, “always-on” cultures where the boundaries between work and personal life are increasingly blurred. Grievances, especially informal ones, serve as sensitive indicators of cultural health. In toxic work environments, people often ignore problems until they grow into serious scandals involving bad behavior or ethical violations. These problems tend to worsen when leaders remain passive or when power is unequally distributed. Willful blindness, when people choose to ignore or hide misconduct, makes

the situation worse. It disrupts trust, prevents accountability, and increases employee frustration and disengagement (Cannon, 2022).

Macro-organizational toxicity arises from the structure and dynamics within organizations that influence relationships and roles (Chamberlain and Hodson, 2010). Understanding these aspects requires recognizing the organizational context in which they arise (Bennett and Lehman, 1999). Healthy organizations are efficient, well integrated, and support vital subsystems such as recruitment and development that enable effective problem solving and task performance (Cox, 2000). In contrast, organizational chaos occurs when production systems are ineffective or poorly managed (Chamberlain and Hodson, 2010). In addition, bureaucratic organizations face complex, conflicting environmental factors that can heighten internal confusion. Stability and security are also critical to organizational health, as instability and job insecurity can increase stress, with the lack of job security often being more stressful than unemployment itself (Chamberlain and Hodson, 2010).

In this sense, leadership and organizational culture play a critical role in mitigating these toxic conditions. Organizational deviance is often a sign of broader failure or leadership weakness. For example, high levels of deviance in production (e.g. negligence, absenteeism) can indicate disengagement and dissatisfaction. Similarly, deviance in property (e.g. theft or sabotage) may indicate that employees feel undervalued or mistreated (Robinson and Bennett, 1995).

7.2.1.2.1 Toxic leadership

Leadership research has traditionally focused on identifying effective leaders and positive leadership models such as *transformational, ethical, and authentic leadership*, primarily examining how such behaviors improve employee engagement and organizational outcomes (Schyns and Schilling, 2013). However, there are also a number of studies that shed light on the darker side of leadership and show that not all leaders act in ways that benefit their employees or organizations. *Destructive leadership*, defined as persistent and hostile behavior by leaders towards subordinates, has attracted increasing attention due to its alarming prevalence and severe consequences (Schyns and Schilling, 2013). Research shows that a significant number of employees are exposed to destructive leadership behaviors that are associated with numerous negative consequences, including

emotional exhaustion, resistance, deviant workplace behavior, and lower job satisfaction (Schyns and Schilling, 2013). These effects contribute to the creation and perpetuation of toxic work environments characterized by diminished well-being, organizational dysfunction, and significant economic costs (Schyns and Schilling, 2013).

Narcissistic leaders are self-absorbed, constantly seeking attention and tend to disregard the views or welfare of others. They often consider themselves particularly knowledgeable or privileged and expect unquestioning obedience from others. Their strong sense of entitlement can lead to self-serving and abusive use of power, and their leadership style is typically autocratic. Driven by grandiose visions of power and success, they often ignore external realities and overestimate their judgment, resulting in strategies that are difficult or impossible to implement effectively (Padilla et al., 2007). Narcissism has been identified as a major cause of destructive leadership behavior, and research suggests that it is a leading cause of toxic behavior in leaders (Higgs, 2009). Narcissistic leaders often exhibit traits that they share with psychopathy and sociopathy, such as lack of empathy, emotional coldness, and disregard for social norms or consequences. They are preoccupied with their own superiority, power, and recognition and tend to exploit others for personal gain while silencing dissent and surrounding themselves with sycophants (Cannon, 2022). Such leaders often respond to criticism with hostility or punishment, which makes people feel insecure and afraid to speak up. They may have an exaggerated view of themselves and constantly seek admiration, but at the same time, they are emotionally fragile. When their authority is challenged or their weaknesses are exposed, narcissists may react with aggression, denial or psychological breakdown. Such behavior undermines trust and collaboration and also promotes fear, conformity and dysfunctionality within the organizational culture (Cannon, 2022).

Leadership practices play a central role in shaping the organizational environment and have a significant impact on employee behavior, employee satisfaction and organizational outcomes. Toxic leadership refers specifically to leadership styles characterized by abusive behaviors, manipulation, intimidation, and unethical behavior that foster a hostile or oppressive work climate (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Leaders who regularly engage in abusive supervision, manifested in hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors such as humiliation, public ridicule, and threats, can seriously undermine psychological well-being, productivity, and commitment to the organization (Tepper, 2000; Schyns and

Schilling, 2013). Toxic leadership also often involves retaliation against employees who voice dissent, further entrenching a culture of fear and silence (Cortina and Magley, 2003; Detert and Burris, 2007). Such retaliation includes punitive actions such as demotions, unfair performance evaluations, exclusion from important information or projects, and even dismissals (Cortina and Magley, 2003). This climate of retaliation discourages open communication, suppresses constructive employee voice, and can lead to increased turnover, decreased job satisfaction, increased stress levels, and ultimately organizational dysfunction (Detert and Burris, 2007; Morrison and Milliken, 2000). Companies need to promote ethical leadership, create clear channels of communication and put safeguards in place to ensure that employees can speak out safely without fear of retaliation (Detert and Burris, 2007).

Toxic leadership is characterized by behaviors that undermine trust, commitment, morale and productivity and often result in employees leaving their managers rather than the company (Cannon, 2022). Bad leaders suppress enthusiasm, reward the wrong behaviors, undermine culture, and foster mistrust. Such leaders often react defensively to criticism and may exhibit overconfidence, arrogance, and a lack of self-awareness, which can lead to unethical or abusive behavior (Cannon, 2022). Toxic leaders are not only detrimental to individual well-being but also shape company culture by normalizing destructive behaviors. Their actions can provoke imitation among subordinates, reinforcing a cycle of toxicity (Cannon, 2022). Sustainable leadership requires emotional intelligence, ethical standards and a commitment to inclusion and accountability, elements that are increasingly expected in the age of ESG and stakeholder scrutiny (Cannon, 2022).

Effective leadership relies on the ability to both influence and persuade through a balance of high expectations and genuine personal connection (Cannon, 2022). Successful leaders inspire individuals to push beyond their perceived limits while fostering trust, belonging and psychological safety within the team. In contrast, toxic leaders, such as bullies or narcissists, lack empathy and damage trust (Cannon, 2022). At the core of an influential leader is the ability to listen deeply and engage in generative dialog that fosters mutual understanding and strengthens conscientiousness, a trait that is closely linked to performance. The key point is that a reaction of a leader at critical moments has a significant impact on the organizational culture and can either strengthen or undermine it (Cannon, 2022).

7.2.1.2.2 Toxic organizational culture

Organizational culture is a deeply embedded system of shared meanings, values, and beliefs that shape the way members interpret experiences, solve problems, and behave at work (Cannon, 2022). Culture is not just what is visible on the surface but reflects the collective way in which people make sense of the world (Trompenaars, 1996). It influences decision making, motivation and organizational actions and often surpasses strategic initiatives in its impact on performance. Defined by Williams (1993) as the relatively stable and commonly held attitudes within an organization, culture serves as both a source of satisfaction and conflict. Furthermore, organizational culture extends beyond the workplace and influences broader societal norms through the diffusion of corporate logics and management values (Cannon, 2022).

A toxic organizational culture is often characterized by deeply embedded norms, values and practices that create a dysfunctional work environment. Indicators include a *poor communication culture* characterized by a lack of transparency, listening and consistent messaging, as well as emotional suppression where employees are discouraged from expressing their feelings. Poor communication cultures are characterized by a lack of transparency, inconsistent messaging and ineffective listening, create uncertainty, that reduce trust and diminish overall organizational effectiveness (e.g. Men and Stacks, 2014). In addition, *organizational hostility*, defined as pervasive antagonism or conflict among employees, harms interpersonal relationships, increases stress levels, and negatively impacts organizational commitment and productivity (Einarsen et al., 2020). *Internal competition*, especially when it is intense and uncontrolled, often creates an atmosphere of cut-throat competition that discourages collaboration and encourages unethical behavior as employees place personal gain above shared success (Benndorf and Rau, 2012). Hostility and internal competition further fuel conflict and undermine collaboration, while a lack of psychological safety discourages employees from speaking up or taking risks.

Furthermore, the lack of *psychological safety* suppresses employee voice, reduces innovation and limits learning within organizations (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson and Lei, 2014). Similarly, *limited employee autonomy*, reflected in limited decision-making authority and control over work tasks, is closely related to increased psychological

distress, lower job satisfaction and higher turnover (Chamberlain and Hodson, 2010). Low employee autonomy and high turnover rates contribute to instability and disengagement. High turnover rates in organizations, often indicative of broader problems such as inconsistent policies, unethical incentive structures and poor management practices, lead to instability and significant operational disruption. High turnover rates are a common and costly consequence of toxic work environments where persistent dysfunctionality, poor leadership and employee mistreatment lead to employees leaving the organization (Hancock et al., 2013). In knowledge-based economies, this turnover is particularly damaging as departing employees take with them specialized skills, organizational memory, and valuable social networks (Hancock et al., 2013). The costs associated with high turnover go beyond recruitment and training costs to include a decline in productivity, customer service, and overall organizational performance (Hancock et al., 2013). From a cost, human capital, and social capital perspective, turnover undermines the core competencies of the organization and disrupts team cohesion. In toxic environments where psychological safety is compromised, employees are more likely to disengage and leave the organization, increasing instability and further weakening the morale of those who stay (Hancock et al., 2013).

Structural issues such as unethical incentive systems, inconsistent policies and a lack of meaningful DE&I initiatives, including lack of representation, tokenism and performative diversity efforts, exacerbate inequality and reinforce exclusion. Together, these elements create an environment that is detrimental to both employee well-being and organizational effectiveness.

Organizational culture, understood as the collective values, norms and behaviors that influence how employees interpret and respond to challenges within the organization (Schein, 1992), plays a crucial role in shaping decision-making and communication. It is typically characterized by four core dimensions, i.e. *employee involvement, internal consistency, adaptability, and a clear organizational mission statement*. Organizational culture has a significant impact on the extent to which workplaces become toxic environments. In organizations, extreme or toxic behaviors are often rationalized by individuals and groups in order to maintain a coherent internal logic (Cannon, 2022). This sense-making process, shaped by the influence of the perpetrator and the resonance of the incident with others, gradually normalizes behaviors that may initially seem irrational or

inappropriate (Cannon, 2022). Over time, cultural norms become internalized through shared interpretations and language, even if they seem absurd or dysfunctional to outsiders. Organizational culture manifests itself through visible artifacts, shared values, and underlying assumptions, all of which are socially constructed and reinforced through relationships, language, and daily practices (Schein, 1992). Even though culture is not experienced the same way by all members, toxic individuals often show a greater discrepancy between how they perceive themselves and how others experience their behavior (Cannon, 2022). Justifications such as claims of authenticity or toughness are used to legitimize antagonistic actions, contributing to a broader toxic dynamic that becomes embedded in the organizational fabric (Cannon, 2022).

An alternative approach to understanding organizational culture is to examine the interplay between *formal and informal systems* and their influence on outcomes. *Formal culture elements*, such as structures, strategies, policies, processes, and systems, serve as important drivers of organizational behavior (Cannon, 2022). Poor structures, rigid rules and outdated strategies can lead to role confusion, waste resources and block collaboration. Errors often occur at the edges of departments, and inflexible technologies make it difficult to adapt. Taken together, these formal elements have a strong influence on how organizational culture works in practice, for better or for worse (Cannon, 2022).

Informal cultural elements in organizations, such as leadership style, values, beliefs, and norms, are ambiguous and subject to different interpretations, but play a critical role in shaping workplace behaviors and dynamics (Cannon, 2022). Leadership can inspire or harm, and symbols of power can motivate or push people away. Public values often differ from what happens in practice, especially when bad behavior is rewarded. When personal and organizational values clash, employees can feel frustrated or disengaged. Beliefs of people influence how they view the organization and are difficult to change once internalized. These values and beliefs form shared norms that can lead to tension or toxic behavior if they are enforced or inconsistent. Ultimately, a strong and healthy culture relies on both formal systems and the authenticity of these informal elements (Cannon, 2022). In this sense, an important element is the psychological contract, which refers to the unwritten, evolving expectations between employer and employee that are shaped by past experiences, cultural norms and trust. Unlike formal rules and policies, the psychological contract is based on reciprocity and informal agreements and forms the

basis for collaboration in the workplace without constant negotiation (Cannon, 2022). Trust is key: employees may trust close colleagues more than distant managers or leaders, and breaches of trust can undermine this implicit agreement. Organizational changes such as shift reductions, and short-term contracts have altered the psychological contract by emphasizing flexibility and reducing long-term loyalty (Cannon, 2022). While traditional contracts offered job security in return for commitment, modern arrangements often favor autonomy and mobility, sometimes at the expense of trust and commitment (Cannon, 2022). This shift leads to performance volatility and challenges in maintaining organizational cohesion, especially when long-term relationships give way to transactional ones. This has implications for motivation, retention and adaptability in dynamic work environments (Cannon, 2022).

7.2.2 Effects of toxicity

The consequences of a toxic work environment can be grouped into two main areas: personal- and work-related impacts of toxicity. Personal-related impacts include issues such as discrimination, mental health issues and burnout, while work-related impacts include an unmanageable workload, work-life imbalance, career dissatisfaction and reduced productivity.

7.2.2.1 Personal-related impacts of toxicity

At the personal level, workplace toxicity can have a wide range of symptoms, including psychological, emotional, behavioral, attitudinal, cognitive and physiological effects. Employees may experience psychological issues such as depression, anxiety and burnout, as well as emotional reactions such as negative moods, fear, shame and anger. These symptoms can lead to a decline in self-esteem, self-efficacy and motivation. Over time, organizations that suffer from widespread toxicity also face reduced functioning and increased financial costs. Managing toxicity in the workplace is important for the well-being of the individual and also to prevent wider, more damaging consequences for the organization (McCulloch, 2016).

Behavioral symptoms of toxicity in the workplace include decreased interaction, cooperation, and work effectiveness as workers withdraw (e.g. Chamberlain and Hodson, 2010). Increased interpersonal hostility, complaints and accidents are also common (e.g. Appelbaum and Roy-Girard, 2007). Employees may show lower job satisfaction, lower commitment to the organization and a higher intention to quit (McCulloch, 2016).

Cognitive symptoms include impaired judgment, concentration problems, memory loss, and heightened awareness of surroundings, which may increase anxiety (e.g. Appelbaum and Roy-Girard, 2007). Physical symptoms can include muscle tension, pain, ulcers, heart attacks and nausea (McCulloch, 2016).

7.2.2.1.1 Discrimination

Toxicity in the workplace significantly undermines inner experiences and psychological well-being of employees. A critical dimension of this toxicity is *workplace discrimination*, which is characterized by unfair treatment based on identity characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, age, disability, religion, or intersections between these identities (e.g. Cortina et al., 2013). *Gender discrimination* manifests in differential treatment based on gender identity or stereotypical roles, which often limits career advancement and contributes to stress and emotional exhaustion (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). Discrimination based on *ethnicity* similarly impacts the employee experience, leading to increased stress, decreased organizational commitment, and emotional distress (Triana et al., 2015). *Ageism* affects both younger and older employees. It limits opportunities and creates feelings of marginalization, which negatively impact job satisfaction and mental health (Shore and Goldberg, 2013). Employees with *disabilities* also often encounter negative assumptions or barriers that intensify workplace stress and undermine their mental well-being and inclusion in the workplace (Jones, 2016). *Religious* discrimination is associated with prejudice based on beliefs or practices that can marginalize employees and reduce a sense of belonging and inclusion (Ghumman et al., 2013). Furthermore, *intersectionality* highlights how intersecting identities, such as ethnicity and gender, mutually reinforce discriminatory experiences and deepen emotional harm and professional disadvantage (Rosette et al., 2016).

Attitudes towards human differences, especially ethnicity and gender, are often formed early in life through family and cultural influences, are deeply ingrained and resistant to

change. When there is strong group solidarity within organizations or societies, those who are perceived as outsiders may be subject to prejudice, especially when it comes to differences in ethnicity (Cannon, 2022). While social belonging is natural, it can also reinforce exclusionary thinking and normalize discriminatory behavior within organizational cultures. It is therefore important to address this dynamic at both an individual and institutional level (Cannon, 2022).

7.2.2.1.2 Mental health issues

Another important aspect that affects employees is the impact on mental health when they are constantly exposed to a toxic work environment. Employees often struggle with anxiety, constant worry and chronic stress caused by negative interactions in the workplace (Harvey et al., 2017). When employees face constant pressure or discrimination, they can develop emotional exhaustion and burnout, which is detrimental to their physical health, emotional balance and work performance (Maslach et al., 2001). Those who feel emotionally isolated, especially without support from colleagues or supervisors, face even greater risks, such as disengagement, lower productivity and deteriorating mental health.

These challenges underscore the need to create an inclusive, supportive and psychologically safe workplace to reduce discrimination and protect mental health. This strengthens both individual well-being and overall organizational performance.

7.2.2.1.3 Burnout

Burnout is a prolonged psychological response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stress at work, characterized by three dimensions: *exhaustion*, *cynicism (or depersonalization)*, and *inefficacy* (Maslach et al., 2001). Exhaustion often leads individuals to emotionally and cognitively detach from their work as a coping mechanism. This detachment manifests as cynicism, which is seen in human service roles as depersonalization toward clients or as indifference in other occupations. These two components are closely linked, with cynicism often developing as a direct reaction to exhaustion. Inefficacy, or a reduced sense of personal accomplishment, may result from exhaustion and cynicism or develop independently due to a lack of resources. While exhaustion and cynicism are typically driven by work overload and social conflict,

inefficacy is often rooted in insufficient support and opportunities for achievement (Maslach et al., 2001). High stress further intensifies burnout by diminishing resilience, promoting psychological distress, and negatively influencing overall health of the employee (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007).

In order to buffer the effects of burnout, perceived organizational support and appropriate support from superiors and colleagues are of crucial importance. Employees who perceive insufficient social support are at greater risk for emotional exhaustion and burnout due to their diminished coping resources and limited opportunities to recover from workplace stressors (Bakker et al., 2005; Halbesleben, 2006). Thus, addressing excessive workloads, alleviating chronic stress, and strengthening organizational support systems are crucial strategies for preventing burnout and maintaining a healthy, productive workforce. When burnout is widespread and untreated, it is a sign of a toxic work environment where chronic stress, emotional exhaustion and lack of support are normal and seriously undermine the well-being of employees and the functioning of the organization.

7.2.2.2 Work-related impacts of toxicity

Toxic work-related aspects have a significant negative impact on employees. These include an unmanageable workload, an imbalance between work and private life, reduced productivity and career dissatisfaction.

7.2.2.2.1 Unmanageable workload

Research (e.g. Bakker and Demerouti, 2007) has shown that the nature of work characteristics significantly affects the well-being of employees and creates the conditions for the spread of toxicity. In particular, high job demands, such as high work pressure, emotional demands and role ambiguity, are associated with negative outcomes such as sleep disturbance, fatigue and a deterioration in health. In contrast, the presence of work resources, such as supportive colleagues, constructive feedback and autonomy, can promote a positive motivational process that improves learning, engagement and retention (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007).

Workload includes all tasks and responsibilities that demand time and effort from employees in fulfilling their job role, both during and outside normal working hours (Johari et al., 2018). *Unmanageable workload* is a critical occupational condition characterized by inadequacies in organizations that significantly impact employee well-being and productivity and directly contribute to the creation of toxic work environments. When employees are confronted with excessive demands, a climate of chronic stress, fatigue and emotional exhaustion often arises (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli et al., 2009). Such work demands are often the result of excessive tasks or extended work hours that go beyond reasonable expectations, causing chronic stress and increasing the risk of burnout (e.g. Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli et al., 2009). These conditions undermine well-being and productivity and also foster an environment in which toxic behaviors can emerge or be reinforced.

Unclear expectations and role ambiguity further worsened the negative consequences of workload, leading to employee confusion, lower motivation, decreased job satisfaction, and increased turnover intentions (Eatough et al., 2011). Role stressors include *role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload* (Eatough et al., 2011). Role ambiguity occurs when employees are confronted with unclear or vague expectations that leave them unclear about their responsibilities. Role conflict occurs when employees are confronted with incompatible demands from colleagues that hinder the completion of tasks. Role overload refers to the perception that work demands exceed the available time, skills or resources of employees, resulting in a feeling of being overwhelmed (Eatough et al., 2011). Similarly, *unrealistic deadlines* exert significant psychological pressure on employees, creating an environment characterized by persistent stress and anxiety, which ultimately affects performance and contributes to emotional exhaustion. If these chronic stressors are not addressed, they create fertile ground for a toxic work environment where strain, confusion and frustration become the norm and employee well-being is systematically undermined.

Furthermore, *ineffective or stressful production processes*, including *incoherent scheduling* and *overly rigid control systems*, amplify workplace stress by limiting employee autonomy and creating inflexible working conditions that hinder adaptability and resilience (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Inadequate supervision, characterized by insufficient managerial guidance and support, leaves employees vulnerable to confusion,

errors, and frustration, which further deteriorates their performance and psychological well-being (Gilbreath and Benson, 2004). In addition, a lack of key resources and training prevents employees from effectively meeting job demands, which increases stress and decreases organizational commitment (Bakker et al., 2004). When such inadequacies persist, they contribute to the development of a toxic work environment characterized by chronic stress, disempowerment, and lack of engagement.

Stress and overwork are major causes of toxic behavior in the workplace, often showing up as irritability, rudeness, and emotional reactions like spreading rumors, speaking badly about coworkers, or talking down to others. These behaviors, while less overt than bullying or harassment, can be just as damaging and are difficult to address through formal mechanisms (Cannon, 2022). Poor leadership further promotes toxicity by encouraging homogeneity and promoting less competent individuals in order to maintain authority, leading to a long-term deterioration in team quality (Cannon, 2022). The “bad apple” theory highlights how a single disruptive factor can compromise group effectiveness, particularly in the absence of a psychologically safe environment (e.g. Mitchell and Holloway, 2009; Cannon, 2022). When this dynamic continues over a long period of time, it contributes to the creation and reinforcement of a toxic work environment in which negative behaviors are normalized and difficult to challenge. However, research also shows that inclusive, safe and purposeful leadership can prevent toxicity and significantly improve team cohesion and performance. Ultimately, the presence or absence of such leadership plays a critical role in shaping organizational culture and resilience (Cannon, 2022).

7.2.2.2.2 Work-life imbalance

Work-life balance is generally understood to mean the harmonious integration of work and private life in which the individual feels comfortable and satisfied in both areas (Johari et al., 2018). It is based on the idea that work and private life complement each other and contribute to a fulfilling life. Achieving this balance benefits both employees and organizations, as it increases motivation, reduces stress and is associated with higher productivity and lower absenteeism and turnover (Byrne, 2005; Johari et al., 2018).

Conversely, an *imbalance between work and private life* is characterized by a blurring of the boundaries between professional obligations and private life. This contributes

significantly to employee stress, lower job satisfaction and reduced overall well-being (Sirgy and Lee, 2018). Work-life balance includes two main aspects: engagement in both work and personal life and a low level of conflict between the social roles associated with each domain (Sirgy and Lee, 2018). A clear manifestation of this imbalance is work-life interference, where the demands of the organization constantly intrude on personal time, undermining their ability to disengage from their work commitments and recover psychologically (Derks et al., 2015). Advances in technology have intensified this intrusion by encouraging the expectation of constant availability and responsiveness outside of official working hours, leading to ongoing stress and potential burnout (Derks et al., 2015).

The rise of remote working arrangements has further intensified the blurring boundaries between work and personal life. Remote work refers to “the possibility of performing the working activity at a distance, maintaining the same working schedule and tasks, using suitable computer tools and portable personal computers connected to the corporate services” (Fregnan et al., 2022; p. 9).

Remote work brings several challenges, including the risk of social isolation, an increased tendency towards workaholism and the experience of technostress. It also brings with it the potential loss of peer support, increased psychological distress due to the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life, and a decrease in informal interactions at work (Mazzei et al., 2023). Employees working remotely often struggle to define when work ends and personal life begins, leading to extended working hours and increased work-related stress (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). Social isolation is a common challenge of remote work and reduces opportunities for informal social interactions, weakens emotional support networks and contributes to loneliness and lower employee engagement (Toscano and Zappalà, 2020). Effectively addressing these challenges requires thoughtful organizational strategies, transparent communication, and the implementation of measures such as boundary management and proactive initiatives that prioritize employee well-being in remote work settings (Mazzei et al., 2023; Felstead and Henseke, 2017).

7.2.2.2.3 Reduced productivity and job performance

Job performance is the effectiveness of a person in carrying out work tasks using available resources (Johari et al., 2018). It is distinguished between *task performance*, that are contributions to the technical core of the organization, and *contextual performance*, which includes discretionary behaviors that support the social and psychological work environment (Johari et al., 2018). Factors that influence work performance include motivation, individual skills and the work environment. A supportive work environment is crucial. Poor conditions, such as a lack of autonomy, insufficient recognition or misallocated responsibilities, can reduce morale, increase pressure and hinder performance (Chandrasekar, 2011).

Toxic workplaces often lead to lower productivity as they reduce motivation, engagement and ability to work effectively. Environments with disrespectful behavior, too much pressure, limited independence, or abusive managers can seriously weaken the desire and energy of employees to do their jobs well (Porath and Pearson, 2010). Such negative conditions lead to emotional and cognitive disengagement characterized by a psychological withdrawal from work tasks and a reduced willingness to invest personal energy and enthusiasm in work tasks (Kahn, 1990; Saks, 2006; Schaufeli, 2013). Schaufeli (2013) specifically highlights employee engagement as a positive psychological state characterized by cognitive absorption, emotional dedication, and vigor, which is undermined in toxic workplaces, leading to lower employee engagement and productivity. Mazzei et al. (2019) further argue that clear, supportive and transparent communication within organizations is essential to maintain high employee engagement, while communication characterized by ambiguity or negativity fosters disengagement and disengagement. To maintain employee engagement, motivation and productivity, supportive leadership, clear and respectful communication and a strong focus on mental well-being are important (Mazzei et al., 2019; Schaufeli, 2013).

7.2.2.2.4 Career dissatisfaction

Career dissatisfaction in toxic workplaces is often due to a combination of factors that undermine job fulfillment and a sense of fairness. Individuals may feel that they are stagnant and unrecognized, that they have no opportunities to advance or improve their

skills. *Financial exploitation* further contributes to dissatisfaction as employees perceive themselves to be underpaid or expected to perform unpaid work beyond their official duties. Limited autonomy and a lack of decision-making power intensify these conditions, so that employees feel trapped in roles that do not satisfy them. In addition, *unfair access to promotions and rewards* reinforces feelings of inequality and deepens dissatisfaction and disengagement. Career dissatisfaction contributes significantly to perceptions of toxicity in the workplace and negatively impacts psychological well-being, organizational commitment and overall productivity (Bakker et al., 2004; Kalleberg, 2011).

Employees who experience *limited decision-making authority or autonomy* often report lower intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction, which leads to disengagement and turnover intentions. *Job autonomy* refers to the degree of freedom, independence and discretion that individuals have in planning their work and determining the procedures to carry it out (Johari et al., 2018). Autonomy is seen as an important factor for internal motivation and job performance as it promotes a sense of ownership of work outcomes (Johari et al., 2018). Furthermore, when organizations do not provide clear and meaningful paths for career development, employees often feel trapped or stagnant in roles that are perceived as unfulfilling or meaningless, which further increases dissatisfaction and psychological pressure (Bakker et al., 2004; Kalleberg, 2011). Autonomy in the workplace is associated with higher job satisfaction, engagement, involvement, motivation and performance, while reducing emotional distress, absenteeism and turnover. In addition, jobs that require skill and complexity, including working with people, data or objects, contribute to better outcomes for workers (Chamberlain and Hodson, 2010).

Perceived unfairness of organizational justice increases negative feelings in the workplace, which promotes employee cynicism, lower loyalty to the organization, and a higher likelihood of turnover (Colquitt et al., 2012). The organizational justice literature distinguishes between perceptions of fairness and mere satisfaction with outcomes, showing that fairness has a clear impact on important outcomes such as trust, organizational commitment, performance, and counterproductive behaviors. Originally, the focus was on distributive justice, which concerns the perceived fairness of outcome distribution based on equality, equity or necessity. Research then expanded to procedural justice, which emphasizes fair decision-making processes, and interactional justice,

which assesses the fairness of interpersonal treatment during these processes. Later distinctions separated interactional justice into interpersonal (respect and propriety) and informational (truthfulness and justification) dimensions (Colquitt et al., 2012).

Despite its critical role in shaping employee motivation, performance and retention, employee compensation remains an under-researched area of organizational behavior and HRM (Gupta and Shaw, 2014). Well-designed compensation systems can serve as a powerful lever to attract talent, reinforce desired behaviors, and increase job satisfaction. However, when poorly implemented, for example, through excessive pay differentials, unclear criteria or performance-based systems that encourage competition, they can also contribute to a toxic work environment. The effectiveness of compensation systems depends on their financial logic and also on how they are perceived and experienced by employees in their broader organizational and cultural context (Gupta and Shaw, 2014).

Financial exploitation further impacts career dissatisfaction, as the perception of being underpaid or having to work for free significantly undermines the sense of justice and fairness of employees. Underpayment relative to market standards or the expectation to perform tasks beyond contracted duties without adequate compensation increases feelings of exploitation and leads to resentment, burnout, declining morale and lower work engagement (Kalleberg, 2011; Gupta and Shaw, 2014). Addressing these conditions requires organizational commitment to equitable compensation structures, transparent promotion processes, and active investment in employee autonomy and professional growth opportunities to mitigate the harmful effects of job dissatisfaction and financial exploitation (Kalleberg, 2011; Gupta and Shaw, 2014).

7.3 Empirical research on toxic work environments

Building on this theoretical framework, this study examines how employees respond to toxic work environments, focusing on their communicative behavior, i.e., their voice, silence or dissent up to exit. While previous research has focused primarily on the cultural dimensions of toxic workplaces (e.g. Appelbaum and Roy-Girard, 2007; Rasool et al., 2021), less attention has been paid to the experiences and the strategic choices employees make in toxic work environments. Rather than viewing employees as passive recipients

of toxic dynamics, this research examines how they handle these environments through defensive or expressive strategies. These may involve remaining silent out of fear or retaliation, voicing their concerns internally or externally, facing the problem, or deciding to leave the organization. Such reactions are not just behavioral responses, but strategic and often emotionally charged decisions that are shaped by contextual factors, personal values, and the perceived risks and benefits of speaking out. The study also examines how employees interpret the reactions of managers and the company to their concerns, whether they perceive support and responsiveness, indifference and inaction, or even punitive retaliation. These perceptions influence the willingness of employees to act and their sense of psychological safety and trust in the organization.

The aim of the study is twofold. First, it aims to contribute to theory by expanding knowledge about the communicative behavior of employees under toxic conditions. It examines how organizational toxicity impacts voice-related processes and explores defensive silence and expression of dissent. Second, the study offers practical insights for organizations by analyzing employee responses and organizational action or inaction. In particular, the study aims to show how failures to listen and provide managerial support can contribute to employee disengagement, silence or exit, and how organizations can constructively intervene before situations escalate publicly or lead to the loss of human capital. Therefore, the study helps to promote internal strategies that enhance psychological safety, trust and accountability in response to toxicity in the workplace.

7.4 Methodology

Building on the literature review, the researcher identified several recurring factors of toxic work environments that had previously received little empirical attention. To address these gaps, the researcher developed an online survey to explore how employees experience and respond to toxic work dynamics through communication. The questionnaire combined one open question with closed-ended questions to capture how individuals perceive, cope with and make sense of toxicity in their work environment, and it was administered on Reddit communities. In particular, the open-ended question asked participants to report a toxic work situation they had personally experienced. These stories were rich, detailed and emotionally charged and showed that the participants had

a strong need to express themselves. They used the space to describe what had happened and to make sense of their experiences.

Given the depth of these responses, the researcher also opted to conduct a qualitative content analysis, which allowed for a detailed examination of the themes and strategies that emerged from the data. The need of participants to share and make sense of their experiences, in many cases as a form of venting, underlines the importance of an interpretative qualitative approach. The next paragraphs describe the methodology used for the content analysis, including the development of the coding protocol, and provides all the details on the structure and content of the questionnaire.

Content analysis

As previously explained, the research design was adapted during the research process: what began as a purely quantitative study has expanded into a mixed methods approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative analysis to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how employees experience and respond to toxic work environments.

The qualitative component of the study relied on a structured content analysis (Kuckartz, 2014; Lewins and Silver, 2014) of the open-ended responses collected via the online survey. This part of the research aimed to explore the characteristics of toxic workplace dynamics and the communicative behaviors they trigger, specifically voice, silence, dissent, and exit strategies.

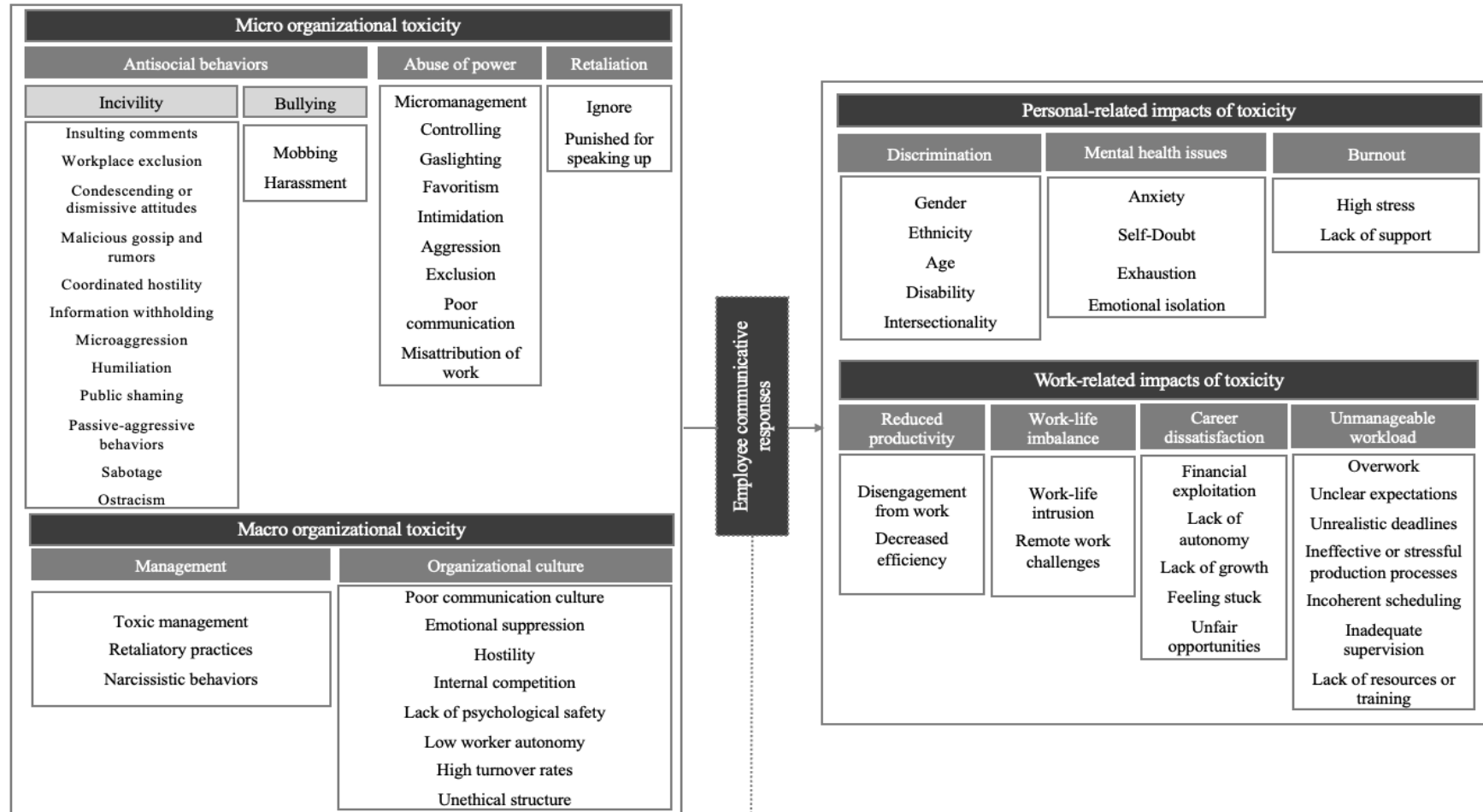
To guide the analysis, a theory-based codebook (Figure 15) was developed based on the existing literature on toxicity, considering the main causes at the micro- and macro-organizational levels and effects of toxicity in the workplace at the personal- and work-related levels. The codebook was hierarchically structured, comprised main categories and sub-categories and was initially applied using a deductive approach. In line with the methodological guidance of Kuckartz (2014), inductive codes were also created as new patterns and themes emerged directly from the data.

The researcher carried out the coding process using MAXQDA 24 software. Each response was first read in its entirety, and the relevant segments were then assigned to the appropriate codes using the “code and retrieve” function. After the first round of coding, the researcher systematically recoded the data to refine the application of the codes, improve consistency, and consolidate overlapping or unclear categories.

The coding and recoding process followed clear procedures to ensure consistency and maintain a balance between theoretical background and attention to the data.

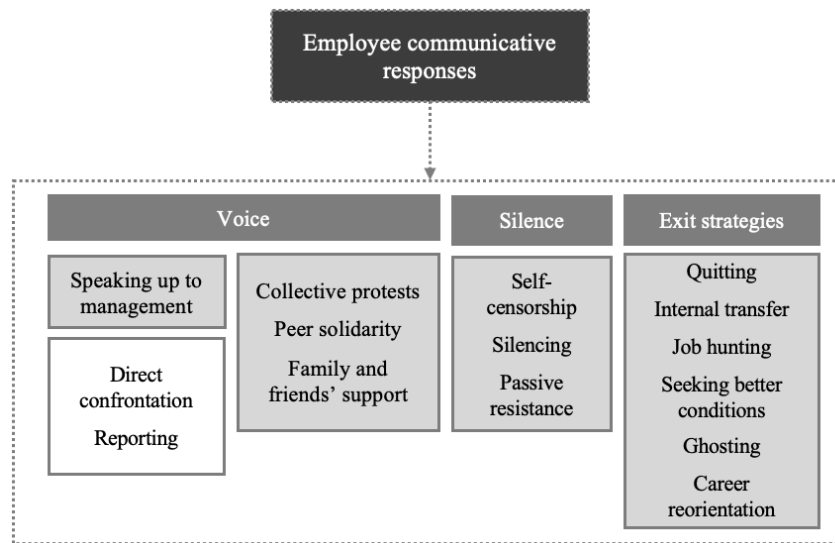
Figure 15 a and b show a visual representation of the main categories of the codebook and their subcategories.

Figure 15a. Codebook visual representation (*part 1*)



Source: own elaboration

Figure 15b. Codebook visual representation (*part 2*)



Source: own elaboration

Survey

The questionnaire included seven sections.

Section 1 included a filter question asking whether the respondent had ever worked in a toxic environment, followed by ten checklist items covering common toxic conditions (e.g. discrimination, burnout, antisocial behavior). It also included the open-ended question asking respondents to describe a specific situation in which they had experienced a toxic work environment.

Section 2 addressed a branching question, in which respondents were grouped according to how they responded to that specific situation, by speaking up, remaining silent, speaking only outside the organization, or both, inside and outside. Based on the communication response, the questionnaire was divided and filtered into four different parallel sections.

Section 3 addressed *silent behaviors*, both in and out of the workplace. Therefore, respondents were able to select aspects related to fear of retaliation (e.g. Morrison and Milliken 2000; Brinsfield, 2012), silence (Pinder and Harlos 2001), protection of professional relationships (Detert and Edmondson 2011), cultural background (Morrison and Milliken 2000) and psychological detachment from work (Sonnentag and Fritz,

2015). They were then asked to report the behavior of their manager in this situation, i.e. whether the manager noticed that something was wrong or tried to manage the situation.

Section 4 examined the voice behavior of employees outside of work who chose not to speak up within the organization. Here, the recipients of the voice are *family and friends* and *social media*. In both cases, the reasons for their expressions were explored. In the case of *family and friends*, several factors were considered, including preliminary venting (Kassing, 2008), the search for emotional support (Hamid and Othman, 2015; Kassing and Armstrong, 2002), the need for solidarity and shared understanding (Ravazzani and Mazzei, 2018), the lack of internal channels or organizational barriers to effective reporting (Kassing, 2008), and motivations related to revenge (Ravazzani and Mazzei, 2018). The items for *social media* were the same, but in this case, the desire to stimulate organizational and/or societal considerations was added (Ravazzani and Mazzei, 2018).

Section 5 explored the voice behavior of those who expressed their concerns at work to *managers or colleagues* but remained silent outside of work. Participants were asked to indicate the main reasons for expressing concerns to managers, selecting items from Garner (2009). In addition, following Garner (2014), they were asked about specific actions of managers related to the following items: *desire for openness* (i.e. manager supports dialog but may not take action), *instrumental support* (i.e. manager takes proactive steps to address concerns), *not within my power to act* (i.e. manager invokes constraints due to policy or hierarchy), *explain* (i.e. manager provides rationalizations but does not address concerns), and *rejection of dissent* (i.e. manager excludes dissent or retaliates). In terms of communicating with *colleagues*, participants were asked to indicate the main reasons, in terms of guiding, receiving advice, obtaining information, changing the mind of the audience, changing the behavior of the audience, obtaining help, and seeking emotional support (Goldman and Myers, 2015; Garner, 2009).

Finally, *Section 6* explored the overall voice of participants, i.e. those who expressed their concerns both in the workplace to *managers and/or colleagues* and outside the workplace to *family and friends and/or on social media*. Consistent with Section 5, participants were asked about the main reasons for expressing concerns to managers (Garner, 2009), specific actions taken by managers (Garner, 2014), and reasons for raising concerns with colleagues (Goldman and Myers, 2015; Garner, 2009). Consistent with Section 4, in the case of family and friends, items included preliminary venting (Kassing, 2008), the search

for emotional support (Hamid and Othman, 2015; Kassing and Armstrong, 2002), the need for solidarity and shared understanding (Ravazzani and Mazzei, 2018), the lack of internal channels or organizational barriers to effective reporting (Kassing, 2008), and motivations related to revenge (Ravazzani and Mazzei, 2018). The items for social media were the same, but also in this case, the desire to stimulate organizational and/or societal considerations was added (Ravazzani and Mazzei, 2018).

The questionnaire also explored exit strategies in each of the four parallel sections. Participants were asked if they were still working for the organization where the toxic situation occurred and if they had attempted to leave the company due to this situation. In addition, socio-demographic information about the company and the participant was requested in Section 7.

After ethics approval (Prot. n. 0034684), the survey was created in Google Forms and posted to relevant Reddit communities between April and June 2025. The survey was conducted on Reddit to reach a diverse and often underrepresented population and allow for the collection of rich, varied accounts of toxic experiences in the workplace. Moreover, the dedicated communities of the platform (e.g. r/toxicworkplace; r/workplacebullying; r/workplaceburnout; r/managedbynarcissists; r/antiwork; r/officepolitics; r/samplesize) provided a targeted and thematically relevant space to reach individuals directly exposed to such environments. In addition, the use of online communities aligns with the increasingly digital nature of modern work, particularly in hybrid or remote work environments where toxicity often manifests virtually. Participation was anonymous and only began after the consent screen. A total of 153 participants completed the survey, but 146 had experienced at least one toxic event and were retained for analysis. As most questions were exploratory single questions, the statistics are descriptive and are primarily used to capture and compare the richer qualitative findings.

Table 16 (Appendix C) contains the complete questionnaire for the study.

7.5 Results

This section presents the main findings from both the qualitative and quantitative analyses conducted to explore communicative behaviors in toxic work environments.

The qualitative analysis served as the starting point for this study, focusing on the description of toxic workplace situations. The narratives revealed complex dynamics and also raised questions that could not be fully addressed within the scope of qualitative data alone. To clarify these initial findings, the quantitative phase explored broader patterns and the recurrence of specific behaviors and perceptions across the sample. Together, the two approaches offer a comprehensive picture of how employees react to a toxic environment and reveal both personal coping mechanisms and systemic tendencies in companies.

Sample

The final sample of 146 participants was predominantly composed of female participants (68.5%), with male respondents accounting for 28.8% and a small percentage identifying as “Other” (2.7%). Most participants (58.9 %) belonged to the millennials, followed by Generation X (19.9 %) and Generation Z (19.2 %). Only 2.1% of respondents belonged to the baby boomer generation. Regarding work experience, the majority reported over 10 years of experience (60.3%), while 17.8% had between 4 and 6 years, 12.3% between 1 and 3 years, and 9.6% between 7 and 9 years.

Education was generally high: 26% held a Bachelor’s degree (3-year), 20.5% held a 4-year or postgraduate Master’s degree, and 23.3% had a Master’s degree or specialization. Smaller groups included those with a PhD (6.2%), a professional certification (6.8%), some university experience without graduating (12.3%), and only a high school diploma (4.8%).

In terms of nationality, participants came from a wide variety of countries, though the sample was primarily American (46.2%), followed by Italian (9.8%), Canadian (8.3%), British (6.8%), and Indian (5.3%). Several other nationalities were each represented by under 3% of the sample. This diversity reflects the international spread of the survey,

though with a clear overrepresentation of respondents from English-speaking Western countries.

Companies' characteristics

To better contextualize the toxic workplace experiences reported by participants, respondents were asked to provide information about the organizational environment in which these situations occurred. Specifically, they were invited to indicate whether their company exhibited certain characteristics related to industry dynamics, managerial practices, and workplace culture. These items aimed to capture relevant characteristics of the organizations, including whether the company operates in a rapidly changing industry, competes in a job market with ample opportunities, prioritizes innovation, adopts a participative managerial style, demonstrates high levels of employee engagement, fosters a collaborative climate, or exhibits a strong degree of digitalization in its processes.

These organizational characteristics reported by participants across all sections present a noteworthy trend (Table 17): the mean scores for all evaluated dimensions are consistently low, suggesting a general perception of weak organizational functioning in the contexts of toxic work environments. On a 1 to 5 scale, the overall average ratings fall below 3 for every item. Specifically, participants report that their organizations rarely operate in rapidly changing industries ($M = 2.58$) or competitive labor markets ($M = 2.46$), and innovation is not commonly prioritized ($M = 2.18$). Furthermore, managerial styles are not perceived as participative ($M = 2.02$), employee engagement is low ($M = 2.12$), and the working climate is described as not particularly positive or collaborative ($M = 1.80$), which is the lowest mean in the table. Even digitalization scores relatively low ($M = 2.56$). These results suggest that participants experiencing or witnessing toxicity tend to associate it with structurally and culturally underdeveloped organizations, where innovation, collaboration, and employee involvement are limited. This reinforces the connection between toxic experiences and broader organizational dysfunctions.

Table 17. Organizational characteristics

Sections	N	Operate in a new and/or rapidly changing industry	Prioritize innovation as its main strategy in recent years	Adopt a predominantly participative managerial style	Have a high level of employee engagement	Foster a positive and collaborative work environment	Have a high level of digitalization in its business processes
S3	5	2.40	2.00	2.00	2.20	1.80	2.40
S4	47	2.38	2.00	2.17	2.26	1.98	2.43
S5	15	3.00	2.67	2.27	2.40	2.20	2.60
S6	79	2.63	2.22	1.89	1.99	1.62	2.65
Total	146	2.58	2.18	2.02	2.12	1.80	2.56

Source: own elaboration

The distribution of participants by company size shows a notable presence of both very large and very small organizations. The most strongly represented group are companies with more than 5,000 employees (27.4%), followed by companies with up to 50 employees (23.97%) and companies with 51 to 250 employees (19.18%). Medium-sized companies are less well represented, including companies with 251 to 500 employees (10.96%), with 2,001 to 5,000 employees (8.90%) and with 1,001 to 2,000 employees (5.48%). The least represented categories are companies with 501 to 750 employees (2.05%) and 751 to 1,000 employees (2.05%). As mentioned earlier, toxic experiences in the workplace appear to be more commonly reported both in very large organizations, where depersonalized systems and limited individual support can contribute to harmful dynamics, and in very small companies, which are often family-run or characterized by rigid, traditional hierarchies. In such environments, close interpersonal tensions and hierarchical pressures can reinforce dysfunctional behaviors and limit opportunities for resolution.

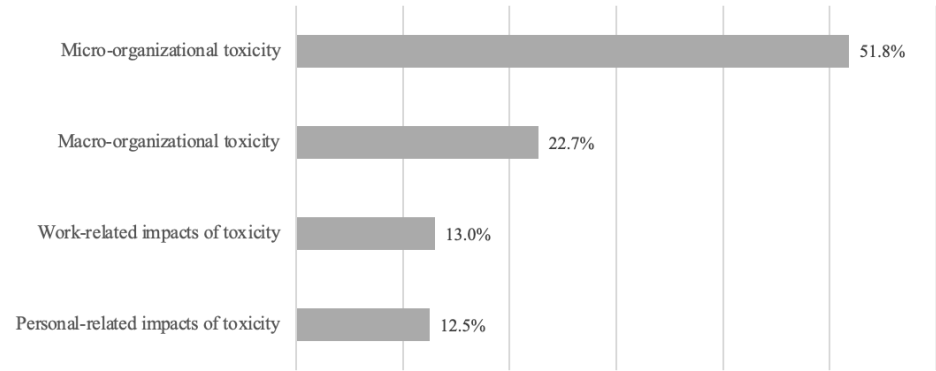
7.5.1 Results from the content analysis

This section presents the results of content analysis of the responses of 146 participants to the open question about a toxic experience at work using the codebook method described above. The results are grouped into five categories derived from the codebook: (1) micro-organizational toxicity, (2) macro-organizational toxicity, (3) personal-related impacts of toxicity, (4) work-related impacts of toxicity, and (5) employee

communicative responses. While the main themes were deductively derived from the literature, the subthemes emerged inductively from the data, which allowed analytical flexibility and increased the depth of interpretation.

The dataset includes a total of 824 text segments categorized into the four overarching dimensions that contribute to toxic experiences in the workplace (Figure 16). The most represented category is *micro-organizational toxicity*, accounting for 51.8% of segments (n=427), which underscores the central role especially of the interpersonal dynamics in shaping toxic work environments. This is followed by *macro-organizational toxicity* with 22.7% (n=187), *work-related* impacts of toxicity with 13.0% (n=107) and *personal-related* impacts of toxicity, which account for 12.5% of the total (n=103).

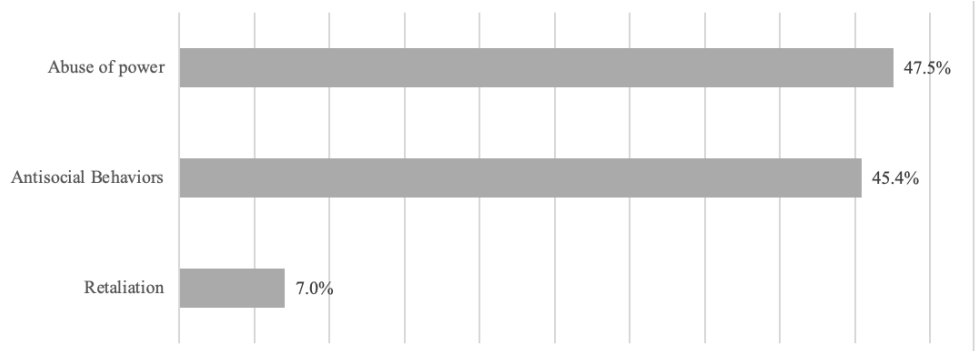
Figure 16. Statistics of the codes (I level)



Source: own elaboration

Micro-organizational toxicity (figure 17) is dominated by *abuse of power* (47.5%) and *antisocial behavior* (45.4%), with *retaliation* accounting for a smaller but significant proportion (7.0%), highlighting the strained hierarchical and peer relationships.

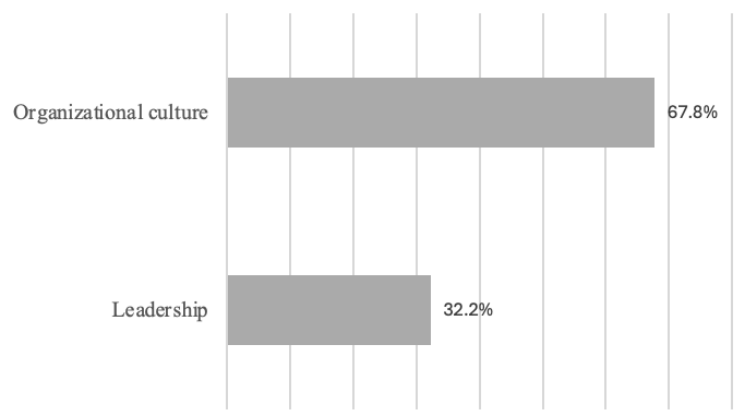
Figure 17. Statistics of micro-organizational toxicity



Source: own elaboration

At the *macro-organizational level* (figure 18), culture (67.8%) and leadership (32.2%) play a major role, which shows how long existing habits and leadership styles can perpetuate toxic behaviors.

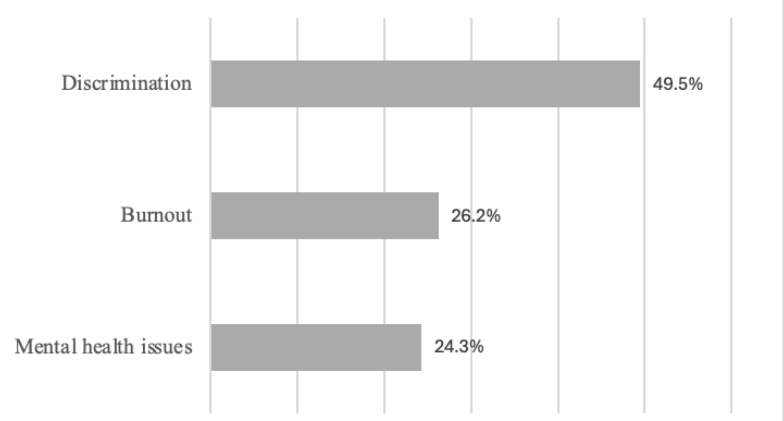
Figure 18. Statistics of macro-organizational toxicity



Source: own elaboration

Within *personal-related* impacts of toxicity (figure 19), the most prevalent sub-code is discrimination (49.5%), followed by burnout (26.2%) and mental health issues (24.3%), showing the high emotional and psychological toll on the individual.

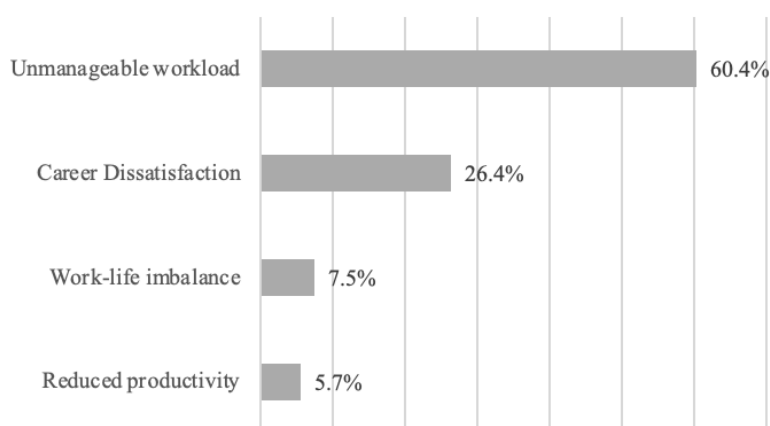
Figure 19. Statistics of personal-related impacts of toxicity



Source: own elaboration

Finally, *work-related effects* (figure 20) focus on *unmanageable workload* (60.4%), followed by *career dissatisfaction* (26.4%), *work-life imbalance* (7.5%) and *reduced productivity* (5.7%), indicating inefficiencies and unbalanced expectations.

Figure 20. Statistics of work-related impacts of toxicity



Source: own elaboration

The following paragraphs will go into the details of the narratives and the findings of the qualitative analysis. Each theme is illustrated in a dedicated table with selected quotes that represent the most recurring and significant patterns from the dataset.

Micro-organizational toxicity

The findings show how micro-organizational toxicity manifests through harmful communication dynamics that undermine psychological safety, isolate individuals and distort professional relationships (Table 18). At this level, the main categories that emerged are *antisocial behaviors*, *abuse of power*, and *retaliation*.

Table 18. Micro-organizational toxicity

Sub-Categories of Micro-organizational Toxicity (second level)	Sub-Categories of Micro-organizational (third level)	Sub-Categories of Micro-organizational (fourth level)	Definition	Quotations from the data
Antisocial behaviors			Encompasses harmful group dynamics where negative behaviors are directed at individuals	“I performance managed a person with antisocial behaviors” “Every time I tried to talk to a colleague another colleague said I should shut up”
	Incivility		low-intensity, deviant workplace behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target	“Coworker made vague threatening comments, then

				“watched me” like Peeping Tom”
		Insulting comments	Remarks that demean or marginalize others, often reinforce stereotypes and cause emotional damage over time	“My manager’s (...) insults to the best of her capabilities”
		Workplace exclusion	Systematic sidelining from opportunities or critical information	“My manager continued to wear me down with gaslighting and aggressive emails, and at some point, announced in a higher up management meeting that nobody in the company was allowed to speak with me without her prior consent”
		Showing condescending or dismissive attitudes	Involve treating others as inferior or unworthy of attention, often undermining their contributions and sense of belonging	“I received a sharply worded and dismissive response from my director”
		Malicious gossip and Spreading rumors	The circulation of harmful, often unverified, information.	“When I got recognised by senior Management my colleagues tried to make a negative image about me”
		Coordinated hostility	Group efforts to target or undermine an individual	“He also encouraged other employees to disparage me with disinformation”
		Information withholding	Not sharing critical details or resources needed for job performance.	“My supervisor never wanted to hire anyone for my position. So when I was hired, he systematically discredited me by withholding info, excluding me from meetings”
		Microaggressions	Subtle, often unintentional comments or behaviors that cumulatively contribute to a hostile work environment (e.g. racial, gender-based, disability-related)	“They would talk about sensitive topics in inappropriate ways and ask coworkers inappropriate questions”

		Humiliation	Acts intended to embarrass or publicly belittle someone	“I spoke up about a project not meeting the company requirements and was literally yelled at in front of my entire team”
		Public shaming	Deliberate exposure or ridicule in public spaces/forums	“She would criticise us in front of everyone”
		Passive-Aggressive behaviors	Indirect resistance or subtle undermining that is not overtly confrontational	“(…) she smirked and didn’t even respond to me”
		Sabotage	Deliberate actions to undermine the work performances of colleagues.	“Had to have supervision with them they took my ideas and stonewalled me from projects and presented them as their own”
		Ostracism	Deliberate exclusion from conversations or team activities	“I had a coworker who I interacted with quite a bit. She got angry with me and stopped talking to me completely”
	Bullying		Repeated aggressive actions or harassment aimed at intimidating an individual.	“Currently now I’m constantly mocked, made fun off for everything about myself”
		Mobbing	Group bullying where one person is systematically targeted	“I joined a new company on a team full of employees with significantly less experience than me and became the target of a workplace mobbing”
		Harassment	Unwanted behaviors, often repetitive, that demean or intimidate	“I was regularly harassed and called incompetent by the founder” “Being told I look like a little girl and sexually harassed”
	Abuse of power		Power imbalances lead to unfair workplace dynamics, where authority is misused to manipulate or suppress employees	“I was verbally abused by a boss on a regular basis” “He never did his job, always made everyone else do his job”

			“During these meetings he would scream at people until they cried, make vague threats on people’s lives, insult them, threaten to fire people in front of their colleagues, tell staff that he was worth more than them, and berate them”
	Micromanagement	Overly controlling oversight that stifles autonomy	“I had a toxic manager who micromanaged everything — I was not even allowed to attend meetings with other people in our organization without her explicit permission”
	Controlling	Excessively rigid management that limits employee discretion	“My manager continued to wear me down with gaslighting and aggressive emails, and at some point, announced in a higher up management meeting that nobody in the company was alllowed to speak with me without her prior consent”
	Gaslighting	Manipulating individuals into doubting their perceptions or memory	“On multiple occasions I was berated for not doing work that I did not know was required”
	Favoritism	Unequal treatment based on personal preference rather than merit	“Director will give instructions to one person but not the other” “A former manager would try to have me do all of the work while giving preferential treatment to other employees” “a supervisor who constantly changes my work and the rules, but doesn’t apply the same rules to other employees”

	Intimidation		Using fear to control or suppress dissent	“(…) and flexes her power by threatening punishment and guilt tripping”
	Aggression		Verbal or physical actions intended to dominate or harm	“This one woman who literally keeps mocking me loudly” “My boss cornered me in my office for an impromptu meeting and started berating me, telling me that I was worse than someone several pay grades below me among other things”
	Exclusion		Withholding information or opportunities as a means of control	“The VP withheld information from me, didn’t include me in the parts of the job that were now my responsibility, and she continued to handle”
	Poor communication		Lack of clarity or consistency in messaging that fosters confusion	“I have watched many talented, smart, capable colleagues walk out the door due to her bullying and poor communication”
	Misattribution of work		Taking credit for successes or Shifting blame for failures	“My manager was constantly taking all the credit from junior employees and interns like me” “Had to have supervision with them they took my ideas and stonewalled me from projects and presented them as their own”
Retaliation			Punishing employees for voicing concerns	“When I defended myself against this with my boss, I faced retaliation and insults” “It put a bigger workload on people who actually cared to do things well and correctly”
	Ignore		Deliberately sidelining or not acknowledging contributions	“I complained to my boss and the manager gave me a task that he also then assigned

				to a man who was overloaded with work and ignored what I did for the task”
	Punished for Speaking Up		Negative consequences following the expression of dissent	“I complained to her boss and he told her back, so she threatened to fire me if I ever talked to him again”

Source: own elaboration

Antisocial behaviors

The experiences of participants reflect a wide range of *antisocial behaviors*, particularly in the form of *incivility* and *bullying*. Respondents described various forms of *incivility*, including *offensive comments*, *public shaming*, *passive-aggressive behavior*, *ostracism*, and *exclusion in the workplace*. One participant recalled that “The coworker screamed violently at me in front of my other colleagues”, while another reported that he was “frequently yelled at by [a] coworker over minor work issues”. These incidents illustrate the type of minor but persistent interpersonal deviance (e.g. Cortina et al, 2001), in which behaviors with unclear intent to harm gradually erode emotional safety and professional legitimacy (e.g. Singh and Srivastava, 2023b). Other participants pointed to *workplace exclusion*, with a respondent stating, “Gossiping, isolating me, disappearing for hours and leaving me to do all the work, whispering while looking at me, ignoring accomplishments, being very critical of performance”, and they described colleagues who would “smirk and didn’t even respond” to their contributions. Others recalled how they were “literally yelled at in front of [the] entire team” and how a manager “criticized us in front of everyone”, which underlines the public dimension of toxic confrontation with the aim of humiliation. These forms of *public shaming* reinforced status differences and created a *hostile team climate*.

Other participants reported experiences of *coordinated hostility*, *malicious gossip* and *withholding of information*, which often escalated into targeted social exclusion. One respondent noted, “She actively campaigned against me with our coworkers”, and another shared, “He also encouraged other employees to disparage me with disinformation”. These behaviors are consistent with the literature on toxic peer dynamics, which identifies *gossip* and *social sabotage* as covert but effective tactics of interpersonal toxicity

(Ellwardt et al., 2012; Giacalone and Rosenfeld, 1987). The respondent who described being treated in meetings “as if I were invisible” illustrates the consequences of *dismissive attitudes* and *microaggressions* that reinforce marginalization and psychological withdrawal (Cortina et al., 2001; Chory and Hubbell, 2008).

Several narratives revealed more serious cases of *bullying*, including *mobbing* and *harassment*, characterized by repeated aggressive acts of intimidation. One participant reported, “I have watched many talented, smart, capable colleagues walk out the door due to her [the manager] bullying and poor communication”. Another described a case of *sexual harassment*: “(...) until it was discovered this coworker had been stalking and sexually harassing someone”. These cases reflect the persistent and damaging patterns of power abuse described in the literature, particularly in hierarchical or unregulated environments (Krishna et al., 2024; McDonald, 2012).

Abuse of power

As explained, toxic dynamics often resulted from *abuses of power*, including *micromanagement*, *gaslighting*, and *favoritism*. Respondents reported that they felt manipulated and controlled. Manipulative dynamics such as gaslighting were also prevalent and led employees to doubt their perception and self-worth, as the following comment shows: “She immediately changes the rules to something different, leaving me to feel constantly gaslighted”. Others pointed to overreaching by the manager, such as: “The manager would not allow you to send emails without getting the exact wording checked”. Such behaviors are consistent with criticisms of toxic leadership, in which control practices and favoritism reinforce informal hierarchies and silence dissent (e.g. Tepper, 2000). Several other participants described experiencing excessive control from their managers, including one who stated that he had “to seek approval before engaging with colleagues”, illustrating how rigid supervision undermines autonomy. *Favoritism* also played an important role in shaping a toxic environment, as one respondent reported that “the only people who weren’t punished...were those personally close with the manager”. These forms of preferential treatment, together with restrictive supervision, not only reinforced informal hierarchies but also marginalized dissenting voices.

Other participants reported *intimidation* and *aggressive managerial tactics*. One respondent described how “during these meetings he would scream at people until they

cried”, revealing a culture of dominance through fear and emotional harm. *Poor communication* further contributed to dysfunctional climates. As one employee explained, “Info gets distorted, wrong, no clear instructions or expectations”, reflecting a lack of clarity that fueled confusion and vulnerability. These communication failures were worsened by *misattribution of work*, particularly directed at younger employees. One entry-level employee shared, “I experienced senior colleagues making me responsible for mistakes behind my back with managers”, indicating a lack of accountability and protective structures. Taken together, these behaviors demonstrate how narcissistic leadership, verbal abuse, and organizational indifference perpetuate toxicity in the workplace and create conditions in which employees feel replaceable, silenced, and disempowered.

Retaliation

Finally, participants also reported various forms of *retaliation* in response to voiced concerns or dissent. Several respondents described being *ignored* or *punished for expressing their opinions* and being penalized through *ostracism* or formal *performance evaluations*. One participant noted, “I experienced retaliation for raising issues related to a manager abusing colleagues, investment systems and federal regulations”, while another reported, “(...) and my supervisor gave me a poor performance review to put me in my place”. This is to illustrate how retaliation in organizations not only inhibits voice but also reinforces silence and cynicism and weakens ethical accountability and transparency (e.g. Detert and Edmondson, 2011; Morrison and Milliken, 2000).

Macro-organizational toxicity

The results confirm that toxic workplace dynamics are not limited to individual relationships or workloads but are deeply rooted in macro-organizational structures and managerial practices (Table 19). Here, the main toxic aspects that emerged relate to *toxic management* and *organizational culture*.

Table 19. Macro-organizational toxicity

Sub-Categories of Macro-organizational Toxicity (second level)	Sub-Categories of Macro-organizational Toxicity (third level)	Definition	Quotations from the data
Management		Focuses on managerial practices and leadership styles that set the tone for the work environment. Look for examples where leadership directly influences toxicity	“Management was frequently unreachable and unresponsive” “We have lost a fourth of our workforce due to poor leadership”
	Toxic management	Behaviors by those in charge that create a hostile or oppressive climate.	“(…) our manager was more concerned about how his sudden absence would impact her own workload” “Nothing to do with competence all about them wanting power”
	Retaliatory practices	Punitive measures against employees who raise concerns, reinforcing a climate of fear	“Experienced retaliation for raising issues related to a manager abusing colleagues, investment systems and federal regulations”
	Narcissistic behaviors	Self-centered actions that prioritize the image or interests of the manager	“(…) but every time I would propose something beneficial for the project, my boss would deliberately oppose it with nonsensical instructions just so he could take credit for them and not me”
Organizational culture		Encompasses the underlying values, norms, and practices that define the work environment, revealing systemic issues	“She and the people spreading the rumor were not punished” “The organization had a terrible workplace culture characterized by micromanagement, high turnover, and unsustainable workload” “When I did enquire about the situation HR kept telling me it was my problem and that I needed to find a way to work with my new manager’s management style” “In my current company, the leadership has implemented new processes and protocols that have been problematic for the people under them. The poor change management has lead to an increasingly toxic workplace” “This interaction created a chilling effect that discouraged transparency and contributed to a climate where seeking clarification or raising concerns was treated as insubordination”
	Poor Communication culture	lack of transparent communication, lack of listening, and inconsistent messaging	“There were a lot of language and cultural barriers during the whole 8 months and even at present time” “Ideally, they were supposed to use two official languages (English and Cantonese) for their work meeting and all forms of

			communication, but most were unwilling to do so”
	Emotional suppression	Norms that discourage open expression of feelings	“The most consistent occurrence for me is what I call toxic positivity, management keeping a happy face over a dysfunctional workplace”
	Hostility	A pervasive sense of antagonism or conflict among employees	“They basically tied my hands, blamed me for poor performance and claimed I wasn’t a team player”
	Internal competition	Rivalry that fosters a cutthroat atmosphere and undermines collaboration	“Currently I am working in a toxic place where everyone is a duck up to the boss but they all talk shit in their back”
	Lack of Psychological Safety	An environment where employees fear repercussions for speaking up or taking risks	“When I raised my grievance, I was told “I asked for it” and that it was my fault”
	Low worker autonomy	Restricted decision-making or control over the work of others	“While I was initially given autonomy on the new builds (...) he began micro-managing approximately six months into these projects (they ran concurrently), massively changing specs/design elements, creating construction delays and causing each project to go well over budget”
	High turnover rates	Frequent employee exits creating instability	“A job with ~50% turnover on my team”
	Unethical structure	Policies or incentive schemes that indirectly promote overwork or unethical behavior	“(…) and I ended up being exited from the organization because I proved the injustice and held managers accountable” “I was reprimanded for not complying with a policy that directly violates Privacy laws in my jurisdiction”

Source: own elaboration

Management

A recurring theme in the responses was the presence of *toxic management*, where leadership styles fostered a climate of fear, manipulation and instability. One participant spoke of a “toxic positivity” where apparent optimism masked deeper problems, “The most consistent gaslight, for me, is what I call toxic positivity, with management keeping a happy face over a dysfunctional workplace”. Another respondent captured the emotional contradiction faced by employees working under unethical managers: “But how can you work with a lying, cheating, gaslighting manager? That’s toxic behavior, not a management style”. These narratives reflect descriptions in the literature of *destructive leadership* that undermines trust, encourages disengagement, and normalizes deviant behavior (e.g. Schyns and Schilling, 2013).

Another expression of toxic management was the *culture of retaliation*, where employees were punished for raising concerns, consistent with the findings of Cortina and Magley (2003). For example, one participant stated, “Reported the issues, was ignored and had work tasks removed in retaliation”, indicating a climate of fear where dissent leads to sanctions rather than solutions.

Organizational culture

In many cases, organizational toxicity was embedded in the *organizational culture* through *poor communication*, *emotional suppression*, and *normalized hostility*. One respondent noted, “Manager would scream at colleagues. Upper management said to deal with it”, while another respondent noted, “the leadership has implemented new processes and protocols that have been problematic for the people under them, and the poor change management has led to an increasingly toxic workplace”, demonstrating how poor communication cultures and hostile environments were perpetuated through indifference. The suppression of emotions was also reflected in an environment that discouraged vulnerability or expressiveness. One participant referred to the lack of support during overwhelming tasks, while another described toxic internal competition in the workplace: “When I got recognized by senior management, my colleagues tried to make a negative image about me”. These findings are consistent with the dynamics in which emotional suppression, internal competition, and a lack of psychological safety promote silence and undermine trust (Men and Stacks, 2014; Cannon, 2022). Furthermore, as one participant pointed out, “HR does not do anything to help the employee so going and give a formal complaint will make things worse”.

A toxic culture can have its origins in problems such as *understaffing*, *overwork* or an *unclear definition of roles* that create conditions in which even leaders are unable to fulfill their responsibilities. One participant noted, “My Director of the small team was overwhelmed and consequently provided little instruction on how to complete very complex tasks”. This illustrates how the pressure experienced at the managerial level has an emotionally destabilizing effect and leads to a “trickle-down effect”. Another participant reported: “I also was subject to receiving extra work and or negative/tense dialogue due to the emotional instability my director experienced due to his workload pressure”. Again, the inability of the director to cope with the demands leads to the stress

being passed on to subordinates, reinforcing a toxic spiral. These examples show that a toxic environment not only affect individuals but has a cascading effect: what is unmanageable for managers becomes unbearable for employees.

Participants also pointed to failures such as *low autonomy*, *high turnover* and *unethical structures*. For example, one participant shared, “We have lost a fourth of our workforce due to poor leadership”, while another described being “fired for following standard procedures they wanted me to ignore to make more money”. These statements demonstrate how unethical incentive systems and hierarchical instability contribute to employee alienation, loss of talent, and reputational damage (e.g. Appelbaum and Roy-Girard, 2007). In particular, the lack of a stable and ethical organizational foundation contributes to instability and makes it clear that toxicity goes beyond interpersonal dynamics and also encompasses institutional and cultural dimensions.

Personal-related impacts of toxicity

The narratives revealed a focus on the psychological and physical consequences of toxic work environments (Table 20), confirming previous research on the detrimental effects of prolonged exposure to organizational dysfunction (e.g. McCulloch, 2016). At the personal level, the main categories identified are *discrimination*, *mental health issues* and *burnout*.

Table 20. Personal-related impacts of toxicity

Sub-Categories of Personal-related impacts of toxicity (second level)	Sub-Categories of Personal-related impacts of toxicity (third level)	Definition	Examples of quotations from the data
Discrimination		Workplace decisions or interactions influenced by bias, leading to unequal treatment. Look for narratives where employees feel treated unfairly due to inherent or socially constructed identity markers.	“I’ve experienced discrimination from my boss”
	Gender	Differential treatment or bias based on gender identity or roles.	“My coworker told me a man should be in my position” “The women who refused to participate were treated unfairly”
	Ethnicity	Comments or actions suggesting that racial background affects opportunities or treatment.	“I was told “Black people have a low IQ, this is why they need White people”“

	Age	Discrimination either against younger or older employees, often noted as being “too young” or “too old”	“I am a woman in mid-40s. My new manager immediately on arrival selected a few favorites. He was a man in mid-fifties and all his favorites were young women in their late twenties” “My supervisor said we couldn’t hire someone because they were “too old” and would “probably have a heart attack” on the job. They were only 50 and they were in good shape”
	Disability	Negative assumptions or barriers created because of physical, mental, or developmental disabilities.	“(…) but they said a person on a wheelchair did not need to work and we’re lazy”
	Religion	Unequal treatment based on religious beliefs or practices.	“Reported antisemitism”
	Intersectionality	Narratives that indicate overlapping and mutually reinforcing discrimination (e.g. race + gender)	“I watched my coworker get harassed for her weight and disability”
Mental Health Issues		Reflects the psychological impact of a toxic environment. Continuous exposure to a toxic work environment negatively impacts well-being and stability of employees	“Worked at company 11 years and was for a family who mentally and emotionally abused me and overloaded”
	Anxiety	Expressions of constant worry or fear related to work condition	“My anxiety started to kick in and I was having panic attacks”
	Depression	Narratives of persistent sadness or hopelessness influenced by the work atmosphere	“I was feeling suicidal and just wanted all of this to stop”
	Self-Doubt	Accounts of questioning competence or worth	“I felt like I couldn’t do anything right as if I’m dumb and second-guessing myself”
	Exhaustion	Descriptions of feeling physically or emotionally drained	“Eventually I snapped and got fired”
	Emotional isolation	Descriptions of feeling unsupported or disconnected from colleagues and supervisors.	“My colleagues keep doing things in and out work without asking me” “I’m “Feeling isolated”“
Burnout		Prolonged workplace stress that drains employees mentally, physically, and emotionally, reducing their ability to function effectively.	“Her projects are always stressful and there was one time where it caused me to have a panic attack” “I am burned out and miserable”
	High stress	Persistent pressure that undermines overall health	“Dread going into work” “That situation at the beginning of my career was painful”
	Lack of support	Perception of insufficient organizational or peer backing during stressful periods	“Never a “thank you” or “well done”“

Source: own elaboration

Discrimination

An important effect that emerged from the data is *discrimination*, often experienced through subtle or overt biases based on identity characteristics. *Gender discrimination* was particularly prominent. One respondent noted, “They hate me for no reason other than a personality conflict, but use my gender against me”, suggesting that interpersonal tensions were intensified or justified by gender stereotypes. Another participant recounted, “When I asked for equal pay to my male colleague informed [me] that I needed to learn the experience of a woman and would thus be paid less”, illustrating how discriminatory rationalizations were used to deny fair pay. These quotes support existing literature that identifies gender as a persistent basis for unequal treatment, leading to emotional exhaustion and limited career progression (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). In terms of discrimination, several sub-categories were mentioned, including *ethnicity, age discrimination, disability, religion and a combination of these factors*. Some participants described experiences of intersectional discrimination, where multiple aspects of their identity, such as ethnicity, age and ability, were attacked simultaneously, deepening the negative impact of the toxic environment. More broadly, these findings reflect how identity-based discrimination contributes to the erosion of psychological safety in the workplace (e.g. Cannon, 2022).

Mental health issues

One participant described a complex interplay of toxic conditions, stating: “At this job I was bullied, faced discrimination, worked beyond the point of burnout, and suffered detriments to both my mental and physical health”. This quote illustrates the convergence of *mental health issues* such as anxiety, depression, self-doubt, emotional exhaustion and isolation that often come with discrimination and bullying. These experiences are consistent with prior research on how toxic environments undermine psychological stability and increase the risk of anxiety, depression and lower organizational engagement (e.g. Harvey et al., 2017). Taken together, these statements underscore the high personal levels of toxicity in the workplace and the urgent need for inclusive, psychologically safe work environments.

Burnout

Among the personal effects of toxicity, many often resulted in burnout, which is characterized by persistent emotional exhaustion, high stress and lack of support. The impact of toxic workplace conditions on employee well-being was highlighted in several reports of burnout, such as one participant who shared, “In the same situation, then workload peaked 16hrs per day, no meals, urgent calls at night and no support from the colleagues closer to me”, illustrating the unbearable demands and isolation that characterized her experience. As one participant stated, “It has been exhausting and only gets worse as the pressure increases”, while another noted, “Management was frequently unreachable and unresponsive”. These conditions mirror the findings of Maslach et al. (2001), who define burnout as an erosion of engagement caused by persistent work overload and inadequate social support. The combined effect of overwhelming tasks and management neglect led to significant psychological stress and organizational disengagement.

Work-Related impacts of toxicity

The responses of participants highlighted the effects of a toxic work environment at the work-related level (Table 21). The main aspects that emerged are *unmanageable workload, work-life imbalance, reduced productivity, and career dissatisfaction*.

Table 21. Work-related impacts of toxicity

Sub-Categories of Work-Related impacts of toxicity (second level)	Sub-Categories of Work-Related impacts of toxicity (third level)	Definition	Quotations from the data
Unmanageable workload		Captures structural issues that make work overwhelming or unsustainable. Look for mentions of poor planning or unrealistic demands	“Due to understaffing, workers were forced to work 60+ hour weeks” “Excessive demands despite staff shortages and a complete lack of corporate welfare”
	Overwork	Extended hours or excessive tasks that exceed reasonable limits.	“In a previous role, I experienced a toxic workplace environment mainly due to an extremely high workload that was well-known and acknowledged by management” “Management cut our staff and increased our workload”

	Unclear Expectations	Lack of clear goals or role definitions	“(…) and “managing out” strategies (removing me from projects where I shine, putting me on either intern-level work or overwork with little explanation, unclear expectations and deadlines that drastically shift at the last minute)”
	Unrealistic Deadlines	Impractical timeframes for task completion	“Whoever is assigned to complete her projects will typically be spammed with direct messages urging them to finish said project as soon as possible”
	Ineffective or stressful production processes	Workflows that create undue stress or inefficiency	“I experienced a lack of organizational structure and inefficient/ineffective procedures”
	Incoherent scheduling	Irregular or conflicting work hours that disrupt balance	“(…) including pressure to deliver on projects that are mis-assigned to my team”
	Inadequate supervision	Insufficient guidance or oversight, leading to confusion	“Despite praising me for my directness and efficiency in the past, she now screams at me and tells me to soften my communication without providing examples or clear guidance” “(…) and when I asked for constructive feedback or for specifics on where and how I could meet his expectations, I was stonewalled and told to figure it out for myself”
	Lack of resources or training	Inability to perform tasks effectively due to missing tools or knowledge	“Failure of my manager to bring me into the work that my coworkers were doing or provide adequate training opportunities”
Work-life Imbalance		Blurring of boundaries between work and personal life	“This included workplace mobbing, sexual harassment in the workplace, and monitoring outside of working hours”
	Work-life intrusion	Work demands encroaching on personal time	“I remained silent when the boss was texting me more workload after work”
	Remote work challenges	Blurred boundaries in remote working and virtual isolation	“My remote work from home was being timed”
Reduced Productivity		Captures the observable decline in work output and engagement as a consequence of toxic conditions	“They would not fulfill the duties of their role, making it so the team could not rely on them during their shifts”
	Disengagement from work	Emotional and cognitive withdrawal from job responsibilities	“I was treated like I was incapable of doing anything but working from templates and copy-pasting my boss’s writing into emails”
	Decreased efficiency	Reduced performance, often reflected in slower or lower-quality work outcomes	“(…) These restrictions were not applied to any other team member and required me to seek approval before engaging with colleagues—delaying work and creating unnecessary inefficiencies”
Career Dissatisfaction		A lack of fulfillment or opportunities for growth, feelings of stagnation and discontent related to professional development and recognition	“He wouldn’t assign me any work besides note taking when I’m an engineer with a higher title than some of the men on the project”

	Financial exploitation	Perceptions of being underpaid or exploited	“The owner only employed college-students on a part time basis and expected them to do all tasks: cooking, cleaning, checking in guests, serving breakfast, etc.”
	Lack of autonomy	Limited decision-making power or freedom in the role of others	“The manager would not allow you to send emails without getting the exact wording checked ahead of time and then had to be included on all emails”
	Lack of growth	Absence of opportunities for career advancement or skills development	“Denied training and career advancement due to “good old boy” culture and cronyism”
	Feeling stuck	A sense of being trapped in an unfulfilling role with no prospects for change	“(…) The situation cost me a promotion because the coworker wanted another colleague of mine for the role after I went to HR. I was then assigned to a less desirable shift and had opportunities denied”
	Unfair opportunities	Imbalanced access to promotions or rewards	“Very blatant favoritism based on nepotism, connections, physical appearance”

Source: own elaboration

Unmanageable workload

The most frequently cited issue was the *unmanageable workload*, which is often exacerbated by *overwork*, *unrealistic deadlines* and *ineffective processes*. Several respondents described chronic overwork due to poor organizational planning, “Management cut our staff and increased our workload” and “making it difficult to feel trusted or supported while managing already demanding responsibilities”.

Respondents described *unclear expectations and incoherent scheduling* as causes for making coordination and concentration difficult. One participant reported, “A supervisor who constantly changes my work and the rules”, illustrating the emotional price of constant ambiguity (Eatough et al., 2011). Another recounted that “The CEO (...) would regularly bring people onto calls for meetings which would last, at their shortest, 2 hours”, revealing how *stressful production processes* became a further example of how the system fails. In cases of *inadequate supervision*, participants noted a *lack of feedback and availability*, such as: “Manager ignoring my questions and not showing up to scheduled meetings”. Similarly, *lack of resources or training* was described as being “rushed into a project with no intake information”, indicating the type of disorganization that prevents effective work performance and increases stress (Gilbreath and Benson, 2004).

Work-life imbalance

Many participants also emphasized the *imbalance between work and private life*, especially when *working remotely*. One respondent shared, “She tags others into the conversation (...), without talking to me first”, indicating the challenges of remote work, blurred boundaries, and emotional strain. These examples confirm how the pressure to be constantly available undermines psychological recovery and fosters technostress (e.g. Derks et al., 2015).

Reduced productivity

Toxicity also contributed to *reduced productivity* due to both *disengagement from work* and *decreased efficiency*. One participant remarked, “People skipping out on their duties or leaving extremely early but blasting others”, signaling a breakdown in morale and fairness. Another said, “Everything is constant chaos and crisis, and I can never do enough well enough”, an example of emotional, cognitive, and energetic withdrawal from task performance (Kahn, 1990; Schaufeli, 2013).

Career dissatisfaction

Finally, participants talked about *career dissatisfaction* due to *financial exploitation*, *lack of autonomy*, *feeling stuck*, *lack of growth* and *unfair opportunities*. One respondent described being forced to work “about 18 hours a day with no overtime paid”, only to be told that this pressure was a requirement for promotion. Others reported “having to do supervision with them [other team members and management], then they took my ideas and stonewalled me from projects”, illustrating frustration with recognition and advancement. These reflections resonate with Kalleberg (2011) on the discussion of underpayment, stagnation, and stalled growth as major causes of employee disengagement and discontent. Taken together, these factors show how work-related toxicity not only affects well-being, but also diminishes performance, motivation and career development.

Employee communicative responses

The narratives of participants revealed a spectrum of communicative responses to toxic work environments, ranging from *direct confrontation* to *strategic silence* and

withdrawal (Table 22). The main categories that emerged are those of *voice*, *silence* and *exit strategies*.

Table 22. Employee communicative responses

Sub-Categories of Employee Communicative Responses (second level)	Sub-Categories of Employee Communicative Responses (third level)	Sub-Categories of Employee Communicative Responses (fourth level)	Definition	Quotations from the data
Voice	Speaking Up to Management		The ability of the employee to express concerns, ideas or experiences openly and safely, especially regarding harmful behavior, unfair practices or organizational dysfunction.	"I finally did tell a manager that I felt isolated by my team due to meetings, decisions, and communications being done without my involvement"
			Direct efforts to address issues through direct confrontation, voicing concern in meeting, reporting	"I told my manager that I was being bullied and they responded by saying tell someone who cares"
		Direct confrontation	Face-to-face discussions addressing grievances	"I tried to bring up the issue with my manager, who then proceeded to speak with the sales person's manager. I was essentially told "that's just how she is" and my grievance was ignored"
		Reporting	A formal attempt to seek justice or address toxicity, though it may come with professional risks	"(...) After working there for a year, and experiencing it myself, I became the 3rd to raise a grievance formally.
	Collective protests		Organized and coordinated actions by groups of employees aimed at challenging harmful workplace conditions, unfair treatment, or systemic issues, often when individual voices are ignored or silenced.	"We reported the issue several times with no resolution until eventually one of the women wanted out and shared explicit photos with HR"
	Peer solidarity		Informal support networks among colleagues who share experiences and provide emotional support	"It got a tiny bit better when I came up to office and I had a coworker trying to be nice to me and I cave because I thought we both had anxiety in the work place so I open up on my self and I told her what kind of treatment I went for and that I learn a lot about myself. Also I told

				her the unfairness I face in the workplace”
Silence			Employees refraining from speaking up due to fear, resignation, or a survival strategy. Employees may choose not to report or address toxicity to avoid retaliation or further distress	“I never spoke up to any other coworkers or management as I had felt ashamed of the attention and feared it may have been my own fault at the time”
	Self-censorship		Employees intentionally withholding their opinions or concerns to avoid negative repercussions	“HR does not do anything to help the employee so going and give a formal complain will make things worse”
	Silencing		Refers to actions or behaviors that suppress employees voice, opinions, or participation	“the boss to passively bully everyone with a raised voice, and anyone who speaks up is retaliated against with threats of administrative action”
	Passive Resistance		Minimal effort, “quiet quitting”, psychological disengagement, strategic withdrawal. Employees resist workplace expectations subtly by reducing effort or mental investment	“Most of my colleagues were frequently nervous, passive and resigned to the belief that no improvements were possible”
Exit Strategies			A definitive response to toxicity, often chosen when other coping strategies have failed	“(…) thankfully I will be leaving that team soon.
	Quitting		Resigning from the current role	“(…) and I ended up quitting a job that I otherwise loved” “I left and went to a competitor company where 4 high flying salespeople had gone to from my previous company, along with a sales support person, for similar reasons to mine”
	Seeking Better Conditions		Actively searching for workplaces with healthier cultures	“(…) I now happily work at a shooting range, 12 hours a day 7 days a week, making almost 3 times the money, and ENJOYING it to the fullest, because they pay me to do what I love”

Source: own elaboration

Voice

A prominent theme was the effort to *speak up to management*, either through confrontation or by reporting unacceptable behaviors. For example, one respondent recounted, “I stood up for myself during a confrontation with my abusive co-worker”, while another noted, “When other colleagues complained about this coworker’s behavior, management did nothing to step in”. These quotes illustrate that while voice was expressed, it was often disregarded by management. This is consistent with Morrison and Milliken (2000), who observe organizational conditions that suppress employee voice and discourage upward feedback.

In addition to the upward voice, the analysis also revealed examples of solidarity among colleagues, where *peer support* helped employees navigate a toxic climate. As one participant stated, “Thanks to the support of a few people and a significant change in the team, then I managed to turn the situation and shine”. This resonates with previous literature on the protective function of peer relationships and informal networks as a buffer against stress and exclusion (e.g. Cannon, 2022).

Silence

However, *silence* occurred just as frequently as voice. Several participants described *self-censorship*. One said, “I feel I can never say no because otherwise I will be penalized”. Others experienced *being silenced* by their superiors: “My boss would say that we have to listen to her because she’s the boss”. This dynamic is consistent with the mechanisms of defensive silence and defensive voice (Van Dyne et al., 2003) and with Morrison and Milliken (2000), who suggest that fear of retaliation often undermines the willingness of employees to raise concerns. One participant describes the “chilling effect” of the organizational response: “This interaction created a chilling effect that discouraged transparency and contributed to a climate where seeking clarification or raising concerns was treated as insubordination”.

Exit strategies

Some participants responded with *passive resistance* by practicing forms of *exit* that reflected *disengagement* and *quiet quitting*. Others opted for exit strategies when the toxicity became unbearable. One participant explained, “I decided to leave the workplace,

as I felt unsafe and was experiencing panic attacks from his erratic behavior”. Another participant explained how he was able to create better working conditions after this situation: “At the beginning of my career was painful but at the same time taught me a lot, how to avoid finding myself again in those situations and at the same time how to avoid them in my own team”.

In contrast, other subcategories of exit strategies, such as *job hunting*, *internal transfer* or *career reorientation*, did not emerge clearly from the content analysis and were excluded from the qualitative results.

Therefore, the analysis reveals a rich spectrum of communicative behaviors, ranging from active expression of opinion to silence and withdrawal, and shaped by the perceived responsiveness of the company and the risks of expressing opinion. However, several employee dimensions did not sufficiently appear in the open-ended responses, therefore the next section of the study combines these qualitative findings with the quantitative results of the survey to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how employees respond to workplace toxicity.

7.5.2 Results from the survey

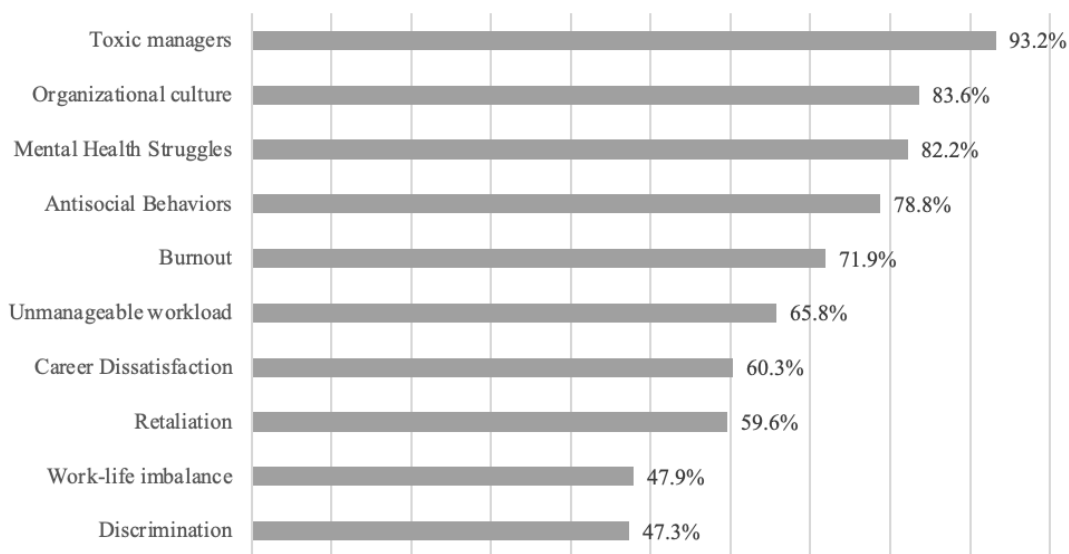
This section presents the results of the online survey conducted to explore communicative behaviors in toxic work environments. The data offer insights into how employees respond to toxic experiences, focusing on voice and silence, managerial responses, and exit-related intentions and actions.

Themes and communicative responses

The 146 respondents were asked to indicate any toxic dynamics in the workplace that they had experienced, resulting in cumulative and overlapping exposures. The presence of *toxic managers* was most frequently cited (93.2%), followed by *organizational culture dysfunction* (83.6%) and *mental health issues* (82.2%). These results are consistent with the qualitative findings and align with the existing literature that emphasizes the role of leadership behaviors and cultural factors in the maintenance of toxicity in the workplace (e.g. Mitchell and Holloway, 2009). Also, *antisocial behavior* (78.8%) and *burnout* (71.9%) were frequently mentioned, which emerged as critical dimensions in the

qualitative content analysis. Issues such as *unmanageable workload* (65.8%) and *career dissatisfaction* (60.3%) indicate the structural and motivational dimension of toxicity, where employees are confronted with unrealistic demands, unclear goals and a lack of growth opportunities. Finally, a significant proportion of participants also reported *retaliation* (59.6%) and *discrimination* (47.3%), and almost half of the responses identified *work-life imbalance* (47.9%). These findings (figure 21) suggest that participants are rarely exposed to a single toxic element, but rather to intersecting forms of toxicity at managerial, organizational, interpersonal and psychological levels.

Figure 21. Themes

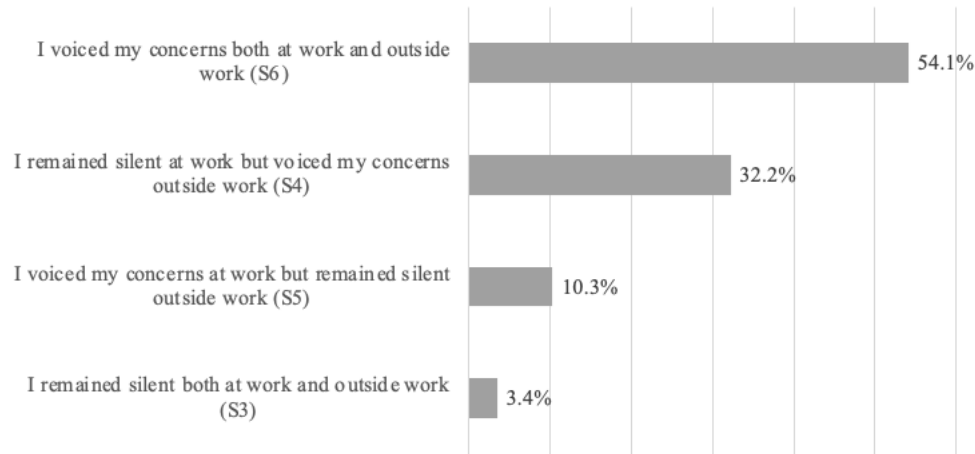


Source: own elaboration

To examine employee communicative responses to toxicity, participants were asked to indicate whether they voiced or silenced their concerns, both inside the workplace with managers or colleagues and outside to family, friends, or on social media. The results show a dominant orientation (Figure 22): 54.1 % of respondents stated that they had expressed their concerns both at work and externally. A smaller proportion (10.3%) voiced their concerns only in the workplace, while 32.2% chose to remain silent in the corporate context, but to voice their frustration externally. Remarkably, only 3.4% of participants were completely silent and kept their concerns to themselves both internally and externally. These findings confirm that although internal expression may be limited by fear of retaliation or a climate of silence within the organization (Morrison and

Milliken, 2000), employees often seek alternative ways to voice their concerns, particularly when formal channels are perceived to be unsafe or ineffective.

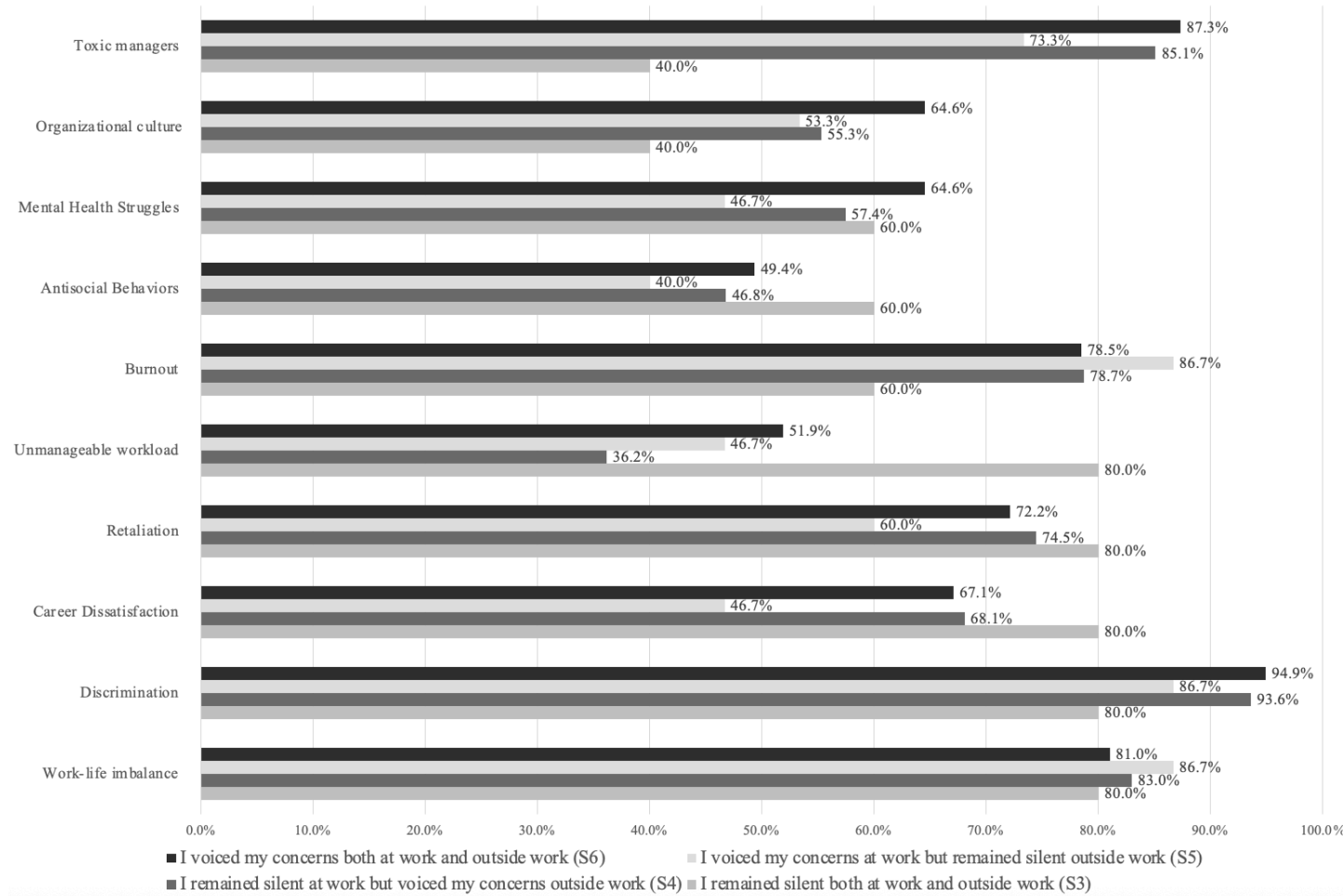
Figure 22. Employee communicative responses to toxicity



Source: own elaboration

Looking at the themes again by comparing the different communicative responses across sections (Figure 23), it becomes clear that fully voiced concerns, both internally in the work and externally, are particularly associated with issues related to toxic management, organizational culture and antisocial behaviors. In contrast, silence, either complete or limited to the workplace, is more common among those facing unmanageable workloads and burnout, suggesting that these issues inhibit speaking up more than interpersonal ones. Interestingly, even those participants who remained silent at work but spoke up outside of work (to family, friends, or on social media) reported high levels of mental health issues and toxic dynamics, suggesting a need for a safe outlet when formal organizational voice channels are perceived as inaccessible or ineffective.

Figure 23. Comparison of employee communicative responses across sections

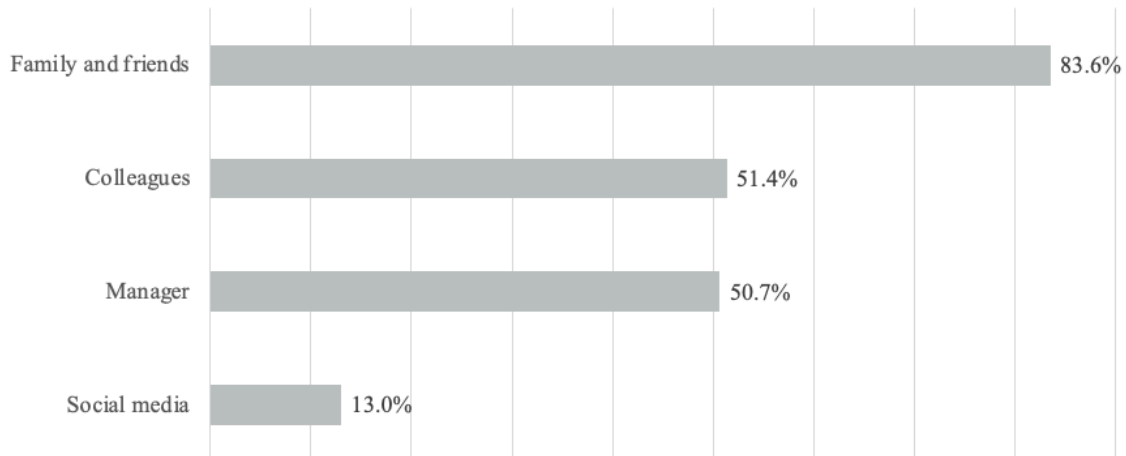


Source: own elaboration

Voice responses

Among the participants who expressed their concerns, the most frequent recipients (figure 24) were family and friends (83.6%), followed by colleagues (51.4%) and managers (50.7%). Only a minority shared their concerns on social media (13.0%).

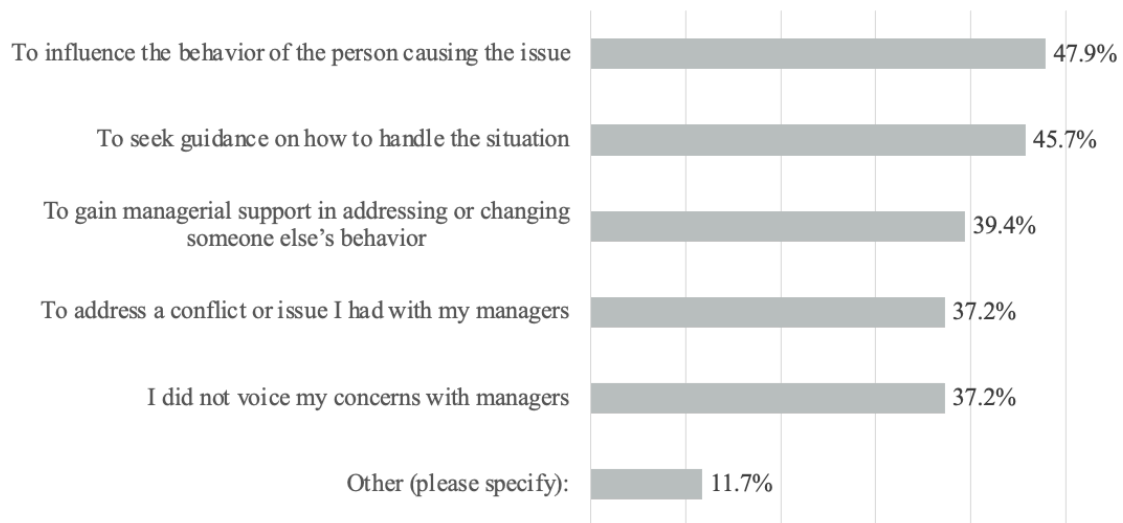
Figure 24. Recipients of voice behaviors



Source: own elaboration

When analyzing the reasons for talking to the manager (figure 25), the most frequently cited motivation was trying to influence the behavior of the person who caused the problem (47.9%), followed by the need to seek guidance on how to handle the situation (45.7%) or to get the managerial support to address the behavior of another person (39.4%). More than a third (37.2%) said that they had not raised their concerns with managers, and the same percentage said that they had spoken to management to discuss a conflict or issue they were having directly with their managers. This suggests that even when involved, managers are not always seen as the preferred or safest recipients of employee concerns.

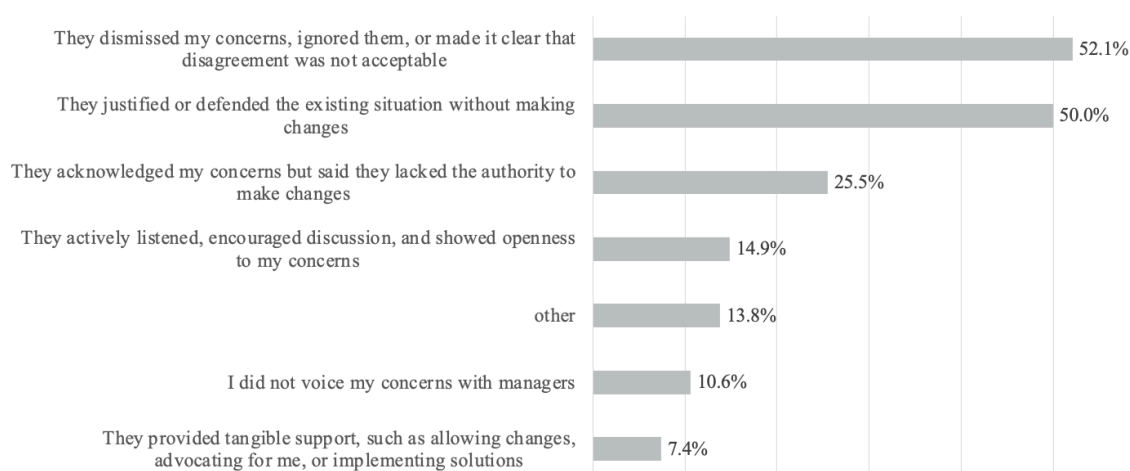
Figure 25. Main reasons for speaking up to managers



Source: own elaboration

However, the descriptions of managerial actions in response to these concerns (figure 26) reveal *perceived inaction or resistance*. The most common experience (52.1%) was that managers dismissed the concerns, ignored them or made it clear that disagreement was not acceptable. This was closely followed by 50.0% who stated that managers justified or defended the existing situation without making any changes, reflecting a tendency to maintain the status quo rather than work towards a solution. In addition, 25.5% reported that their concerns were acknowledged, but managers claimed that they lacked the authority to make changes. In contrast, supportive behaviors were rare. Only 14.9% of respondents reported that their managers provided tangible support, for example by allowing or advocating for change on their behalf, and only 10.6% recalled that their managers actively listened, encouraged discussion and showed openness. These findings are consistent with the results of the content analysis, particularly where participants described a defensive or avoidant leadership style and a general lack of listening in the organization. Taken together, these findings illustrate that while some employees attempted to constructively engage with their managers, they were often met with resistance, silence or distraction, which may contribute to further organizational disengagement or alternative communication strategies.

Figure 26. Manager's responses to employee concerns

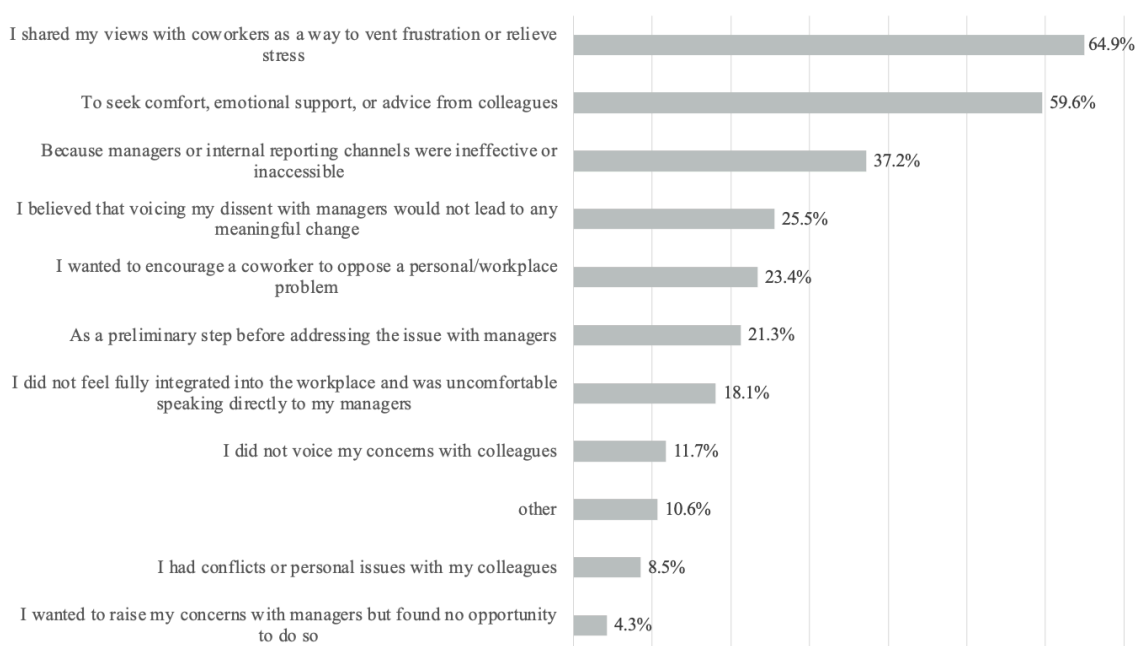


Source: own elaboration

Regarding the reasons to voice concerns to *colleagues* rather than management, most participants (64.9%) said they did so as a way to vent frustration or relieve stress and (59.6%) to seek emotional support, comfort or advice (figure 27). This result is consistent with the qualitative findings about peer solidarity as an important space for processing toxic experiences. Another common explanation (37.2%) was that employees found internal reporting channels or managerial avenues as ineffective or inaccessible, indicating a lack of trust in formal mechanisms. Around one in four participants (25.5%) said that voicing their concerns with managers would not lead to any meaningful change.

Interestingly, 21.3% of respondents saw dialog with colleagues as a preliminary step before raising the issue with managers, suggesting some kind of preparatory or indirect voice. Others were more likely to cite structural or cultural constraints: 18.1% did not feel fully integrated or comfortable enough to speak directly to managers, while 11.7% explicitly stated that they did not raise their concerns with managers because there was no opportunity to do so. A smaller group (8.5%) stated that they had conflicts or personal issues with colleagues, while 4.3% wanted to raise concerns with managers but found no opportunity to do so.

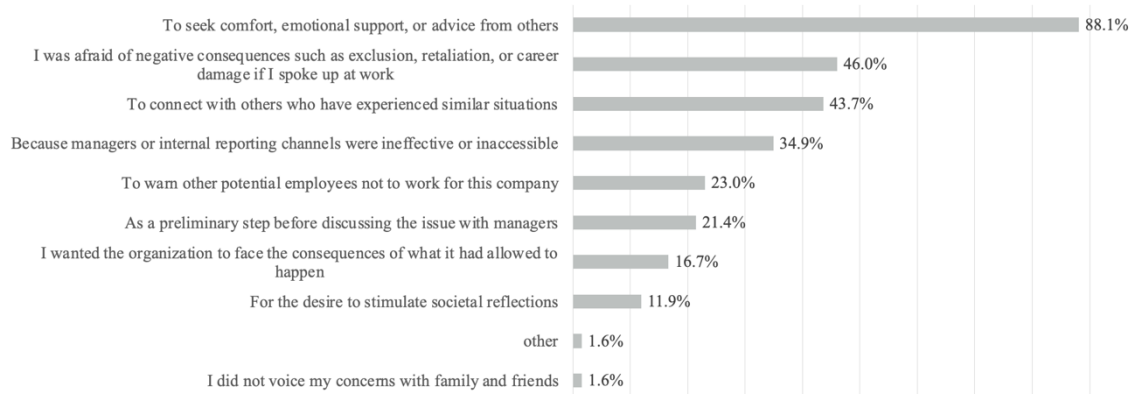
Figure 27. Main reasons for speaking up to colleagues



Source: own elaboration

The most common reason for turning to *family and friends* was to seek comfort, emotional support or advice (88.1%), underlining the role of personal networks as safe spaces for coping with difficult experiences at the workplace (figure 28). In addition, 43.7% of participants expressed a desire to connect with others who had experienced similar situations, highlighting the value of shared understanding in managing toxicity within organizations. A smaller but notable proportion (21.4%) had these conversations as a preliminary step before raising the issue with managers, suggesting that the external voice can serve as an early outlet in the employee awareness or decision-making process. For others, talking to close personal contacts was a response to the perceived inefficiency or inaccessibility of internal reporting channels (34.9%) or fear of ostracism, retaliation or career damage if they raised their concerns within the organization (46.0%). Interestingly, some responses indicated broader intentions: 23.0% indicated that they wanted to warn other potential employees about the company, and 16.7% expressed a desire for the company to suffer the consequences for what it had allowed to happen. A smaller group (11.9%) wanted to stimulate some societal reflections. Only 1.6% of respondents said they did not express their concerns to family or friends.

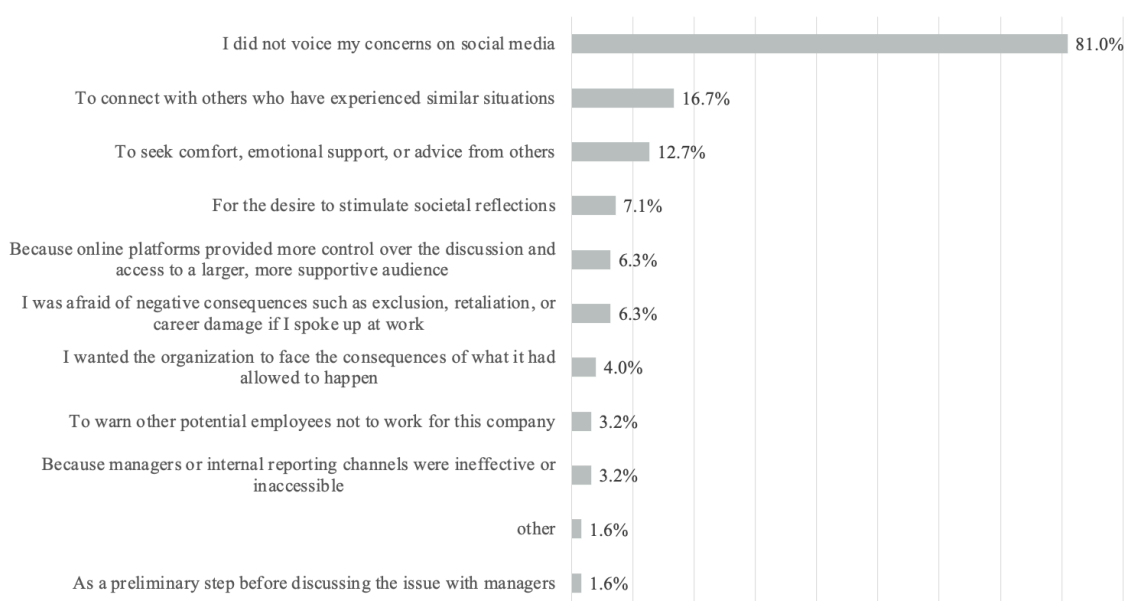
Figure 28. Main reasons for speaking up to family and friends



Source: own elaboration

Social media was the least-used outlet for employee voice. 81.0% of respondents stated that they did not share their concerns on these platforms (figure 29). This finding is particularly interesting given that the survey was administered on Reddit, yet most respondents still chose not to speak out publicly on social media about these sensitive topics. Among the minority who voiced concerns on social media, the most common reason was to share with others who had experienced similar situations (16.7%), followed by the need to seek comfort, emotional support or advice (12.7%). A smaller proportion (6.3%) stated that online platforms offer more control over the discussion and access to a wider, supportive audience, making them an attractive space for expressing opinions when traditional channels are perceived as limiting. Other participants explained their use of social media in terms of fear of ostracism, retaliation or career damage (6.3%) or as a way to stimulate societal reflection on injustices in the workplace (7.1%). A few also expressed the intention to hold the company accountable (4.0%) or to warn potential employees about the company (3.2%). Only 1.6% of respondents used social media as a preliminary step before discussing the issue with their managers.

Figure 29. Main reasons for speaking up on social media



Source: own elaboration

Silence responses

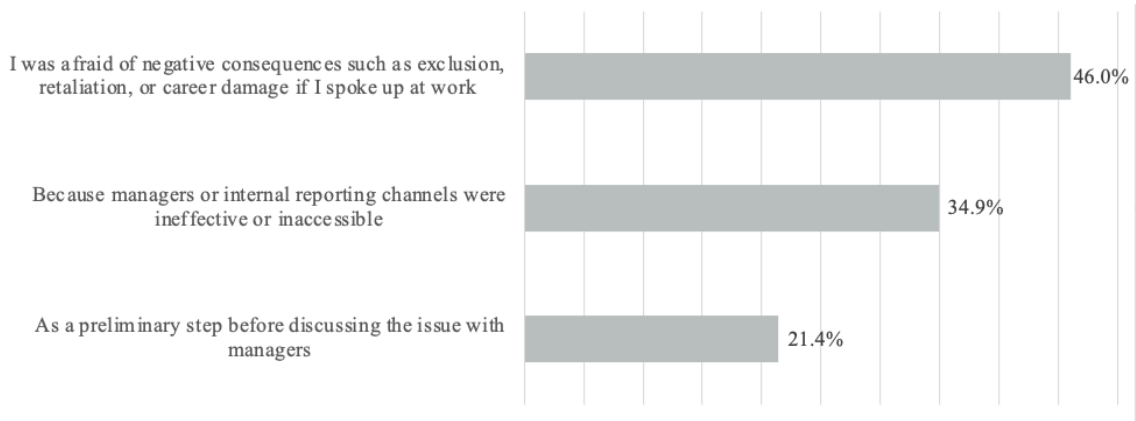
Only a small proportion of respondents (3.4%) stated that they had remained silent both at work (with managers or colleagues) and outside of work (with family, friends or on social media). For these individuals, the most commonly cited reasons for their silence were fear of damaging professional relationships (n=3) and the influence of cultural background discouraging open expression (n=3). Other cited reasons were the fear of adverse consequences such as criticism, exclusion or dismissal (n=2), the belief that speaking out would not have changed anything (n=2) and the concern of being perceived as a whiner (n=2). Other reasons given were the desire to protect one's reputation (n=2), previous negative experiences following an attempt to speak up (n=1), and "other" reasons not listed in the questionnaire (n=3). These included feeling unsure whether the problem was due to their own lack of ability or the environment, particularly in the early stages of their career; reluctance to burden family members with their concerns, which led to them remaining silent for long periods despite escalating problems; and a lack of awareness of the importance of setting boundaries with superiors, influenced by cultural norms that discourage confronting authority figures.

When asked whether their managers had noticed that something was wrong in the specific situation, the answers were evenly split: two said yes, two said they did not know, and

one said no. In terms of action taken by managers, one believed that their supervisor had tried to get the situation under control, while two did not know and two said that no action had been taken. These results illustrate that the silence of those who remained silent was mainly due to relationship problems, perceived hopelessness and a lack of visibility or intervention from the manager.

Among the participants who spoke up outside the organization but remained silent internally (n=126), this behavior reflects a form of indirect silence shaped by internal organizational conditions (Figure 30). The most frequently cited reason (46%) was fear of negative consequences in the workplace, such as ostracism, retaliation or career damage. This finding highlights that even those who found the courage to voice their concerns externally still felt that internal voice as too risky or unsafe. In addition, 34.9% of participants indicated that they did not speak up internally because they felt internal channels or formal reporting mechanisms were ineffective or inaccessible. 21.4% of respondents said they chose to talk externally, mostly with family and friends, as a preliminary step before discussing the issue with their manager, suggesting that they were seeking emotional validation or strategic advice.

Figure 30. Indirect forms of silence

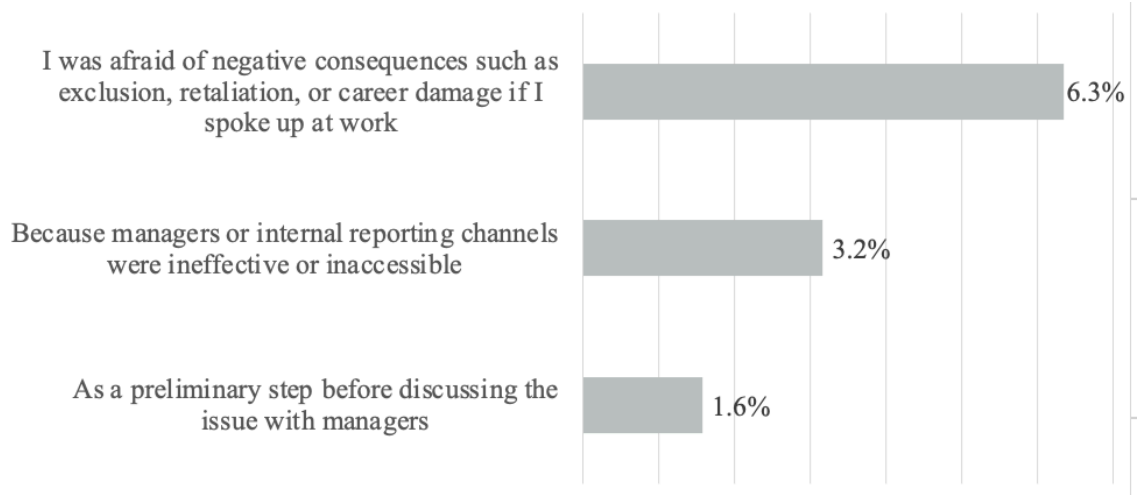


Source: own elaboration

While the majority of external voice occurred in private, only 6.3% turned to social media (Figure 31). Five respondents cited fear of retaliation as a reason for not speaking out internally, three respondents mentioned the ineffectiveness of internal channels and only two respondents saw external expression as a preliminary step. This low figure is remarkable when considering that the questionnaire was distributed via Reddit

communities, which are generally oriented toward public expression and peer discussion. This suggests that even in online environments where anonymity is maintained, individuals are reluctant to share their workplace experiences publicly, further highlighting the deep concerns around disclosure and potential consequences. This may be due to reputational risks, while the private, external voice serves as a safer alternative when internal channels are blocked or insecure.

Figure 31. Indirect forms of silence



Source: own elaboration

Exit responses

The data collected in each section underscores the complexity and contextual nature of the decisions of employees to leave toxic work environments and shows that quitting is rarely a linear or uniform response. Rather, it is shaped by a confluence of individual agency, organizational behavior, and limitations. While a significant proportion of participants across all sections reported successfully leaving the company where the toxic situation occurred (37%), these cases were far from the norm. For instance, for those who decided not to talk to anyone, only one out of five respondents managed to leave the company, while others faced significant barriers such as unsuccessful attempts, circumstantial constraints (e.g. waiting for a part-time contract to end), or ambivalence about whether to take action.

Among the 146 participants, responses to the question “Are you still working for the company where the toxic situation occurred?” reveal a nearly even split. A slight majority

(47.3%) reported that they were still employed at the organization, while 43.2% had left. An additional 9.6% selected “other”. Qualitative responses within this category point to situations such as being fired after raising concerns or being employed at one location while simultaneously experiencing toxicity at another within the same organization. Others were in the process of leaving or undergoing investigations for psychological injuries tied to their workplace experience, including one respondent who described being on provisional compensation.

Among participants who chose to voice their concerns both internally or externally, over one-third (34%) reported having successfully left the organization. However, for 17.7% of respondents, leaving was attempted but ultimately not possible, reflecting structural or personal constraints such as job market limitations, financial insecurity, or procedural barriers (e.g. being fired before they could resign). An additional 20.6% expressed intent to leave but had not yet taken action, suggesting a state of indecision or limited opportunity to transition. Only 4.3% had not considered leaving at all, which emphasizes how rare it is to remain completely passive in the face of toxicity. The remaining 23.4% selected or described “other” situations. These include instances of being terminated after speaking up, being forced to relocate or transfer within the organization without resolution, remaining in the company while job-seeking, or experiencing employer retaliation (e.g. firing after requesting accommodations or HR intervention). Others reported continuing their roles remotely as a coping strategy or leaving due to temporary contracts ending rather than through a direct decision to quit. Taken together, these cases demonstrate how the decision to exit, even when pursued or considered, is often influenced by a combination of external constraints, organizational inaction, and the complex effects associated with speaking up.

7.6 Discussion

This study investigated how employees respond to toxic work environments, with particular attention to their communicative responses of voice, silence, dissent, and exit, and how managerial actions or inactions influence these responses. It combined qualitative narratives with quantitative survey data that provided a complementary view of the topic.

The findings from the content analysis show that toxicity in the workplace occurs mainly because of micro-organizational problems, such as incivility, bullying and abuses of power. Macro-organizational problems, such as poor management and poor communication culture, also have an impact. Participants frequently identify the problem in poor communication, rigid hierarchies, excessive workloads and inadequate management support as the main causes of a toxic environment. This supports previous research on toxic organizational cultures (Cannon, 2022; McCulloch, 2016), which shows that these dysfunctions often create the conditions in which toxicity can thrive. Participants also described issues of micromanagement, gaslighting, and favoritism that reinforced power imbalances, undermined trust, and diminished sense of autonomy and psychological safety. These behaviors are consistent with the concept of toxic leadership (Tepper, 2000; Schyns and Schilling, 2013), particularly in contexts where accountability mechanisms were perceived to be weak or absent. Participants frequently reported experiences of bullying, gossip, social exclusion and mobbing, often facilitated by the complicity or silence of other team members. This highlights a pervasive culture of interpersonal hostility in teams. Such dynamics reflect aggression and bullying (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Giacalone and Rosenfeld, 1987), suggesting that toxicity is not limited to managerial misbehavior but can also be reinforced by interactions with other colleagues and group norms.

Consistent with these themes, the survey analysis revealed that the most frequently cited problems across the sample were toxic managers, organizational culture, mental health struggles and antisocial behaviors. These confirm the themes identified in the qualitative phase and highlight the systemic nature of toxicity in different organizational contexts.

One particularly notable finding is the distribution of toxic experiences across organizations of different sizes: toxicity was most commonly reported in very large or very small organizations. In large companies, the impersonal nature of bureaucratic systems and the perceived inaccessibility of leadership contributed to a sense of invisibility and disengagement. In contrast, participants in smaller companies, which are often family-run or subject to rigid hierarchies, reported high levels of favoritism, interpersonal tensions and authoritarian leadership styles. Despite the differences in size and structure, these environments led to similar emotional outcomes such as burnout,

isolation and emotional exhaustion, reflecting the detrimental effects of misalignment of values and lack of autonomy (Maslach et al., 2001).

A central theme of the results from content analysis and survey concerns communication responses and the complexity of employee voice in toxic contexts. The data from the content analysis shows that silence was often a calculated response characterized by fear, previous negative experiences, or a sense of futility. Many participants described making a conscious decision to remain silent, particularly when they were afraid of retaliation or lack of support. Many participants turned to indirect or displaced forms of expression, confiding in friends, family or online spaces and avoiding confrontation in the workplace. This behavior reflects a general lack of perceived psychological safety and limited trust in internal reporting mechanisms. Fear of retaliation and doubts about the effectiveness of internal reporting emerged as important deterrents, highlighting the perceived risks and low expected benefits of organizational reporting channels.

Interestingly, only a small minority of respondents used social media to express their experiences, despite the survey being shared via Reddit communities. This shows the difference between simply viewing content and actively sharing personal experiences online. It also suggests that people are still concerned about the risks to their reputation and the stigma associated with speaking out in public. In some cases, silence emerged as a deliberate and protective strategy rather than a sign of passive acceptance. Participants who remained silent often stated that they feared jeopardizing their professional relationships, that they had internalized cultural norms that discouraged dissent, or that they doubted themselves, especially those who were still at the beginning of their careers.

The content analysis also shows that when employees tried to speak up, they often faced defensiveness, lack of action, or even retaliation from managers instead of support. When participants attempted to speak up internally, managerial responses often reinforced silence rather than encouraging dialog. This finding is consistent with the survey analysis. Consistent with Garner (2014), managerial responses often reflected dismissal or justification of the status quo rather than engagement or support. These tendencies illustrate a broader problem of managers not responding to concerns and point to a leadership style that avoids problems or acts defensively rather than dealing with problems in a helpful and constructive way (Rayner and Cooper, 2003). This is particularly concerning given the role managers play in enabling or suppressing voice.

Even when employees tried in good faith to engage constructively, they were often met with indifference or resistance, reinforcing disengagement and mistrust.

Ultimately, the topic of exit proved to be a complex process. While a large proportion of participants reported leaving or attempting to leave their toxic work, many were prevented from doing so by financial pressure, contractual restrictions or fears around job security. This shows that voicing concerns does not always solve the problem and can even lead to people leaving the company if the company remains inflexible. Importantly, several participants described emotional costs such as burnout, anxiety and depression, supporting existing research findings on the health consequences of high-demand and controlled work environments (Maslach et al., 2001; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007).

Overall, the integration of qualitative and quantitative results paints a picture of a general toxic organizational climate that is both structurally and communicatively weak. Employees often use protective strategies, from indirect expression of opinion to complete silence, not because they are not engaged, but because they perceive it as ineffective, unsafe or futile to speak up (e.g. Morrison and Milliken, 2000). This perception is reinforced by recurring managerial inaction, inadequate or inaccessible feedback channels, and organizational cultures that normalize silence and discourage voicing dissent. In such environments, toxicity tends to go unaddressed and becomes integrated into daily operations (e.g. Stalcup, 2012), leading to widespread frustration, disappointment and burnout among employees.

The consequences for companies are extensive: direct impacts on employee well-being and untreated toxicity that undermines trust in leadership, weakens morale and jeopardizes the psychological contract between employer and employee (e.g. Cannon, 2022). As the data shows, this also manifests in increased turnover intentions and actual resignations: even employees who initially tried to voice their concerns often chose to leave when they found managerial inaction or resistance. This leads to a costly cycle for organizations, where the loss of talent is aggravated by the damage to reputation and the financial load of ongoing recruitment, onboarding and training. High turnover also disrupts team cohesion, institutional memory and productivity, undermining the long-term stability and growth of the organization (e.g. Housman and Minor, 2015). To break this cycle, companies need to go beyond performative gestures and invest in meaningful intentions of change. Future interventions should focus on cultivating psychological

safety as a prerequisite for speaking up and fostering a climate in which employees feel empowered to voice their concerns without fear of retaliation. This requires not only fostering authentic dialog but also ensuring that managers are properly trained, held accountable and supported to respond constructively to feedback. Only through a sustained commitment to these principles can organizations begin to eradicate toxic cultures and create healthier, more resilient and sustainable workplaces where employees can thrive and contribute fully.

Theoretical implications

The results of this study have several theoretical implications for the literature on toxicity in the workplace (e.g. McCulloch, 2016; Harvey et al., 2017), employee communicative behaviors, particularly in the areas of voice and silence (e.g. Morrison, 2023), toxic management (Tepper, 2000; Schyns and Schilling, 2013), and burnout (Maslach et al., 2001; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007).

The findings strengthen the conceptualization of toxicity as a phenomenon embedded in interpersonal relationships and organizational structures. It extends previous research (e.g. McCulloch, 2016; Cannon, 2022) by showing how toxic cultures emerge through a combination of inadequate communication, unclear roles, managerial neglect and damaging group dynamics. Toxicity is shown to be perpetuated by both top-down management failure and bottom-up interpersonal hostility, suggesting that it should be treated as a systemic rather than an episodic organizational problem.

The study reinforces the conceptualization of employee voice and silence as strategic and contextual behaviors, which is consistent with the literature that frames these responses as influenced by perceived safety, efficacy, and relational dynamics. The integration of qualitative narratives and quantitative analysis emphasizes the multidimensional nature of communicative responses and shows that voice and silence often coexist, change over time, or take indirect forms depending on perceived risks and opportunities.

In addition, the study contributes to theory by illustrating how toxic environments confine traditional upward communication and displace expression to informal, external or emotionally motivated channels such as peer conversations or online forums.

Importantly, the findings show that inaction or defensive responses from managers silence employees and also weaken their trust in the organization, which in turn reinforces the cycle of disengagement and withdrawal. Managers were often perceived as passive or complicit, reinforcing silence and disengagement. This suggests a culture in which avoidance and defense are normal and in which manager behavior actively contributes to encouraging, ignoring, or punishing voice.

Building on the concepts of voice, silence and dissent (e.g. Morrison, 2023), the study also shows that communicative behaviors in toxic environments are not simply reactive, but strategic and contextual. Employees are often caught in a perceived trade-off between expressing opinions and protecting themselves. They choose silence as a rational strategy in unsafe environments. The findings deepen the understanding of how silence, dissent, and external venting (e.g. with family, friends, or online) function as alternative mechanisms of expression in the absence of internal trust and support.

The data also confirm and extend existing models of toxic management (Tepper, 2000; Schyns and Schilling, 2013) by showing how characteristics such as micromanagement, gaslighting, favoritism, and avoidance merge into broader managerial unresponsiveness.

Finally, the findings illustrate how toxic work environments, particularly those characterized by high demands and control, contribute to burnout, chronic stress, anxiety and emotional exhaustion (e.g. Maslach et al., 2001; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). The study links burnout to work overload, communicative and emotional stress. It shows how the inability to express opinions, the experience of retaliation and the collapse of psychological safety serve as ways to disengagement and exit.

Managerial implications

The results of this study offer managerial implications for organizations seeking to address and prevent toxic work environments. The results underscore the central role of managerial behavior in shaping communicative responses of employees. When managers dismiss concerns, show emotional distance or remain inactive, employees are more likely to remain silent, withdraw or express their dissatisfaction outside the organization, undermining both trust and internal cohesion. Managers are therefore called to recognize that their reactions affect the well-being of the individual and indicate the perceived safety

or risk of speaking up. Proactive listening, emotional validation and tangible follow-up are critical to creating a climate in which employees feel safe to speak up. The low levels of innovation, participation and collaboration reported by participants also suggest that many toxic environments are also characterized by disengagement and hierarchical rigidity. Organizations should invest in building participative cultures and transparent feedback mechanisms where voice is seen as a valuable resource rather than a threat. Finally, recognizing the early signs of communicative withdrawal, such as silence, direct or indirect complaints or external venting, can help organizations intervene before toxicity becomes the norm and leads to turnover, burnout or reputational damage. To this end, managers should also monitor dissent that occurs outside of formal channels, such as in personal networks or online communities, which may indicate unresolved internal tensions. Recognizing these signals can provide early insight into internal discontent and enable timely organizational responses before they escalate into public crises.

Limitations and future directions

This study has several limitations that should be taken into account in future research. First, the sample is limited and was self-selected and recruited through Reddit communities focused on toxicity in the workplace, which may have attracted individuals with particularly negative experiences and limited the generalizability of the results. Although the context allowed for valuable insights and the inclusion of underrepresented voices, it may have favored the emergence of particularly severe or emotionally salient experiences.

Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the survey limits the ability to assess how the communication behavior and response of an organization evolve. Relying on self-report also carries risks in terms of recall bias and subjective interpretations of events.

Future research could address these limitations by using longitudinal studies, expanding the sample frame to include participants from a broader range of industries and communication climates, and incorporating data from multiple sources, such as managerial perspectives, organizational documents or public statements from employees related to toxicity.

Finally, further studies could examine the specific conditions under which employees move from internal to external voice or from silence to action to better understand its evolution in toxic environments.

Conclusion

The decisions of employees to speak up, remain silent, or express dissent are communicative behaviors through which power, trust, and values are constantly negotiated in organizations nowadays affected by social, technological, and cultural transformations.

Voice, silence, and dissent emerged in this dissertation as central mechanisms that determine whether organizations can learn, innovate, and maintain stakeholder trust in increasingly complex environments. In this historical moment marked by increasing sociopolitical polarization and widespread value tensions, these communicative behaviors become urgent dynamics through which employees interpret their organizations and assess the integrity, fairness, and responsiveness of their leaders. Employee voice, silence, and dissent actively shape organizational learning, innovation and legitimacy, functioning as strategic responses that help organizations address uncertainty, ethical tension, and the interdependence of contemporary work.

As seen throughout the dissertation, global crises, social justice movements, geopolitical instability, conflicting value systems and sociopolitical pressures expose organizations to constant examination, as employees increasingly expect their employers to demonstrate integrity, inclusivity, and care by taking clear positions on socially relevant issues. This environment makes corporate communicative choices significantly more complex and directly influences organizational decision-making and communication climates.

At the same time, the rise of hybrid and flexible work models, along with increased attention to mental health, work–life balance, and meaningful work, has redefined employees' perceptions and expectations of the organizational environment. This shift is reframing the employment relationship. Employees now expect work environments that are supportive, respectful, and aligned with their personal and professional values. Beyond compensation and career advancement, they seek clear boundaries, recognition, and meaningful participation. These expectations are setting new standards for acceptable work and reshaping the psychological contract between employees and organizations.

Managing employee communicative behaviors has therefore become a pressing priority, as the way organizations listen, respond, and act on employee concerns determines their

credibility both internally and externally. These changes make communicative behaviors a central organizational issue and position the management of voice, silence, and dissent as key priorities for maintaining trust and managing complexity. This is amplified by the pervasive role of social media, which multiplies the arenas in which employees voice concerns, creating both vulnerabilities and opportunities for organizations.

Within this changing landscape, *employee voice* turned out to be a critical driver of organizational learning, innovation, and reputation, positioning employees as strategic and active communicators whose expressions can strengthen or undermine stakeholder relations. Across the empirical studies conducted and presented in this dissertation, climates of trust, fairness, and participation actively fostered constructive communicative behaviors, with internal communication functioning as an enabling process that generates intangible assets such as knowledge and engagement. However, employees also proved to be potential disruptors of organizational systems. This dual role as both contributors and challengers underscores the importance of organizational climates that encourage voice while constructively managing dissent and silence.

Employee silence emerged as a deliberate communicative choice resulting from calculated assessments of risks and benefits of employees, reflecting evaluations of whether speaking up is perceived as safe, meaningful, or socially acceptable. The findings of this dissertation suggest that silence often indicates underlying organizational problems linked to fear of retaliation, reputational concerns or the vulnerability of marginalized groups, though it may also arise from apathy, disengagement, or lack of confidence. Silence, in these cases, functions as a strategic response to relational and contextual pressures, serving as a protective strategy in hostile contexts. However, it simultaneously undermines organizational learning by withholding knowledge and weakening trust, emphasizing the critical importance of climates that enable voice and dissent to preserve both employee well-being and organizational functioning.

Employee dissent, although often perceived as disruptive, resulted in a co-creative resource that enhances decision-making, organizational learning, and trust when acknowledged and managed constructively. Its forms vary depending on the direction of the communication: employees may express their concerns directly to people in positions of power or influence in the form of *upward dissent*; they may discuss their views *laterally* with peers and colleagues who have little authority to make changes; and they

may *displace* their frustrations outside the organization, for example with friends, family, or on social media. The dissertation examined specifically how dissent spreads within organizations and the consequences that arise when it is not acknowledged or addressed, demonstrating that when employee disagreement is ignored or suppressed, dissent loses its constructive potential and instead leads to disengagement, withdrawal, and, in some cases, external expressions of dissatisfaction that can damage trust, morale, and organizational reputation.

This research placed at the center of cultural analysis and organizational change two focal employee communicative behaviors that have become decisive for understanding contemporary organizational life: *employee activism* and the *dissenting voices* of employees experiencing *toxic work environments*. These two domains were selected to address knowledge gaps identified during the dissertation: the limited understanding of employee activism under sociopolitical pressure and the underexplored communicative responses to toxicity as a systemic organizational condition. By examining employee expression both directed toward sociopolitical issues that challenge corporate positioning or shaped by harmful workplace dynamics that inhibit voice, the dissertation sheds light on how communicative behaviors operate at the intersection of identity, power, and organizational purpose.

On one side, employee activism involves situations where employee concerns are expressed both inside and outside the organization, extending voice beyond corporate boundaries to challenge or support the company. On the other side, toxic work environments illustrate conditions where harmful organizational dynamics suppress expression, normalize silence, and displace dissent into informal or external arenas.

Employee activism was explored in two studies from both managerial and employee perspectives. Interviews with managers and communication professionals in Italy and the United States (Study 1) offered insights into how organizations interpret and respond to employee activism, while the employee perspective (Study 2) examined the individual and organizational factors influencing the willingness of employees to engage in activism, and the role of corporate and CEO activism in these relationships. Toxic work environments were analyzed through narratives and perceptions of employees (Study 3), which exposed how toxic conditions develop and how employees perceive managerial roles in either perpetuating or mitigating dysfunction.

From the perspective of employee activism, the dissertation clarified the distinction between forms of activism supported or facilitated by organizations and those that emerge autonomously from employees and are independent of any institutional mandate. This differentiation is crucial for understanding the diverse meanings, functions, and organizational implications of activism. Study 1 highlighted the core conceptual and practical dimensions of the phenomenon, its motivations, underlying values, mobilization tactics, influential factors, and communicative management strategies. Communication professionals in Italy and the United States revealed how organizations interpret activism, navigate its implications, and reconcile value-driven requests with reputational concerns. Employee activism emerged as a multidimensional communicative practice, understood as employee-driven prosocial engagement and active citizenship, and as an organization-led process of participation and inclusion that positions employees as active contributors whose voices may extend beyond organizational boundaries. Insights from Study 2 added how activism can manifest as a collaborative and internally aligned process when legitimized and encouraged by the organization, or as a corrective and sometimes adversarial form of voice when initiated by individuals who perceive gaps between promoted values and organizational practice.

Moreover, Study 3 positioned toxic work environments as organizational environments where unethical, abusive, or harmful behavior is normalized and embedded, fostering a climate of anxiety, stress, and disengagement. TWEs were investigated through structured content analysis of employee narratives, uncovering how employees experience harmful climates, interpret managerial behaviors, and articulate communicative withdrawal or displaced dissent. The typology of toxic phenomena proposed in the dissertation captures the many forms organizational toxicity can take. A key insight from the narratives is employees' varying willingness to speak up depending on the type of toxicity they encounter. People are more likely to voice concerns about interpersonal mistreatment but tend to remain silent when facing chronic overload and burnout. This highlights a persistent organizational taboo: the difficulty of challenging a *culture of pseudo-productivity* that maximizes effort, erodes well-being, and undermines performance. As long as chronic stress, unsustainable workloads, and constant urgency are seen as signs of commitment or professional strength, employees are more likely to

normalize these conditions and suppress dissent, reinforcing a communicative silence around issues that are structurally harmful but culturally legitimized.

These complementary empirical perspectives illustrated how communicative behaviors operate under enabling and harmful organizational conditions, deepening understanding of the relational, contextual, and value-based dimensions of ECBs.

Each study, as seen, contributed original insights. In addition, several *transversal themes* emerged, showing how communicative behaviors develop within organizations and the conditions that encourage or discourage employees from speaking up, remaining silent, or expressing dissent. These include the role of employees as active communicators across internal and external communication arenas, the importance of a climate of voice and psychological safety to enhance employee activism and prevent toxic culture normalization, managerial responsiveness and leadership exposure, dialogic listening, and risk management.

The role of employees as active communicators across internal and external communication arenas

Across the dissertation, *employees* emerged as *active communicators* both inside and outside the organizations, in a way that reflects the growing permeability between internal and external communication. This reflects broader organizational ecosystems shaped by digitalization, polarized public debates, and value conflicts that encourage employees to use multiple channels to express expectations, concerns, or disagreements. As findings showed, employee voice now occurs across multiple arenas simultaneously, going beyond internal-external distinctions and reshaping how organizational communication is managed.

This dynamic is especially evident in employee activism, where employees use their voices to engage with sociopolitical issues that can both enhance and challenge organizational reputation, positioning, and credibility. Because employees can act as either advocates or adversaries, organizations face the challenge of constructively guiding voice through internal channels. Failure to do so increases the likelihood that employee expression will move beyond organizational boundaries and control. Interviewees revealed how employee activism has become closely associated with cultural change

within companies, reflecting a shift toward empowerment, active participation, and openness in corporate decision-making. It involves employees exercising their freedom of expression and acting as “active citizens”.

Findings showed that effective approaches to managing voice, silence, and dissent vary significantly depending on individual, organizational, and cultural context. In the case of employee activism, the cross-national comparison of the two countries highlighted how broader sociopolitical conditions, legal frameworks, and cultural expectations shape risk assessments and communication choices. National culture, legal frameworks, and socio-economic conditions create distinct expectations regarding authority and expression, which influence whether employees engage constructively, remain silent, or displace concerns externally.

This aspect also manifests in the *forms* and *directions* that activism takes. For example, in Italy, where union structures are robust, employee concerns are more often channeled through formal institutional mechanisms, resulting in more structured and collectively organized forms of voice. In fact, Italian employee activism tends toward advocacy activism supporting corporate positions and remains almost exclusively internally directed. In contrast, in the United States, where union presence is weak, employee activism tends to emerge in more individualized and direct forms, with adversarial orientations and instances of externally directed activism.

Demographic and generational differences further shape these contextual dynamics, as diverse employee groups bring distinct priorities and expectations. In the field of activism, younger generations, particularly where traditional sources of identification such as family and religion have weakened, increasingly seek alignment between personal values and organizational stances on socially relevant issues. Generational trends further highlighted contextual differences, especially in value alignment, identity, and meaningful work. Younger employees in both countries saw communicative engagement to reconcile personal ethical expectations with organizational purpose but acted at different speeds and through diverse channels depending on cultural norms and institutional infrastructures. For example, in Italy, younger employees tend to become active more gradually, integrating into organizational life before mobilizing around issues, while in the United States, younger employees demonstrate immediate

engagement with activism, reflecting different cultural expectations about individual agency and organizational membership.

Another aspect involved is *missing voices*. In both employee activism and toxic work environments, silence among certain groups often resulted from fear of retaliation, perceived futility, marginalization, or cultural norms that discourage expression. These silences, which frequently regard marginalized, blue-collar, or platform economy workers, highlight persistent inequities in access to voice. Findings showed how formal mechanisms alone cannot ensure inclusion unless organizations actively address the barriers that silence specific groups and integrate diversity into the design of their voice systems. When such access is lacking, employees who increasingly act as active communicators and representatives of their organizations are more likely to express their frustrations and concerns externally, through personal networks, digital platforms, or social media. In doing so, they bring internal problems into the public sphere, where narratives can quickly circulate and influence external perceptions. This dynamic increases reputational vulnerability and increases the likelihood that unresolved internal tensions will develop into broader public controversies or crises. In Study 2 on employee activism, in some cases, it emerged that Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) helped to address the issue of missing voices by providing an organizational space where those who often remain unheard can express their perspectives and concerns. In this way, ERGs contribute to dialog, mutual understanding, and the co-creation of a more inclusive and participatory organizational culture.

Climate of voice and psychological safety to enhance employee activism and prevent toxic culture normalization

Across the studies, the *climate of voice* and *psychological safety* were found to be critical. The consequences of failing to cultivate enabling communicative environments are reflected in measurable negative organizational outcomes. The dissertation demonstrated that closed communication climates constrain expression and undermine organizational performance. Organizations experiencing closed communication climates risk facing multiple challenges: *knowledge loss*, as critical information fails to reach decision-makers; *trust erosion*, reducing collaboration and collective problem-solving; *reputational risks*, as suppressed concerns move to external channels beyond

organizational control; *lower talent attraction*, particularly among employees who prioritize purpose and values alignment; and *the risk of crisis escalation*, as issues that could have been addressed internally instead may spread into the public sphere.

In the context of employee activism, particularly in Study 2, supportive climates fostered communicative intentions, encouraging employees to speak up, engage in discussion, and advocate for social or organizational change. A positive climate of voice and a strong sense of identification were key enablers of communicative activism. Psychological safety and identification enabled activism to shift from tension to constructive organizational dialog. When these elements were present, employees felt empowered, aligned with organizational purpose, and motivated to participate constructively; when weaker, activism intentions appeared fragile and highly sensitive to managerial and organizational signals. A shift in mindset is therefore needed. Based on these insights, this dissertation proposed that employee activism should be seen as a strategic resource that can drive meaningful social change and improve organizational outcomes. When organizations adopt this perspective, they create space for open dialog and collective learning. Instead of resisting employees' concerns, leaders can use these expressions of voice to strengthen trust, align organizational values with societal expectations, and foster a more engaged and committed workforce.

The climate of voice is closely linked to the development of a *speak-up culture*, where employees feel encouraged and safe to share ideas, concerns, and feedback openly without fear of negative consequences. Findings from all empirical studies demonstrated that culture strongly influences communicative behaviors, continuously sustaining or undermining the openness that defines positive climates of voice. In organizations that foster open internal communication and participative decision-making, employees report greater trust, collaboration, and willingness to contribute. In contrast, hierarchical and defensive environments reinforce silence and disengagement, indicating that culture determines how communication operates in practice.

Moreover, when psychological safety is lacking and employee voice is suppressed, employees engage in calculated silence even when they witness operational problems, ethical concerns, or risks, as shown in the study on toxic work environments. This silence is a deliberate and strategic response to a hostile environment, rather than a passive one. However, it is costly for the organization: important information that could prevent

mistakes, improve processes, or protect the well-being of employees is withheld, while harmful behaviors and norms gradually become accepted as part of the organizational culture. In toxic work environments, in fact, the absence of psychological safety and an enabling voice climate was a defining feature. Employees in Study 3 often described how fear, futility, and reputational risk silenced them or pushed dissent into displaced forms, such as conversations with peers and family, rather than direct internal communication. Interestingly, only a small minority of respondents used social media to share their experiences, even though the survey was distributed through online communities. This highlights the gap between viewing content and actively sharing personal stories online, suggesting that reputational anxieties and stigma remain powerful deterrents to public expression. In the contexts of employee activism and toxic work environments, voice, silence, and dissent emerged as strategic and contextual behaviors. These findings align with existing literature, which shows that when employees perceive environments as safe, fair, and effective, they are more likely to signal problems, propose improvements, and support organizational goals, whereas perceived danger or futility leads to silence or exit.

Another aspect that deserves further emphasis is the importance of multicultural and intercultural dynamics in shaping voice, silence, and dissent, which emerged especially from Study 1. In global organizations, diverse cultural norms coexist, and these differences can create ambiguity or misinterpretation. Behaviors considered constructive in one context may be interpreted as disrespectful in another. In this sense, intercultural communication can serve as a lever for strengthening psychological safety in contemporary organizations. Developing intercultural competence, through awareness of implicit norms, dialogic practices, and culturally sensitive listening, can mitigate these risks and foster environments where individuals feel recognized, protected, and free to express concerns or ideas without fear of exclusion. Thus, intercultural communication may act as a bridge across perspectives and as a structural condition for psychological safety, enabling organizations to transform diversity into a source of collective learning, constructive dissent, and well-being.

The type of organizational culture a company adopts and maintains over time is a primary force shaping how its members interpret experiences, make decisions, and address challenges. In employee activism, a purpose-driven orientation has emerged as a functional necessity for managing contemporary employee communication behaviors. In

Study 3, when corporate and CEO activism were aligned with organizational values, employees perceived activism as consistent with the organizational mission and felt encouraged to engage in constructive expression. Conversely, when organizations were already perceived as authentic and trustworthy, activism was less necessary, as employees expected leadership to act responsibly without corrective pressure. These findings highlighted authenticity as both a catalyst and a regulator of employee activism. In this way, authenticity can reduce the perceived need for corrective voice by signaling responsiveness and integrity.

In toxic work environments, weak or dysfunctional cultures lead to low participation, limited collaboration, and reduced innovation, making it a cultural issue that requires cultural transformation rather than individual intervention. Toxic cultures often begin when small acts of incivility are accepted and normalized, gradually leading to more widespread harmful behaviors. Preventing this escalation requires proactive strategies that foster respect, cooperation, and no tolerance for toxicity. Toxicity harms employee well-being, erodes trust in leadership, lowers morale, and breaks the psychological contract between employer and employee. Results also showed higher turnover intentions and actual resignations, as many employees who initially voiced concerns eventually left after encountering managerial inaction or resistance. This results in costly problems of talent loss, reputational damage, and ongoing expenses for recruitment, onboarding, and training. High turnover further disrupts team cohesion, knowledge retention, and productivity, threatening the long-term stability and growth of the organization. This creates reinforcing cycles: communicative withdrawal accelerates trust erosion, turnover destabilizes social cohesion, and dysfunction becomes embedded through cultural adaptation.

For these reasons, to create sustainable competitive advantage, organizations are called to cultivate participative and inclusive cultures in which voice is genuinely valued as a collective resource rather than perceived as a threat.

Managerial responsiveness and leadership exposure

Managerial responsiveness and leadership exposure are crucial in determining whether voice grows or recedes and shaping organizational culture and sustaining supportive communicative behaviors.

Managerial responsiveness is the ability of managers to acknowledge employees' input and translate it into concrete action, demonstrating openness and accountability. From both the perspectives of employee activism and toxic work environments, the findings indicated that managerial responsiveness is essential to ensure employees feel safe to speak up and to prevent communication breakdowns that harm the organization. When managers display toxic or destructive conduct, they harm individual well-being and legitimize similar behaviors among subordinates.

Results from Study 3 showed that toxicity arises on one hand from *micro-organizational factors*, namely from antisocial behaviors and abuse of power, such as micromanagement, favoritism, and interpersonal hostility. On the other hand, it emerges from *macro-organizational factors*, namely poor leadership, communication culture, and lack of psychological safety. These dynamics show that toxicity rarely stems from a few "bad apples" but from systemic conditions where unresponsive leadership, defensive communication norms, and unclear expectations allow harmful behaviors to spread. While many toxic experiences originate in interpersonal interactions, they persist and intensify when organizational structures and practices fail to address or correct them. These erode trust, autonomy, and psychological safety, leading to widespread burnout, emotional exhaustion, and disengagement, with particularly high prevalence in very large, very small, and rigidly managed organizations.

In toxic work environments, managerial behavior served as the primary mechanism suppressing communication, with the supervisor-employee relationship emerging as the decisive area where voice is either enabled or silenced. This finding reinforces previous research while extending it: the dissertation demonstrated that specific managerial behaviors reflect poor management and actively create unresponsiveness that undermines trust and constrains upward communication. In particular, when managers respond to employee voice with defensiveness or avoidance, they fail to encourage voice and actively normalize silence as the rational organizational strategy, driving employees to withdraw internally or displace dissatisfaction to external arenas beyond organizational control. These dynamics highlight the communicative power of leadership: the tone, style, and attitude expressed shape how employees perceive the legitimacy of voice practices throughout the organization. What is needed is an *inclusive leadership* that listens actively, values diverse perspectives, and fosters a psychologically safe environment

where employees feel empowered to speak up and contribute constructively to organizational learning and improvement.

The findings also highlighted the importance of inclusive leadership for *effective conflict management*, which should go beyond simple mediation to establish reliable communication channels and protections. In this way, organizations can transform inevitable internal disagreements from sources of relational toxicity and silence into constructive opportunities for learning and dialog.

Moreover, leadership visibility, authenticity, and alignment with organizational values emerged as necessary conditions for constructively inspiring and directing employee communication behaviors. In the case of activism, the research clarified the moderating role of corporate and CEO activism in intensifying communicative intentions to act but also demonstrated that these effects are dependent on perceived credibility and value coherence. Study 2 on employee activism advanced understanding of corporate and CEO activism by demonstrating their decisive moderating role in strengthening activist intentions of employees. When leadership is visible, transparent, and consistent with organizational values, employees feel more engaged and perceive activism as aligned with the broader social purpose of the organization. However, this effect operates primarily at the communicative level and remains insufficient for translating intentions into concrete activist behaviors. These findings revealed what the literature defines as an *intention-behavior*. Study 2 specifically distinguished between *communicative intentions and actionable intentions of employee activism*. Communicative intentions refer to the motives of employees to voice their concerns or support for activism in the organizational context, i.e., their willingness to raise concerns, engage in discussions, and advocate for change. Actionable intentions refer to direct and observable behaviors such as protesting, signing petitions, or organizing initiatives. While employees may express strong communicative intentions to engage in activism, translating these into concrete actions is hindered by risks, barriers, and a lack of enabling structures. This is also related to the noteworthy finding from Study 2 that engagement does not drive activism. Employees may mobilize even without a strong attachment to the organization when they perceive value misalignment, ethical concerns, or leadership inaction that calls for corrective voice. This insight highlights a broader management paradox: although organizations often succeed in cultivating a workforce that is apparently satisfied and

committed to everyday tasks, this level of engagement rarely translates into the collective, sustained, and actionable intent required for meaningful change. The research on activism in this dissertation clearly illustrated this intention–action gap, an aspect also noted in other organizational domains, showing that motivation alone is not enough. Turning intentions into action depends on the presence of opportunity structures, reliable protections, and a sense of efficacy, factors that determine whether desired forms of voice remain aspirational or become concrete. Managers should focus on identifying and addressing the practical and psychological barriers that prevent employees from turning their good communicative intentions into concrete actions. This may involve creating dedicated advocacy channels, employee resource groups, and actively demonstrating leadership support for specific internal actions.

Dialogic listening

This *responsiveness* is built through listening, acknowledgment, and concrete action, with *authentic and dialogical listening* serving as an essential pillar. The findings consistently showed that organizational listening, from formal mechanisms such as climate surveys and town hall meetings to informal feedback and everyday interactions, plays a central role in cultivating trust. Supervisors play a crucial role in shaping employees' willingness to speak up, as their responsiveness signals whether communication is valued.

In both employee activism and toxic work environments, listening served as the foundation of communicative health. The dissertation highlighted that listening is an active process that validates psychological safety, signals organizational care, and prevents communicative breakdown. In these contexts, Employee Resource Groups have emerged as key enablers of dialog and inclusion, fulfilling a dual role: they act as a bottom-up mechanism for employees to raise concerns and as a strategic managerial tool for listening, risk prevention, and fostering a culture of voice. ERGs enable employees to express concerns that might otherwise go unspoken, strengthening internal trust and inclusivity. This is consistent with previous literature showing that ERGs can catalyze internal social movements and serve as platforms for early issue detection or even internally directed activism. As emerged from Study 1, ERGs should therefore be seen as platforms for community management, useful for early-warning systems of emerging

social issues and as legitimate mediating structures for channeling communicative intentions into collective actions.

The findings further highlighted that *proactive listening, emotional validation, and visible follow-up actions* are essential for restoring psychological safety and encouraging constructive voice. Where these are lacking, employees perceive silence as safer and more rational. This aligns with prior research, which shows that without genuine listening, employees feel their voice is futile, disengage, or withdraw entirely. Conversely, in enabling contexts, transparent communication and consistent feedback reinforce the sense of value and belonging of employees, increasing active participation.

Since most toxic environments are characterized by interpersonal problems, as shown in Study 3, conflict management skills are essential for transforming potentially destructive interactions into opportunities for dialog and mutual understanding. Effective conflict management requires both leaders and employees to handle disagreements constructively, mitigate tensions before they escalate, and facilitate conversations that address underlying concerns rather than merely suppressing symptoms. When organizations systematically develop these skills through training and institutional support, they create conditions where interpersonal friction can be addressed early and in a transparent way, preventing unresolved problems from building up and fueling toxic cultures.

Moreover, early recognition of communicative withdrawal allows leaders at any level and management to intervene before toxicity becomes systemic, preventing burnout, turnover, and potential reputational crises. Monitoring dissent even in informal or external spaces, such as conversations or online communities, can also help organizations detect latent tensions and address them through timely dialogue and organizational action before they escalate.

Risk management

The role of *risk and crisis management* operates as a transversal organizational requirement across all communicative contexts examined in this dissertation. In employee activism, proactive risk communication, clear policies, and participatory approaches constituted the necessary infrastructure for anticipating and preventing crises triggered by activism before they occur. Organizations that strengthen these capabilities gain the

critical capacity to distinguish between constructive, value-driven activism that enhances organizational learning and dysfunctional activism that generates reputational or operational threats. This distinction determines whether activism becomes an organizational asset or liability.

In this context, *voice regulation* becomes a crucial strategic mechanism. The findings showed that ethical guidelines, codes of conduct, whistleblowing procedures, and especially social media policies serve as both protective and enabling tools when supported by commitments against retaliation and constructive responses. These structures reduce reputational risks and create safe spaces for expression, making rules supportive rather than restrictive. This perspective aligns with previous research arguing that such policies, when clearly communicated and supported by non-retaliation assurances, can protect both organizations and employees, fostering organizational climates characterized by clarity about expression boundaries and protection for employees who voice concerns within those boundaries.

However, voice regulation works when it is combined with organizational responsiveness. If policies set clear rules but internal channels fail to lead to meaningful dialog or action, employees will see them as empty formalities and may choose to speak out externally instead, regardless of the official procedures in place.

This preventive orientation proved equally decisive in toxic work environments, where early recognition of communicative withdrawal, i.e., silence, indirect complaints, or displaced dissent, enables timely intervention before dysfunction becomes systemically embedded. Across both domains, preventive risk management emerged as a communicative skill and essential component of a resilient and healthy organization, requiring organizational listening, early detection systems, and cultural accountability. Organizations that cultivate these integrated capabilities position themselves to manage voice constructively: they detect emerging concerns early, engage them through responsive dialog, channel them through appropriate regulatory frameworks, and address them before escalation.

Final remarks

The main contribution of this dissertation lies in understanding that voice, silence and dissent cannot be examined in isolation but should be understood as communicative behaviors embedded in broader sociopolitical, organizational, and cultural transformations marked by polarization, complexity, interdependence, ethical tensions, and changing expectations regarding well-being and purpose that continue to reshape the world of work. By situating these phenomena within broader transformations such as digitalization, new work modalities, and organizational tensions, the studies advanced theoretical understanding of voice, silence and dissent, and provided empirical insights into how employees handle the complex and often contradictory conditions of contemporary work.

The dissertation demonstrated that employees communicate strategically, managing complexity by assessing trust, fairness, safety, and belonging, while organizations influence these behaviors through communication climate, responsiveness, and authenticity. It provided a clear understanding of employee communication behaviors that support organizational learning and help prevent communication breakdowns. The dissertation also contributed by explaining how activism and communicative responses develop in toxic work environments and by identifying new directions for future research in a historical context marked by increasing polarization and widespread difficulty in practicing empathy.

In particular, Study 1 advanced understanding of employee activism from a cross-national and organization-centered perspective. By proposing a three-tier model of national, organizational, and individual dimensions, the study showed how different forms and directions of activism emerge and why they vary across contexts such as Italy and the United States. In doing so, it challenged dominant views of employee activism as primarily disruptive or adversarial and instead positioned it as a phenomenon that can be proactively and culturally tailored, managed through dialogic communication, voice regulation, and alignment among corporate, CEO, and employee activism.

Study 2 distinguished between employees' communicative and actionable activism intentions, showing that these are influenced by different organizational and individual dynamics. Results indicated that a supportive climate of voice, organizational

identification, and transparent corporate and CEO activism foster employees' communicative activism intentions, while also highlighting a persistent intention–action gap that prevents these intentions from translating into concrete behaviors. By revealing this persistent intention–action gap, the study advanced employee activism research by explaining why supportive communication environments legitimize voice without necessarily enabling riskier forms of action.

Study 3 advanced a communication-centered understanding of toxic work environments by showing that employees' responses of voice, silence, dissent, and exit are strategic communicative choices shaped by organizational structures, managerial practices, and communication climates. It demonstrated that silence and indirect expression serve as protective strategies in contexts characterized by weak listening, managerial inaction, and perceived retaliation. Furthermore, by connecting micro-level toxic interactions with macro-level organizational structures and leadership cultures, the study conceptualized workplace toxicity as a systemic phenomenon that progressively constrains internal voice, redirects dissent to external channels, and increases disengagement and exit.

A possible limitation for this dissertation lies in its prevalent focus on a communicative perspective. Future research could further explore how human resources systems may help identify and address toxic conditions at an early stage, in synergy with communication.

Similarly, by focusing on in-depth and self-reported narratives of toxicity shared by self-selected participants in online communities, this study highlighted emotionally intense and often overlooked employee experiences, providing less insight into bystanders' perspectives. Another important direction is therefore the study of “witnessed toxicity”, focusing on how observers perceive harmful situations, how they cope, and how they may unintentionally support or challenge dysfunctional norms. A related area concerns the normalization of harshness and organizational violence in industries such as fashion, luxury, and entertainment, where aggressive behaviors and humiliating practices are often presented as signs of identity, selectivity, or resilience. In these contexts, the language of “toughness” can hide abusive dynamics, silence those affected, and legitimize behaviors that would clearly be considered toxic in other settings. Future studies could also examine how narratives of excellence, competitiveness, and pseudo-productivity justify these practices, and how employees, managers and leaders handle voice, silence and dissent in

environments where strong pressure to conform makes it difficult to question deeply rooted cultural norms.

The intention–behavior gap identified in employee activism highlights the need for studies examining the enabling infrastructures, legal protections, and support mechanisms that influence whether communicative intentions become concrete actions.

Another limitation of this dissertation is that it examines employee voice, silence, and dissent mainly through human-mediated communication processes, without considering the increasing influence of digital and algorithmic systems on how employees express concerns and how organizations listen. The growing use of AI-mediated communication systems, algorithmic listening tools, and automated reporting mechanisms raises new questions about transparency, bias, and psychological safety. Understanding how digital infrastructures shape communicative behaviors and whether they help reduce or intensify existing inequalities is increasingly relevant.

While this dissertation identified the presence of polarized opinions and conflicting forms of activism within organizations, it did not examine in depth how these tensions can be managed internally without reinforcing divisions. A promising line of inquiry concerns the organizational management of polarized activism, especially in contexts where opposing employee groups coexist, such as LGBTQIA+ communities and employees mobilizing around radical religious values. These situations provide a crucial test for leadership and management and highlight the need for approaches that can manage value tensions without deepening internal divisions.

Taken together, the dissertation offered an integrated understanding of employee voice, silence and dissent in empowering and harmful contexts. It clarified the conditions under which organizations learn from voice and protect against silence, and it delineated theoretical advancements and practical insights to cultivate environments where employees can contribute, be heard, and influence business decisions and outcomes, without denying the real constraints, risks and contradictions of contemporary work. In that sense, the dissertation returned to where it began: not with a single prescription for voice, but with a sphere of listening, enabling, learning, adapting and responding that helps organizations manage employee voice across different contexts and adapt to the evolving world of work.

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Appendix A: Employee activism interview guide

Table 10. Employee activism interview guide

English	Italiano
0) Screen question	0) Domanda filtro
Do you currently work for a company/organization?	Lavora attualmente per un'azienda/organizzazione?
If yes, proceed with the following questions	Se la risposta è "Sì", procedi con le seguenti domande.
If not, keep ask "Did you work for a company/organization before"? If yes, proceed with asking questions either in past tense or refer to prior experience and/or current observation of other companies/organizations	Se la risposta è "No", continua chiedendo: "Ha lavorato per un'azienda/organizzazione in precedenza?" Se la risposta è "Sì", procedi con le domande riferendoti all'esperienza passata e/o all'osservazione attuale di altre aziende/organizzazioni, usando il tempo passato.
1) Understanding employee activism and setting the context	1) Comprendere l'attivismo dei collaboratori e definire il contesto
What is your definition/understanding of employee activism?	Qual è la sua definizione/comprensione di attivismo dei collaboratori?
How do you define employee activism in the context of your company/organization?	Come definisce l'attivismo dei collaboratori nel contesto della sua azienda/organizzazione?
Can you mention some high-profile employee activism cases you learned from the news?	Può citare alcuni casi di attivismo dei collaboratori di rilievo di cui è venuto/a a conoscenza attraverso i media?
Do you see employee activism as something separate from participation in trade unions and labor rights?	Ritiene che l'attivismo dei collaboratori sia qualcosa di distinto dalla partecipazione ai sindacati e ai diritti dei lavoratori?

What is your company/organization's perspective on employee activism?	Qual è la prospettiva della sua azienda/organizzazione rispetto all'attivismo dei collaboratori?
Is it viewed positively or negatively?	È percepito positivamente o negativamente?
Is employee activism recognized by your company/organization?	L'attivismo dei collaboratori è riconosciuto dalla sua azienda/organizzazione?
Is it part of your organization's culture?	Fa parte della cultura organizzativa?
Is it a form of corporate purpose and giving?	È considerato una forma di <i>purpose</i> aziendale e di <i>giving</i> ?
How does employee activism manifest in your company/organization?	In che modo l'attivismo dei collaboratori si manifesta nella sua azienda/organizzazione?
2) Categories and forms of employee activism	Categorie e forme di attivismo dei collaboratori
a) Adversary or anti-corporate employee activism	a) Attivismo dei collaboratori <i>adversary o anti-corporate</i>
Did you ever experience worker-led movements and protests <i>against</i> the company/organization/its management/corporate decisions and behaviors? Please consider your current as well as previous work experience	Ha mai vissuto movimenti e proteste guidati dai collaboratori contro l'azienda/l'organizzazione/il management/decisioni e comportamenti aziendali? Consideri sia l'esperienza lavorativa attuale sia quelle precedenti
On which topics/causes did the employees raise their voice?	Su quali temi/cause i collaboratori hanno fatto sentire la propria voce?
Were specific categories of employees taking the lead?	Specifiche categorie di collaboratori hanno assunto la guida?
What objective/s did they pursue?	Quali obiettivi perseguivano?
How/In what ways did the employees coordinate among themselves?	In che modo i collaboratori si sono coordinati tra loro?

How/In what ways did the employees communicate and engage with the external community?	In che modo i collaboratori hanno comunicato e interagito con la comunità esterna?
What tactics did employees employ (petitions, open letters, protest actions, boycotts, public demonstrations etc.)?	Quali tattiche hanno utilizzato (petizioni, lettere aperte, azioni di protesta, boicottaggi, manifestazioni pubbliche ecc.)?
What was the specific role played by social media for mobilization?	Quale ruolo specifico hanno svolto i social media nella mobilitazione?
Did employees act in partnership with external entities (NGOs, associations, consumers, politicians, etc.)?	I collaboratori hanno agito in partnership con entità esterne (ONG, associazioni, consumatori, politici ecc.)?
Did the news media cover the news/how was employee activism framed by the news media?	I media hanno dato copertura alla notizia/come è stato inquadrato l'attivismo dei collaboratori dai media?
Did employee activism obtain resonance on social media too?	L'attivismo dei collaboratori ha ottenuto risonanza anche sui social media?
b) Company communication response/management of employee adversary activism and pressure	b) Risposta comunicativa/gestione da parte dell'azienda all'attivismo <i>adversary</i> e alle pressioni dei collaboratori
If and how has your company/ organization communicated/responded to employees in such instances?	Se sì, in che modo la sua azienda/organizzazione ha comunicato o risposto ai collaboratori in tali circostanze?
And how did it respond to the news media (and/or any other key stakeholder involved/impacted by employee activism)?	E come ha risposto ai media (e/o ad altri stakeholder chiave coinvolti o impattati dall'attivismo dei collaboratori)?
In your opinion, how should a company/organization respond ideally?	Secondo lei, come dovrebbe rispondere idealmente un'azienda/organizzazione?
c) Challenges and impact of employee adversary activism	c) Sfide e impatti dell'attivismo <i>adversary</i> dei collaboratori

In your opinion, in what ways is the organization challenged when employees speak up publicly and collectively as in the case of employee activism? Refer, if possible, to your organizational experience/s	Secondo lei, in che modo l'organizzazione viene messa alla prova quando i collaboratori prendono parola pubblicamente e collettivamente, come nel caso dell'attivismo? Faccia riferimento, se possibile, alla sua esperienza organizzativa
Has the organization taken advantage or at least learned from this experience? In other words, has employee activism produced change on the company/organization/targeted practice/s/were corrective actions taken as a result? (Or dismissal)	L'organizzazione ne ha tratto vantaggio o almeno imparato da questa esperienza? In altre parole, l'attivismo dei collaboratori ha prodotto cambiamento nell'azienda/organizzazione/pratiche prese di mira/sono state adottate azioni correttive come risultato? (O, al contrario, è stato ignorato/dismesso)
d) Employee advocacy	d) Advocacy dei collaboratori
Did you ever experience worker-led movements <i>supporting</i> the company/organization/its management/corporate decisions and behaviors? Please consider your current as well as previous work experience	Ha mai vissuto movimenti guidati dai collaboratori a sostegno dell'azienda/organizzazione/della direzione/di decisioni e comportamenti aziendali? Consideri sia l'esperienza lavorativa attuale sia quelle precedenti
On which topics/causes did the employees raise their voice?	Su quali temi/cause i collaboratori hanno fatto sentire la propria voce?
Were specific categories of employees taking the lead?	Specifiche categorie di collaboratori hanno assunto la guida?
What objective/s did they pursue?	Quali obiettivi perseguivano?
How/In what ways did the employees coordinate among themselves?	In che modo i collaboratori si sono coordinati tra loro?
How/In what ways did the employees communicate and engage with the external community?	In che modo i collaboratori hanno comunicato e interagito con la comunità esterna?
What tactics were employed (open letters, public demonstrations etc.)?	Quali tattiche sono state impiegate (lettere aperte, manifestazioni pubbliche ecc.)?

What was the specific role played by social media for mobilization?	Quale ruolo specifico hanno svolto i social media nella mobilitazione?
Did they act in partnership with external entities (NGOs, associations, consumers, politicians, etc.)?	Hanno agito in partenariato con entità esterne (ONG, associazioni, consumatori, politici ecc.)?
Did the news media cover the news/how was employee activism framed by the news media?	I media hanno dato copertura alla notizia/come è stato inquadrato l'attivismo dei collaboratori dai media?
Did employee activism obtain resonance on social media too?	L'attivismo dei collaboratori ha ottenuto risonanza anche sui social media?
Did your company/organization support employee activism in this case and how?	La sua azienda/organizzazione ha supportato l'attivismo dei collaboratori in questo caso e in che modo?
3) Employee resource groups (ERGs)	3) Employee resource groups (ERGs)
What is the position of your organization in this regard?	Qual è la posizione della sua organizzazione a riguardo?
Do you have such activist networks in your company?	Esistono reti attiviste di questo tipo nella sua azienda?
Can you describe the role of employee resource groups (ERGs) in your company?	Può descrivere il ruolo degli ERG nella sua azienda?
How do they contribute to employee activism?	In che modo contribuiscono all'attivismo dei collaboratori?
How does the company support the formation and activities of ERGs?	In che modo l'azienda supporta la formazione e le attività degli ERG?
What resources are provided to them?	Quali risorse vengono messe a disposizione?
How does the company ensure that ERGs are inclusive and representative of all employees?	In che modo l'azienda garantisce che gli ERG siano inclusivi e rappresentativi di tutti i collaboratori?

How do ERGs provide a platform for employees to engage in activism and advocacy?	In che modo gli ERG offrono una piattaforma ai collaboratori per impegnarsi in attività di attivismo e advocacy?
What impact have they had on the company's policies and practices?	Che impatto hanno avuto sulle politiche e pratiche aziendali?
Can you provide an example of a successful initiative or campaign led by an ERG in your company?	Può fornire un esempio di un'iniziativa o campagna di successo guidata da un ERG nella sua azienda?
How did it impact the company and its employees?	Qual è la posizione della sua organizzazione a riguardo?
4) CEO Activism	4) Attivismo dei CEO
What is your company/organization's stance on CEO activism?	Qual è la posizione della sua azienda/organizzazione riguardo all'attivismo dei CEO?
Have you experienced any instances of CEO activism within your company/organization?	Ha vissuto episodi di attivismo da parte di CEO all'interno della sua azienda/organizzazione?
How does your company/organization balance the potential benefits of CEO activism with the potential risks?	In che modo la sua azienda/organizzazione bilancia i potenziali benefici dell'attivismo dei CEO con i potenziali rischi?
Have you ever experienced any negative consequences from CEO activism within your company/organization or industry?	Ha mai sperimentato conseguenze negative derivanti dall'attivismo dei CEO nella sua azienda/organizzazione o nel settore di riferimento?
5) Company "regulation/guidance" of employee activism (both positive and negative)	5) "Regolamentazione/linee guida" aziendali sull'attivismo dei collaboratori (sia positivo che negativo)
In your opinion, are employees seen as active (corporate) communicators toward external stakeholders?	A suo parere, i collaboratori sono considerati comunicatori (corporate) attivi verso gli stakeholder esterni?

How can this role be played in relation to official external communication/corporate communication function in the organization?	In che modo questo ruolo può essere esercitato in relazione alla comunicazione esterna ufficiale/funzione di comunicazione aziendale nell'organizzazione?
How do you incorporate guidelines for employee voice expression in your organization if you do?	Come vengono incorporate eventuali linee guida per l'espressione della voce dei collaboratori nella sua organizzazione (se presenti)?
How do you balance benefits and risks associated with employee activism?	In che modo si bilanciano i benefici e i rischi associati all'attivismo dei collaboratori?
6) Company risk management	6) Gestione del rischio aziendale
Does your company/organization have internal voice mechanisms and channels in place?	La sua azienda/organizzazione dispone di meccanismi e canali di voce interna?
Does your company/organization monitor possible risks and issues on a regular basis, and how?	La sua azienda/organizzazione monitora regolarmente possibili rischi e problematiche? In che modo?
And is employee voice <i>externally</i> directed?	La voce dei collaboratori è anche diretta verso l'esterno?
Does your company implement corporate activism to anticipate and prevent negative forms of employee activism?	La sua azienda implementa forme di attivismo corporate per anticipare e prevenire manifestazioni negative di attivismo dei collaboratori?
Does your company/organization consider balancing the need to maintain a positive image and reputation with the right of employees to speak out about social and political issues they care about?	La sua azienda/organizzazione considera l'equilibrio tra l'esigenza di mantenere un'immagine e una reputazione positive e il diritto dei collaboratori di esprimersi su questioni sociali e politiche per loro rilevanti?
Does your company/organization address potential conflicts between the organization's values and the values or beliefs of individual employees?	La sua azienda/organizzazione affronta potenziali conflitti tra i valori organizzativi e i valori o le convinzioni dei singoli collaboratori?

Has your company experienced situations in which employees' values, beliefs, and stances on social/political issues conflict with each other (among different employee groups)?	La sua azienda ha vissuto situazioni in cui i valori, le convinzioni e le posizioni dei collaboratori su temi sociali/politici erano in conflitto tra loro (tra diversi gruppi di collaboratori)?
If so, how was such internal dissensus managed?	Se sì, come è stato gestito tale dissenso interno?
Any lessons learned?	Quali lezioni sono state apprese?
Is there any mechanism in place in your company to listen to employees who appear to be “silent” relevant to other more vocal employees? If so, please describe.	Nella sua azienda esistono meccanismi per ascoltare i collaboratori che appaiono “silenziosi” rispetto ad altri più vocali? Se sì, può descriverli?
Have you experienced any incident where the support/opposition of your company's leadership decision is divided internally among employees?	Ha mai vissuto un episodio in cui il sostegno/opposizione a una decisione della leadership aziendale risultava diviso internamente tra i collaboratori?
If so, what was the internal conflict resolution process?	Se sì, qual è stato il processo di risoluzione del conflitto interno?
How do you perceive the impact of social media associated with employee activism and risk/crisis communication?	Come percepisce l'impatto dei social media in relazione all'attivismo dei collaboratori e alla comunicazione di rischio/crisi?
How does your organization leverage social media in these situations?	In che modo la sua organizzazione utilizza i social media in queste situazioni?
Do you have active listening programs to prevent such crises?	Sono presenti programmi di ascolto attivo per prevenire tali crisi?
Does your company/ organization assess the impact of employee activism on your company's reputation?	La sua azienda/organizzazione valuta l'impatto dell'attivismo dei collaboratori sulla reputazione aziendale?
7) Organizational culture and external context	7) Cultura organizzativa e contesto esterno

Does your company/organization ensure that employees feel comfortable raising concerns or providing feedback to management?	La sua azienda/organizzazione garantisce che i collaboratori si sentano a loro agio nell'esprimere preoccupazioni o nel fornire feedback alla direzione?
What channels do you have in place to facilitate that communication?	Quali canali sono predisposti per facilitare tale comunicazione?
(How) do you foster a culture of open communication and collaboration with employees?	In che modo promuovete una cultura di comunicazione aperta e di collaborazione con i collaboratori?
(How) do you encourage employee feedback and input?	In che modo incoraggiate il feedback e il contributo dei collaboratori?
Does your company/organization balance the need for openness and transparency when it comes to protecting confidential information?	La sua azienda/organizzazione bilancia la necessità di apertura e trasparenza con l'esigenza di proteggere le informazioni riservate?
Does your company approach social and political issues that are relevant to your industry or workforce?	La sua azienda affronta questioni sociali e politiche rilevanti per il settore o per la forza lavoro?
Does the national context impact actions of employee activism?	Il contesto nazionale influisce sulle azioni di attivismo dei collaboratori?
Does your industry impact actions of employee activism?	Il settore in cui operate influisce sulle azioni di attivismo dei collaboratori?
8) Considerations about the future	8) Considerazioni sul futuro
How do you see the role of employee activism evolving in the future?	Come vede evolvere in futuro il ruolo dell'attivismo dei collaboratori?
How is your company preparing for these changes?	In che modo la sua azienda si sta preparando a questi cambiamenti?
What challenges or opportunities about employee activism do you anticipate?	Quali sfide o opportunità legate all'attivismo dei collaboratori prevede?
How are you preparing to address them?	Come vi state preparando ad affrontarle?

Source: authors' own elaboration

Appendix B: Employee activism questionnaire development

Table 13. Employee activism questionnaire development

	English	Italiano
Section 1	[Employee activism intentions] Employee Activism is defined in this study as the active and intentional participation of employees in promoting social change through collective actions or shared social, political, or environmental issues that have public visibility.	[Intenzioni di attivismo dei collaboratori] “Employee activism” o attivismo dei collaboratori si riferisce alla partecipazione attiva e intenzionale dei collaboratori di un’azienda nel promuovere il cambiamento della società su temi sociali, politici e ambientali attraverso azioni collettive che hanno visibilità pubblica.
Q1	[Topics] – What social, political, or environmental issues are you most concerned about? Please select all that apply.	[Argomenti] - Quali sono i temi sociali, politici o ambientali che le stanno più a cuore? Per favore, selezioni tutte le opzioni possibili.
I1	gender discrimination, diversity and inclusion rights, immigration, abortion, climate change issues, income inequality, sexual harassment, other	discriminazione di genere, diversità e inclusione, immigrazione, aborto, guerre, cambiamento climatico, disuguaglianza di reddito, molestie sessuali, altro (specificare)
Q2	[Employee activism communicative intentions] <i>(Employee activism communicative intentions were measured by adapting 9 items from the validated scale of Lee (2022) on communication behaviors)</i>	[Intenzioni comunicative di attivismo dei collaboratori] <i>(Employee activism communicative intentions were measured by adapting 9 items from the validated scale of Lee (2022) on communication behaviors)</i>

	As an employee, while thinking of social, environmental or political issues I am concerned with...	Come collaboratore della mia Azienda, pensando a temi sociali, politici e ambientali a cui sono interessato...
I2	I would seek explanations from managers/supervisors to better understand their eventual decisions and perspectives	Cercherei di capire meglio eventuali decisioni e punti di vista di manager e supervisor della mia Azienda
I3	I would participate in a constructive discussion with my company to improve the situation	Parteciperei a momenti di confronto costruttivi con la mia Azienda per cercare di migliorare la situazione
I4	I would encourage constructive dialogue with colleagues	Incoraggerei un dialogo costruttivo con i colleghi
I5	I would express my opinions actively in discussion with my company to improve the situation	Esprimerei attivamente le mie opinioni durante momenti di confronto con la mia Azienda per migliorare la situazione
I6	I would proactively develop and make suggestions to improve the situation	Cercherei attivamente di elaborare idee e suggerimenti per migliorare la situazione
I7	I would suggest new solutions to help my company reach its goals	Proporrei nuove soluzioni per contribuire al raggiungimento degli obiettivi della mia Azienda
I8	I would report any dangers, threats, or criticisms to my company to prevent potential risks	Segnalerei alla mia Azienda eventuali pericoli, minacce o critiche per prevenire possibili rischi
Q3	[Employee activism actionable intentions] <i>(Employee activism actionable intentions were measured using the 4-item validated scale of Lee (2022) on activism intentions)</i>	[Intenzioni di attivismo dei collaboratori – azioni concrete] <i>(Employee activism actionable intentions were measured using the 4-item validated scale of Lee (2022) on activism intentions)</i>

	As an employee...	Come collaboratore della mia Azienda, pensando a temi sociali, politici e ambientali a cui sono interessato...
I9	I intend to join the walk out with other employees	Parteciperei a scioperi insieme ad altri colleghi
I10	I intend to engage in collective actions with other employees	Prenderei parte ad iniziative collettive con i colleghi
I11	I intend to sign a petition and share it with colleagues	Firmerei petizioni e le condividerei con i colleghi
I12	I intend to attend a rally, protest, or demonstration with colleagues	Parteciperei a movimenti di protesta o manifestazioni con i colleghi
Q4	[Personality.] <i>(For measuring personality, we adapted the scale from Gosling et al., 2003)</i> Here are a number of personality traits that may or may not apply to you. Please indicate your level of agreement (5) or disagreement (1) with the following statements. You should rate the extent to which the pair of traits applies to you, even if one characteristic applies more strongly than the other. I see myself as...	[Personalità] <i>(For measuring personality, we adapted the scale from Gosling et al., 2003)</i> Qui di seguito sono elencati una serie di tratti che potrebbero descrivere la sua personalità. Indichi il suo grado di accordo con le seguenti affermazioni che riportano coppie di tratti. Dovrebbe valutare in che misura la coppia di tratti si adatta a lei, anche se una caratteristica ha una rilevanza maggiore dell'altra. Mi percepisco come...
I13	Extroverted, enthusiastic	Estroverso, entusiasta

I14	Critical, quarrelsome	Critico, polemico
I15	Dependable, self-disciplined	Affidabile, autodisciplinato
I16	Anxious, easily upset	Ansioso, facilmente impressionabile
I17	Open to new experiences, complex	Aperto a nuove esperienze, complesso
I18	Reserved, quiet	Riservato, tranquillo
I19	Sympathetic, warm	Empatico, accogliente
I20	Disorganized, careless	Disorganizzato, distratto
I21	Calm, emotionally stable	Calmo, stabile
I22	Conventional, uncreative	Conformista, poco creativo
Section 2	In the following series of statements, we are delving into your company's and CEO's stances and actions concerning social, political, and environmental issues	Di seguito troverà una serie di affermazioni che riguardano le posizioni e le azioni della sua Azienda e del suo Top Management in merito a temi sociali, politici e ambientali.

Q5	[Topics] - Has your company publicly taken a stance or engaged in visible actions in support of one or more of the following socio-political issues? Please select all that apply.	[Argomenti] - La sua Azienda ha mai preso pubblicamente posizione o si è impegnata in azioni concrete a sostegno di uno o più dei seguenti temi sociali, politici o ambientali? Per favore, selezioni tutte le opzioni che ritiene pertinenti.
I23	gender discrimination, diversity and inclusion rights, immigration, abortion, climate change issues, income inequality, sexual harassment, other	discriminazione di genere, diversità e inclusione, immigrazione, aborto, guerre, cambiamento climatico, disuguaglianza di reddito, molestie sessuali, altro (specificare)
Q6	[Impact of corporate activism on employee activism intentions.] <i>Corporate activism was measured by adapting 7 items from the scale of Villagra et al. (2022) and one item adapted from Paul et al. (1997) ("My company promotes good environmental practices").</i> Please indicate your level of agreement (5) or disagreement (1) with the following statements, considering your company's position and actions on social, environmental, or political issues.	[Impatto del corporate activism sulle intenzioni di attivismo dei collaboratori] <i>Corporate activism was measured by adapting 7 items from the scale of Villagra et al. (2022) and one item adapted from Paul et al. (1997) ("My company promotes good environmental practices").</i> Indichi il suo livello di accordo con le seguenti affermazioni, considerando la posizione e le azioni della sua Azienda in merito a temi sociali, politici o ambientali.
I24	My company defends social positions	La mia Azienda sostiene questioni che hanno rilevanza sociale
I25	My company has an ethical obligation to promote social change	La mia Azienda si assume una responsabilità etica nel promuovere il cambiamento sociale
I26	My company positions itself politically	La mia Azienda ha espresso una posizione politica

I27	My company has an obligation to express publicly its political preferences	La mia Azienda dovrebbe esprimere pubblicamente le sue posizioni politiche
I28	My company takes initiatives against bad governments or bad politicians	La mia Azienda interviene contro figure politiche e governi sbagliati
I29	When the government does not solve the citizens' problems, my company takes the initiative	Quando il governo non risolve i problemi dei cittadini, la mia Azienda prende l'iniziativa
I30	My company has an obligation to encourage environmentally responsible behaviors	La mia Azienda dovrebbe incoraggiare comportamenti responsabili nei confronti dell'ambiente
I31	My company promotes good environmental practices	La mia Azienda promuove pratiche ambientali virtuose
Q7	[Topics] - Has your CEO publicly taken a stance or engaged in visible actions in support of one or more of the following socio-political issues? Please select all that apply.	[Argomenti] – Il Top Management della sua Azienda ha mai preso pubblicamente posizione o si è impegnato in azioni concrete a sostegno di uno o più dei seguenti temi sociali, politici o ambientali? Per favore, selezioni tutte le opzioni che ritiene pertinenti.
I32	gender discrimination, diversity and inclusion rights, immigration, abortion, climate change issues, income inequality, sexual harassment, other	discriminazione di genere, diversità e inclusione, immigrazione, aborto, guerre, cambiamento climatico, disuguaglianza di reddito, molestie sessuali, altro (specificare)
Q8	[Impact of CEO activism on employee activism intentions.] <i>CEO activism was measured using the same items for corporate activism, replacing the word “corporate” with “CEO”. Hence</i>	[Impatto del CEO activism sulle intenzioni di attivismo dei collaboratori] <i>CEO activism was measured using the same items for corporate activism, replacing the word “corporate” with “CEO”. Hence using the 7 items</i>

	<i>using the 7 items adapted from Villagra et al. (2022) and one item adapted from Paul et al. (1997).</i> Please indicate your level of agreement (5) or disagreement (1) with the following statements, considering your CEO's positions and actions regarding social, environmental, or political issues on behalf of the entire company.	<i>adapted from Villagra et al. (2022) and one item adapted from Paul et al. (1997).</i> Indichi il suo livello di accordo con le seguenti affermazioni, considerando le posizioni e le azioni concrete del Top Management della sua Azienda in merito a questioni sociali, ambientali o politiche per conto dell'Azienda.
I33	My CEO defends social positions	Il Top Management della mia Azienda sostiene questioni che hanno rilevanza sociale
I34	My CEO has an ethical obligation to promote social change	Il Top Management della mia Azienda si assume una responsabilità etica nel promuovere il cambiamento sociale
I35	My CEO positions itself politically	Il Top Management della mia Azienda ha espresso una posizione politica
I36	My CEO has an obligation to express publicly its political preferences	Il Top Management della mia Azienda dovrebbe esprimere pubblicamente le sue preferenze politiche
I37	My CEO takes initiatives against bad governments or bad politicians	Il Top Management della mia Azienda interviene contro figure politiche disfunzionali e governi sbagliati
I38	When the government does not solve the citizens' problems, my CEO takes the initiative	Quando il governo non risolve i problemi dei cittadini, il Top Management della mia Azienda prende l'iniziativa

I39	My CEO has an obligation to encourage environmentally responsible behaviors	Il Top Management della mia Azienda dovrebbe incoraggiare comportamenti responsabili nei confronti dell'ambiente
I40	My CEO promotes good environmental practices	Il Top Management della mia Azienda promuove pratiche ambientali virtuose
Section 3	Below, you will be asked to indicate your level of agreement (5) or disagreement (1) with statements regarding your role as an employee and your relationship with the company you work for.	Di seguito, le verrà chiesto di indicare il suo livello di accordo con affermazioni relative al suo ruolo di collaboratore e al suo rapporto con l'Azienda per cui lavora.
Q9	[Climate of voice.] <i>Climate of voice was measured by adapting a 6-item scale developed by Frazier and Bowler (2012), which in turn was adapted from LePine and Van Dyne (1998).</i>	[Clima di voce] <i>Climate of voice was measured by adapting a 6-item scale developed by Frazier and Bowler (2012), which in turn was adapted from LePine and Van Dyne (1998).</i> Nella mia Azienda, i collaboratori sono incoraggiati a...
I41	The members of my work group are encouraged to develop and make recommendations concerning issues that affect the group.	suggerire idee e proposte riguardo temi che riguardano questioni di lavoro
I42	The members of my work group are encouraged to speak up and encourage others in this group to get involved in issues that affect the group.	parlare in modo aperto e spingere gli altri membri a occuparsi di questioni che riguardano il team stesso

I43	The members of my work group are encouraged to communicate his/her opinions about work issues to others in the group even if his/her opinion is different and others in the group disagree with him/her.	esprimere le proprie opinioni su questioni lavorative, anche se la loro opinione è diversa e gli altri membri sono in disaccordo
I44	The members of my work group are encouraged to keep well informed about issues where his/her opinion might be useful to the workgroup.	tenersi informati su questioni riguardo alle quali la loro opinione potrebbe essere utile al team
I45	The members of my work group are encouraged to get involved in issues that affect the quality of work life here in this group.	farsi coinvolgere in questioni che impattano la qualità della vita lavorativa del team
I46	The members of my work group are encouraged to speak up in this group with ideas for new projects or changes in procedures.	parlare all'interno del team di idee per nuovi progetti o modifiche alle procedure
Q10	[Transparent leadership communication] <i>Transparent leadership communication was measured using a 9-item scale adapted from Rawlins (2009) and Men and Bowen (2017).</i> My leaders....	[Comunicazione trasparente della leadership] <i>Transparent leadership communication was measured using a 9-item scale adapted from Rawlins (2009) and Men and Bowen (2017).</i> I miei leader....
I47	Asks for feedback from people like me about the quality of its information.	Chiedono un feedback ai propri collaboratori circa la qualità dell'informazione che veicolano

I48	Provides detailed information to people like me.	Forniscono informazioni dettagliate ai propri collaboratori
I49	Makes it easy to find the information people like me need.	Rendono facile trovare le informazioni di cui i propri collaboratori hanno bisogno
I50	Is prompt when responding to requests for information from people like me.	Rispondono in modo sollecito alle richieste di informazioni dei propri collaboratori
I51	Provides information in a timely fashion to people like me.	Forniscono informazioni in modo tempestivo ai propri collaboratori
I52	Provides information that is relevant to people like me.	Forniscono informazioni rilevanti per i propri collaboratori
I53	Presents more than one side of controversial issues.	Espongono più punti di vista riguardo a questioni controverse
I54	Is open to criticism by people like me.	Accettano le critiche dei propri collaboratori
I55	Freely admits when it has made mistakes.	Ammettono i propri errori
Q11	[Perceived external prestige] <i>Perceived external prestige was measured through 5 items selected and adapted from Mael and Ashford (1992).</i>	[Perceived external prestige] <i>Perceived external prestige was measured through 5 items selected and adapted from Mael and Ashford (1992).</i> Considerando la sua Azienda e le persone nella sua comunità...

I56	People in my community think highly of my company	Le persone nella mia comunità hanno un'alta considerazione della mia Azienda
I57	It is considered prestigious to be an employee of my company.	È considerato prestigioso essere un collaboratore della mia Azienda
I58	My company is considered one of the best of the landscape.	La mia Azienda è considerata una delle migliori sul mercato
I59	People from other companies look down at my company. (R)	Le persone nella mia comunità che lavorano presso altre aziende guardano la mia Azienda dall'alto in basso.
I60	My company does not have a good reputation in my community. (R)	Le persone nella mia comunità non hanno una buona reputazione della mia Azienda
Q12	[Organizational identification] <i>Organizational identification was measured through a 5-item scale adapted from Mael and Ashford (1992).</i>	[Organizational identification] <i>Organizational identification was measured through a 5-item scale adapted from Mael and Ashford (1992).</i> Pensando al mio rapporto con l'Azienda...
I61	When someone criticizes my company, it feels like a personal insult.	quando qualcuno critica la mia Azienda, lo prendo come un insulto personale
I62	I am very interested in what others think about my company.	sono molto interessato a ciò che gli altri pensano della mia Azienda

I63	When I talk about my company, I usually say ‘we ’rather than ‘they’.	quando parlo della mia Azienda, di solito dico "noi" piuttosto che "loro"
I64	My company’s successes are my successes.	i successi della mia Azienda sono i miei successi
I65	When someone praises my company, it feels like a personal compliment.	quando qualcuno elogia la mia Azienda, lo prendo come un riconoscimento personale
I66	If a story in the media criticized my company, I would feel embarrassed.	se i media criticassero la mia Azienda, mi sentirei a disagio
Q13	[Authenticity] <i>Perceived corporate authenticity was measured by adapting one item from Tran and Keng (2018) (“I perceive my company as authentic in its statements and actions”) and 4 items adapted from Alhouti et al. (2016).</i>	[Autenticità] <i>Perceived corporate authenticity was measured by adapting one item from Tran and Keng (2018) (“I perceive my company as authentic in its statements and actions”) and 4 items adapted from Alhouti et al. (2016).</i> La mia Azienda...
I67	I perceive my company as authentic in its statements and actions	è autentica nelle sue dichiarazioni e azioni
I68	My company’s actions are genuine	implementa azioni genuine
I69	My company’s actions are in accordance with the company’s values and beliefs	attua azioni coerenti con i valori e le idee promosse dall’Azienda stessa

I70	My company is standing up for what it believes in	si batte per ciò in cui crede
I71	My company is concerned about improving the wellbeing of society	si preoccupa di migliorare il benessere della società
Q14	[Employee Engagement] <i>Employee engagement was measured using the scale from Schaufeli et al. (2006) to investigate employee engagement in its three components of cognitive absorption (e.g. “I am immersed in my work”), emotional dedication (e.g. “I am enthusiastic about my job”), and vigor (e.g. “At my work, I feel bursting with energy”).</i> The following 9 statements are about how you feel at work. Please read each statement carefully and decide if you ever feel this way about your job. If you have never had this feeling, cross the “0” (zero) in the space after the statement. If you have had this feeling, indicate how often you felt it by crossing the number (from 1 to 6) that best describes how frequently you feel that way.	[Employee Engagement] <i>Employee engagement was measured using the scale from Schaufeli et al. (2006) to investigate employee engagement in its three components of cognitive absorption (e.g. “I am immersed in my work”), emotional dedication (e.g. “I am enthusiastic about my job”), and vigor (e.g. “At my work, I feel bursting with energy”).</i> Qui di seguito trova 9 affermazioni che riguardano sensazioni relative al lavoro che svolge. Indichi se ha mai provato tali sensazioni verso il suo lavoro. Se non le ha mai provate, scelga 0. Se invece le ha provate, indichi quanto spesso scegliendo un numero da 1 a 6
I72	At my work, I feel bursting with energy (V)	Nel mio lavoro mi sento pieno di energia
I73	At my job, I feel strong and vigorous (V)	Nel mio lavoro mi sento forte e vigoroso
I74	I am enthusiastic about my job (D)	Sono entusiasta del mio lavoro

I75	My job inspires me (D)	Il mio lavoro mi ispira
I76	When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work (V)	Quando mi alzo la mattina, ho voglia di andare al lavoro
I77	I feel happy when I am working intensely (A)	Sono felice quando lavoro intensamente
I78	I'm proud of the work that I do (D)	Sono orgoglioso del lavoro che faccio
I79	I am immersed in my work (A)	Sono immerso nel mio lavoro
I80	I get carried away when I am working (A)	Mi lascio assorbire completamente quando lavoro
Section 4	Below, we ask you to provide some socio-demographic information about yourself and the company you work for in an anonymous form.	Di seguito le chiediamo di fornire, in forma anonima, alcune informazioni di carattere sociodemografico su di lei e sull'Azienda per cui lavora
Q15	Gender • Male • Female • Other • I prefer not to answer	Genere • Maschile • Femminile • Altro • Preferisco non rispondere
Q16	Generation • From 1946 to 1964 • From 1965 to 1979 • From 1980 to 1996 • From 1997 onwards	Nato • Dal 1946 al 1964 • Dal 1965 al 1979 • Dal 1980 al 1996 • Dal 1997 in poi

Q17	Which of the following definitions best describes your position within the company? • Professional/Staff • Manager/Supervisor • Head of function/Director	Quale delle seguenti definizioni descrive meglio la sua posizione all'interno dell'Azienda? • Professional/Addetto • Manager/Supervisor • Capo di funzione/direzione
Q18	Job Title <i>Open</i>	Job Title <i>Open</i>
Q19	How long have you been employed with your current company? • Less than 1 year • 1 to 3 years • 3 to 5 years • 5 to 10 years • More than 10 years	Da quanto tempo lavora nella sua azienda attuale? • Meno di 1 anno • Da 1 a 3 anni • Da 3 a 5 anni • Da 5 a 10 anni • Più di 10 anni
Q20	Education: • High School Diploma • Some years of university, without degree • Bachelor's Degree (3-year undergraduate degree) • Master's Degree (4-year undergraduate degree or postgraduate degree) • Master's Degree or Specialization • PhD • Professional Certification	Formazione (Indichi il grado di formazione più alto): • Diploma di scuola superiore • Alcuni anni di università, senza laurea • Laurea triennale • Laurea quadriennale o magistrale • Master o Alta specializzazione • Dottorato di ricerca • Abilitazione professionale • Altro (specificare):

Q21	In your opinion, to what extent your Company: 1. <i>Not at all</i> - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5. <i>Very much</i> 6. <i>Don't know</i> / <i>Prefer not to answer</i> • Operates in a new and/or rapidly changing industry • Operates in a market with job opportunities • Has innovation as its main strategy in recent years • Adopts a predominantly participative management style • Has a high level of employee engagement	In che misura la sua Azienda: 1. Per niente - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5. <i>Moltissimo</i> 6. Non so / <i>Preferisco non rispondere</i> • Opera in un settore nuovo e/o in fortissimo cambiamento • Opera in un mercato con opportunità di posti di lavoro • Negli ultimi anni ha come principale strategia l'innovazione • Adotta uno stile manageriale prevalentemente partecipativo • Ha un elevato livello di engagement dei collaboratori
Q22	Industrial Sector: • Manufacturing • Other Industries • Services • I don't know/prefer not to answer	Settore industriale: • Manifattura • Altre Industrie • Servizi • Altro (specificare): ...
Q23	Product sector: • Furniture • Automotive, mechanical and metallurgy • Banking and Insurance • Chemicals and Pharmaceuticals • Construction • Electronics and Home Appliances • Energy, gas, hydrocarbons • Fashion and Luxury • Food and Beverage • Information and Communication • Citizen services • Personal Services • Travel and Transportation • Don't know/ prefer not to answer • Other (specify):	Settore merceologico: • Arredamento • Automotive, meccanica e metallurgia • Bancario-assicurativo • Chimica and Farmaceutica • Costruzioni • Elettronica and Elettrodomestici • Energia, gas, idrocarburi • Fashion and Luxury • Food and Beverage • Informazione and Comunicazione • Servizi al cittadino • Servizi alla persona • Viaggi and Trasporti • Non so/preferisco non rispondere • Altro (specificare):

Q24	Which of the following professional areas best describes your business: • ICT • Logistics • Purchasing/Procurement • Research and Development • Sales, Commercial • Marketing, Communication • Human Resources Management • Administration, finance, control • Production • Other. Please specify:....	Quale tra le seguenti aree professionali descrive meglio la sua attività: • ICT • Logistica • Acquisti/Procurement • Ricerca and Sviluppo • Vendite, Commerciale • Marketing, Comunicazione • Gestione Risorse Umane • Amministrazione, finanza, controllo • Produzione • Altro (Specificare)
Q25	Company Size: • Up to 50 • 51 to 250 • 251 to 500 • 501 to 750 • 751 to 1,000 • 1,001 to 2,000 • 2,001 to 5,000 • Over 5,000 • I don't know/Prefer not to answer	Dimensioni della sua Azienda in termini di collaboratori: • Fino a 50 • Da 51 a 250 • Da 251 a 500 • Da 501 a 750 • Da 751 a 1.000 • Da 1.001 a 2.000 • Da 2.001 a 5.000 • Oltre 5.000 • Non so/Preferisco non rispondere
Q26	Nature • Private • Public • Publicly held • Cooperative • Don't know/ prefer not to answer	Natura • Privata • Pubblica • A partecipazione pubblica • Cooperativa • Altro (specificare):

Q27	Ownership (majority of members) is from: • Italy • North-central Europe • South of Europe • East of Europe • U.S. • China • Japan • Africa • Australia • Don't know/ prefer not to answer • Other (please specify):	La proprietà (maggioranza dei soci) è di nazionalità: • Italiana • Europea del centro-nord • Europea del sud • Europea dell'est • Statunitense • Cinese • Giapponese • Africana • Australiana • Non so/Preferisco non rispondere • Altro (specificare):

Source: authors' own elaboration

Appendix C: Toxic work environments questionnaire development

Table 16. Toxic work environments questionnaire development

S1	Toxic Workplace Environments <i>A workplace can become toxic when factors like aggressive communication, excessive workload, unfair treatment, or unjust management behavior contribute to a stressful or unhealthy environment affecting employees' well-being, job satisfaction, and overall performance.</i>	
Q0	Have you ever experienced a toxic workplace environment? <i>Screen question</i> Yes → Q1 No → Submit, end of the questionnaire	
Q1	Have you ever experienced any of the following conditions, either directly or indirectly? <i>All options that apply</i> • Discrimination (e.g. gender, race, age, disability or religion) • Mental health issues (e.g. anxiety, depression, self-doubt, imposter syndrome) • Antisocial behaviors (e.g. insulting comments, malicious gossip, microaggressions, bullying) • Toxic managers (e.g. abuse of power, micromanagement, gaslighting, favoritism, misattribution of work, hostility, retaliatory practices) • Retaliation (e.g. ignored or punished for speaking up) • Unmanageable workload (e.g. overwork, unclear expectations, unrealistic deadlines) • Work-life imbalance (e.g. work-life intrusion, remote work challenges) • Burnout (e.g. high stress, lack of support) • Career dissatisfaction (e.g. lack of growth, feeling stuck, unfair opportunities)	

	- Organizational culture (e.g. poor communication culture, lack of psychological safety, low autonomy, high turnover rates) - Other (please, specify)	
Q2	Can you describe a specific situation when you experienced a toxic workplace environment? <i>Open</i>	
S2	Remaining Silent or Speaking Up? <i>Employees respond to toxic work situations in different ways. Some may choose to raise concerns, while others may remain silent.</i>	
Q3	With reference to the specific situation mentioned before, how did you respond to this situation? <i>One possible option</i> I remained silent both at work (with managers or colleagues) and outside work (with family, friends, or on social media) → <i>Section 3: Silence at work and outside work</i> I remained silent at work (to managers or colleagues) but voiced my concerns outside work (with family, friends, or on social media) → <i>Section 4: Silence at work but voice outside work</i> I voiced my concerns at work (to managers or colleagues) but remained silent outside work (to family, friends, or on social media) → <i>Section 5: Voice at work but silence outside work</i> I voiced my concerns both at work (to managers or colleagues) and outside work (to family, friends, or on social media) → <i>Section 6: Voice both at work and outside work</i>	
S3	Silence at work and outside work	
S3-Q4	What prevented you from speaking up to someone? <i>All options that apply</i>	
	I was afraid of adverse consequences (e.g. being criticized, excluded, or fired)	Adapted from Brinsfield (2012)

	I saw no point in speaking up because nothing would have changed	Adapted from Pinder and Harlos (2001)
	I was afraid to damage my professional relationships	Adapted from Detert and Edmondson (2011)
	That cultural background discouraged speaking up I felt that the diverse cultural background would have created misunderstandings	Adapted from Morrison and Milliken (2000)
	I needed to disconnect mentally	Adapted from Sonnentag and Fritz, (2014)
	I did not want to remain stuck in those emotions	Adapted from Sonnentag and Fritz, (2014)
	I did not want to be viewed as a complainer	Adapted from Brinsfield (2012)
	I wanted to protect my image or reputation	Adapted from Brinsfield (2012)
	I have previously experienced negative consequences as a result of speaking up	Adapted from Brinsfield (2012)
	Other please specify	
S3-Q5	Regarding this specific situation, did your managers noticed that something was wrong? <i>Yes / No / I don't know/other, specify</i>	
S3-Q6	With reference to this specific situation, did your managers try to handle the situation for you and others involved? <i>Yes / No / I don't know (other, specify)</i>	

S3-Q7	Considering the toxic situation you described, are you still working for the company where it occurred? <i>One possible option</i> Yes No Other (please specify)	
S3-Q8	Have you attempted to leave the company due to the toxic work environment? <i>One possible option</i> • Yes, I actively tried to leave but was unable to. • Yes, and I successfully left the company. • No, I have considered leaving but have not taken action. • No, I have not considered leaving. • Other (please specify)	
S3-Q11	In your opinion, to what extent does that company where you experienced the toxic work situation: <i>Strongly Disagree (1) – (2) – (3) – (4) – Strongly Agree (5)</i> • Operate in a new and/or rapidly changing industry • Compete in a job market with ample employment opportunities • Prioritize innovation as its main strategy in recent years • Adopt a predominantly participative managerial style • Have a high level of employee engagement • Foster a positive and collaborative work environment • Have a high level of digitalization in its business processes	
S3-Q12	What was the company size? <i>One possible option</i>	

	• Up to 50 • 51 to 250 • 251 to 500 • 501 to 750 • 751 to 1,000 • 1,001 to 2,000 • 2,001 to 5,000 • Over 5,000	
S3-Q13	Would you like to mention another toxic workplace situation where you found yourself either speaking up or remaining silent? <i>Open and optional</i>	
S4	<i>Silence at work but voice outside work</i>	
S4-Q4	Who have you talked to about it? • All options that apply • Shared my concerns with family and friends • Shared my concerns on social media • Other (please specify)	
S4-Q5	If you voiced your concerns with family and friends, what were your main reasons for doing so? All options that apply	
	I did not voice my concerns with family and friends	
	To seek comfort, emotional support, or advice from others	Adapted from Hamid and Othman (2015) and Kassing and Armstrong (2002)
	To connect with others who have experienced similar situations	Adapted from Hamid and Othman (2015) and Kassing and Armstrong (2002)

	As a preliminary step before discussing the issue with managers	Adapted from Kassing (2008)
	Because managers or internal reporting channels were ineffective or inaccessible	Adapted from Kassing (2008)
	I was afraid of negative consequences such as exclusion, retaliation, or career damage if I spoke up at work	Adapted from Kassing (2008)
	For the desire to stimulate societal reflections	Adapted from from Ravazzani and Mazzei (2018)
	I wanted the organization to face the consequences of what it had allowed to happen	Adapted from from Ravazzani and Mazzei (2018)
	To warn other potential employees not to work for this company	Adapted from from Ravazzani and Mazzei (2018)
	Other: please specify	
S4-Q6	If you voiced your concerns on social media, what were your main reasons for doing so? <i>All options that apply</i>	
	I did not voice my concerns on social media	
	To seek comfort, emotional support, or advice from others	Adapted from Hamid and Othman (2015) and Kassing and Armstrong (2002)
	To connect with others who have experienced similar situations	Adapted from Hamid and Othman (2015) and Kassing and Armstrong (2002)
	As a preliminary step before discussing the issue with managers	Adapted from Kassing (2008)

	Because managers or internal reporting channels were ineffective or inaccessible	Adapted from Kassing (2008)
	I was afraid of negative consequences such as exclusion, retaliation, or career damage if I spoke up at work	Adapted from Kassing (2008)
	Because online platforms provided more control over the discussion and access to a larger, more supportive audience	Adapted from from Ravazzani and Mazzei (2018)
	For the desire to stimulate societal reflections	Adapted from from Ravazzani and Mazzei (2018)
	I wanted the organization to face the consequences of what it had allowed to happen	Adapted from from Ravazzani and Mazzei (2018)
	To warn other potential employees not to work for this company	Adapted from Hamid and Othman (2015) and Kassing and Armstrong (2002)
	Other: please specify	
S4-Q7	Considering the toxic situation you described, are you still working for the company where it occurred? <i>One possible option</i> • Yes • No • Other: please specify	
S4-Q8	Have you attempted to leave the company due to the toxic work environment? <i>One possible option</i> • Yes, I actively tried to leave but was unable to • Yes, and I successfully left the company • No, I have considered leaving but have not taken action	

	• No, I have not considered leaving • Other (please specify)	
S4-Q11	In your opinion, to what extent does that company where you experienced the toxic work situation: <i>[Strongly Disagree (1) – (2) – (3) – (4) – Strongly Agree (5)]</i> • Operate in a new and/or rapidly changing industry • Compete in a job market with ample employment opportunities • Prioritize innovation as its main strategy in recent years • Adopt a predominantly participative managerial style • Have a high level of employee engagement • Foster a positive and collaborative work environment • Have a high level of digitalization in its business processes	
S4-Q12	What was the Company Size? <i>One possible option</i> • Up to 50 • 51 to 250 • 251 to 500 • 501 to 750 • 751 to 1,000 • 1,001 to 2,000 • 2,001 to 5,000 • Over 5,000	
S3-Q13	Would you like to mention another toxic workplace situation where you found yourself either speaking up or remaining silent? <i>Open and optional</i>	
S5	<i>Voice at work but silence outside work</i>	

S5-Q4	Who have you talked to about it? <i>All options that apply</i> • Voiced my concerns at work with managers • Voiced my concerns at work with colleagues • Other, please specify	
S5-Q5	If you voiced your concerns with managers, what were your main reasons for doing so? <i>All options that apply</i>	
	I did not voice my concerns with managers	Garner (2009)
	To seek guidance on how to handle the situation	
	To gain managerial support in addressing or changing someone else's behavior	
	To influence the behavior of the person causing the issue	
	To address a conflict or issue I had with my supervisor	
	Other (please specify):	
S4-Q6	If you voiced your concerns with managers in your workplace, what specific actions did they take? <i>All options that apply</i>	
	I did not voice my concerns with managers	Adapted from Garner (2014)
	They actively listened, encouraged discussion, and showed openness to my concerns	
	They provided tangible support, such as allowing changes, advocating for me, or implementing solutions	

	They acknowledged my concerns but said they lacked the authority to make changes	
	They justified or defended the existing situation without making changes	
	They dismissed my concerns, ignored them, or made it clear that disagreement was not acceptable	
	Other: please specify	
S5-Q7	If you voiced your concerns with colleagues, what were your main reasons for doing so? <i>All options that apply</i>	
	I did not voice my concerns with colleagues	
	I wanted to raise my concerns with managers but found no opportunity to do so	Adapted from Goldman and Myers (2015)
	I believed that voicing my dissent to managers would not lead to any meaningful change	Adapted from Garner (2009)
	I shared my views with coworkers as a way to vent frustration or relieve stress	Adapted from Garner (2009)
	I did not feel fully integrated into the workplace and was uncomfortable speaking directly to my managers	Adapted from Goldman and Myers (2015)
	I had conflicts or personal issues with my colleagues	Adapted from Garner (2009)
	I wanted to encourage a coworker to oppose a personal/workplace problem	Adapted from Garner (2009)
	To seek comfort, emotional support, or advice from colleagues	Adapted from Garner (2009)
	As a preliminary step before addressing the issue with managers	Adapted from Garner (2009)

	Because managers or internal reporting channels were ineffective or inaccessible	Adapted from Garner (2009)
	Other (please specify):	
S5-Q8	Considering the toxic situation you described, are you still working for the company where it occurred? <i>One possible option</i> • Yes • No • Other (please specify)	
S5-Q9	Have you attempted to leave the company due to the toxic work environment? <i>One possible option</i> • Yes, I actively tried to leave but was unable to • Yes, and I successfully left the company • No, I have considered leaving but have not taken action • No, I have not considered leaving • Other (please specify)	
S5-Q12	In your opinion, to what extent does that company where you experienced a toxic work environment: <i>[Strongly Disagree (1) – (2) – (3) – (4) – Strongly Agree (5)]</i> • Operate in a new and/or rapidly changing industry • Compete in a job market with ample employment opportunities • Prioritize innovation as its main strategy in recent years • Adopt a predominantly participative managerial style • Have a high level of employee engagement • Foster a positive and collaborative work environment • Have a high level of digitalization in its business processes	

S5-Q13	What was the company size? <i>One possible option</i> • Up to 50 • 51 to 250 • 251 to 500 • 501 to 750 • 751 to 1,000 • 1,001 to 2,000 • 2,001 to 5,000 • Over 5,000	
S3-Q13	Would you like to mention another toxic workplace situation where you found yourself either speaking up or remaining silent? <i>Open and optional</i>	
S6	<i>Voice both at work and outside work</i>	
S6-Q4	Who have you talked to about it? <i>All options that apply</i> • Voiced my concerns at work with managers • Voiced my concerns at work with colleagues • Shared my concerns with family and friends • Shared my concerns on social media • Other: please specify	
S6-Q5	If you voiced your concerns with managers, what were your main reasons for doing so? <i>All options that apply</i>	
	I did not voice my concerns with managers	

	To seek guidance on how to handle the situation	Adapted from Garner (2009)
	To gain managerial support in addressing or changing someone else's behavior	
	To influence the behavior of the person causing the issue	
	To address a conflict or issue I had with my supervisor	
	Other (please specify):	
S6-Q6	If you voiced your concerns with managers in your workplace, what specific actions did they take? <i>All options that apply</i>	
	They actively listened, encouraged discussion, and showed openness to my concerns	Adapted from Garner (2014)
	They provided tangible support, such as allowing changes, advocating for me, or implementing solutions	
	They acknowledged my concerns but said they lacked the authority to make changes	
	They justified or defended the existing situation without making changes	
	They dismissed my concerns, ignored them, or made it clear that disagreement was not acceptable	
	I did not voice my concerns with managers or leaders	
	Other: please specify	
S6-Q7	If you voiced your concerns with colleagues, what were your main reasons for doing so?	

	<i>All options that apply</i>	
	I did not voice my concerns with colleagues	
	I wanted to raise my concerns with managers but found no opportunity to do so	Adapted from Goldman and Myers (2015)
	I believed that voicing my dissent to managers would not lead to any meaningful change	Adapted from Garner (2009)
	I shared my views with coworkers as a way to vent frustration or relieve stress	Adapted from Garner (2009)
	I did not feel fully integrated into the workplace and was uncomfortable speaking directly to my managers	Adapted from Goldman and Myers (2015)
	I had conflicts or personal issues with my colleagues	Adapted from Garner (2009)
	I wanted to encourage a coworker to oppose a personal/workplace problem	Adapted from Garner (2009)
	To seek comfort, emotional support, or advice from colleagues	Adapted from Garner (2009)
	As a preliminary step before addressing the issue with managers	Adapted from Garner (2009)
	Because managers or internal reporting channels were ineffective or inaccessible	Adapted from Garner (2009)
	Other: please specify	
S6-Q8	If you voiced your concerns with family and friends, what were your main reasons for doing so? <i>All options that apply</i>	
	I did not voice my concerns with family and friends	

	To seek comfort, emotional support, or advice from others	Adapted from Hamid and Othman (2015) and Kassing and Armstrong, (2002)
	To connect with others who have experienced similar situations	Adapted from Hamid and Othman (2015) and Kassing and Armstrong, (2002)
	As a preliminary step before discussing the issue with managers or leaders	Adapted from Kassing (2008)
	Because managers or internal reporting channels were ineffective or inaccessible	Adapted from Kassing (2008)
	I was afraid of negative consequences such as exclusion, retaliation, or career damage if I spoke up at work	Adapted from Kassing (2008)
	For the desire to stimulate societal reflections	Adapted from from Ravazzani and Mazzei (2018)
	I wanted the organization to face the consequences of what it had allowed to happen	Adapted from from Ravazzani and Mazzei (2018)
	I wanted to warn other potential employees not to work for this company	Adapted from from Ravazzani and Mazzei (2018)
	Other: please specify	
S6-Q9	If you voiced your concerns on social media, what were your main reasons for doing so? <i>All options that apply</i>	
	I did not voice my concerns on social media	
	To seek comfort, emotional support, or advice from others	Adapted from Hamid and Othman (2015) and Kassing and Armstrong (2002)

	To connect with others who have experienced similar situations	Adapted from Hamid and Othman (2015) and Kassing and Armstrong (2002)
	As a preliminary step before discussing the issue with managers	Adapted from Kassing (2008)
	Because managers or internal reporting channels were ineffective or inaccessible	Adapted from Kassing (2008)
	I was afraid of negative consequences such as exclusion, retaliation, or career damage if I spoke up at work	Adapted from Kassing (2008)
	Because online platforms provided more control over the discussion and access to a larger, more supportive audience	Adapted from Ravazzani and Mazzei (2018)
	For the desire to stimulate societal reflections	Adapted from Ravazzani and Mazzei (2018)
	I wanted the organization to face the consequences of what it had allowed to happen	Adapted from Ravazzani and Mazzei (2018)
	I wanted to warn other potential employees not to work for this company	Adapted from Ravazzani and Mazzei (2018)
	Other: please specify	
S6-Q10	Considering the toxic situation you described, are you still working for the company where it occurred? <i>One possible option</i> • Yes • No • Other: please specify	

S6-Q11	Have you attempted to leave the company due to the toxic work environment? <i>One possible option</i> • Yes, I actively tried to leave but was unable to • Yes, and I successfully left the company • No, I have considered leaving but have not taken action • No, I have not considered leaving • Other: please specify	
S6-Q14	In your opinion, to what extent does that company: <i>[Strongly Disagree (1) – (2) – (3) – (4) – Strongly Agree (5)]</i> • Operate in a new and/or rapidly changing industry • Compete in a job market with ample employment opportunities • Prioritize innovation as its main strategy in recent years • Adopt a predominantly participative managerial style • Have a high level of employee engagement • Foster a positive and collaborative work environment • Have a high level of digitalization in its business processes	
S6-Q15	What was the company size? <i>One possible option</i> • Up to 50 • 51 to 250 • 251 to 500 • 501 to 750 • 751 to 1,000 • 1,001 to 2,000 • 2,001 to 5,000 • Over 5,000	

S3-Q13	Would you like to mention another toxic workplace situation where you found yourself either speaking up or remaining silent? <i>Open and optional</i>	
S7	Below, we ask you to provide some sociodemographic information about yourself anonymously	
Q16	Gender <i>One possible option</i> • Male • Female • Other	
Q17	Generation <i>One possible option</i> • From 1946 to 1964 • From 1965 to 1979 • From 1980 to 1996 • From 1997 onwards	
Q18	Years of Work Experience <i>One possible option</i> • 1-3 years • 4-6 years • 7-9 years • 10+ years	
Q19	Education <i>One possible option</i>	

	• High School Diploma • Some years of university, without degree • Bachelor's Degree (3-year undergraduate degree) • Master's Degree (4-year undergraduate degree or postgraduate degree) • Master's Degree or Specialization • PhD • Professional Certification	
Q20	Nationality: <i>Open</i>	

Source: own elaboration

Attachment 1: Published journal article. “Seeking social change from the inside out: A cross-country study on employee activism”

Milan, 11 September 2025

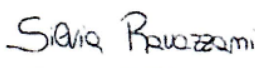
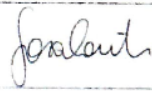
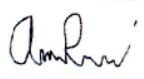
We, the undersigned, Silvia Ravazzani, Yan Jin, Sara Conti, Anna Rachwalski, and Sonny Glenn Robinson, co-authors of the journal article:

Ravazzani, S., Jin, Y., Conti, S., Rachwalski, A., & Robinson, S. G. (2025). Seeking social change from the inside out: A cross-country study on employee activism. *Journal of Communication Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-07-2024-0102>

hereby declare that

although the publication represents the result of a joint research and reflection carried out by all co-authors, the specific contributions of Sara Conti can be identified as follows:

Conceptualization	Prominent
Methodology	Central
Data collection	Prominent (Italian data)
Data analysis	Prominent (Italian data)
Visualization	Central
Writing – first draft	Central
Writing – review & editing	Central
Corresponding author	----
Funding acquisition	----

Silvia Ravazzani	
Yan ~~Yin~~ Jin	
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Seeking social change from the inside out: a cross-country study on employee activism

Journal of
Communication
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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines the emerging issue of employee activism from an organizational perspective while addressing several critical research needs in communication management theory and practice.

Design/methodology/approach – The literature review provides a deeper understanding of employee activism, its influencing factors, its various forms and tactics and how it can be addressed from the perspective of communication practitioners. Empirically, the article presents the results of a cross-national qualitative study, including Italy and the U.S.A., based on 20 qualitative interviews with corporate communications directors and senior internal communications executives.

Findings – Results detail five core themes: (1) the conceptualization of employee activism; (2) the national cultural, organizational and individual factors that influence it; (3) the forms of activism; (4) the tactics used; (5) the elements related to the communication management of employee activism. The cross-national comparison highlights some commonalities across Italy and the U.S.A.: for example the prevalence of isolated voices, the mediating function of ERGs and unions and the role of an open communication climate.

Practical implications – This study offers implications for organizations and their strategic communication management concerning risk management and communication to deal with dysfunctional employee activism, internal communication and voice climate; alignment of employee, corporate and CEO activism to realize a truly purpose-driven organization.

Originality/value – While most studies on employee activism portray employees as obstacles, this study highlights more nuanced ways of managing employee activism, such as organization-centric or de-organization-centric, mostly depending on the nature and forms of employee activism and the influencing factors involved.

Keywords Employee activism, Insider activists, Socially relevant causes, Risk management, Crisis prevention, Corporate activism, CEO activism, Voice regulation, Employee dissent, Strategic communication management

Paper type Research paper

Ethics statement for human participant research (HPR): This project was reviewed and approved by the University of Georgia's Institutional Review Board in June 2023, with a modification approved in September 2023. The review was conducted under Exempt Category 2ii, meaning the study involves minimal risk to participants and includes the collection of identifiable information. Under Category 2ii, there is no significant risk of harm to participants' legal standing, finances or reputations if their identities were disclosed. This project is unfunded and was reviewed by the Human Research Protection Program. For additional information, the Human Subjects Office can be contacted at 706-542-3199 or IRB@uga.edu.



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Introduction

More employees are speaking out publicly on relevant social issues and putting pressure on organizations and managers by engaging in collective action for social change, through actions like employee walkouts, whistleblowing or complaints on social media (Li and Soule, 2021; Miles *et al.*, 2021). Employee activism (from now on EA) differs from other employee-led initiatives, as employees engage in socially relevant causes beyond labor rights and employment conditions that personally affect them (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023). Employees therefore act as internal advocates or disruptors, playing a central role in the redefinition of corporate purpose and strategy. When supportive and organic, EA can provide new opportunities for organizations that want to increase their social impact on socially relevant issues and make that impact more visible through strategic communication management. When EA is dysfunctional and hostile, risks and challenges for organizations facing hostility from their own employees may emerge, especially when the confrontation becomes public.

Literature on social change efforts undertaken from within corporations (e.g. Scully, 2015) underlines how EA has grown both as a global phenomenon and an area of concern in specific national contexts. News sources in the U.S.A. report cases of employees walking off the job to protest the sale of guns at Walmart stores or Wayfair's agreement to supply immigrant detention centers (Gurchiek, 2019). North America is a context that favors EA, as corporations play a dominant role in how regulation is implemented, and insider corporate knowledge is often used by internal activists to drive social change (Scully, 2015). In Europe, too, various crises (Diers-Lawson *et al.*, 2024), from the financial and refugee crises to the climate crisis, combined with the pressure of the UN 2030 Agenda and ESGs, have increased social scrutiny on organizations. In Italy, for example, more and more cases of EA dominate the news, such as when RAI employees protested the CEO's statement on the Israeli–Hamas War (Carugati, 2024). Given the global impact of EA and its varied manifestations in different countries, this study aims to advance the understanding of EA from the views of communication management executives in Italy and the U.S.A.

This study addresses several critical research needs in communication management theory and practice. First, EA has become more urgent in this “age of purpose” (Weber Shandwick, 2019) driven by rising societal expectations, growing employee awareness and empowered voice and generational change, making EA an important focus for organizations. Second, while EA is not so new in social movement research (Scully, 2015), this study follows Krishna *et al.*'s (2023) call for more explorations of EA in public relations and communication scholarship by recognizing the fundamental communicative dimension of this phenomenon, and by examining the perceptions of communication professionals and their communication and engagement practices. Third, delving deeper into existing communication literature, employees engaging in social change are mainly viewed as an obstacle or threat to the organization's reputation (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023; Reitz and Higgins, 2022; Reyes, 2021). This study aims to broaden the view of EA as an opportunity for organizational proactive change. While organizations are called to take preparatory actions that are essential for organizational readiness (Jin *et al.*, 2024), they should also proactively promote forms of advocacy EA consistent with the organization's purpose. Finally, most of the discussion and examples in the literature come from the U.S.A. This cross-national study provides additional insights from the U.S.A. and new findings from Italy, contributing to how EA is understood in North American and European contexts. Although EA and protest cultures may differ by country, our study provides new evidence of their global characteristics and impact.

Literature review and theoretical framework*Understanding employee activism and its influencing factors*

The intersection of business and civil society has become a focus for scholars studying social movements, emphasizing the impact of activist movements on corporations (e.g. Briscoe and Gupta, 2016). In this context, the workplace environment sees a growing importance of

employee voice (Reitz and Higgins, 2022). EA within organizations can be conceived as an example of voice behavior where employees aim to drive social change (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016).

There are several definitions of EA in the literature, summarized in Table 1. While these definitions each offer nuances, they emphasize common characteristics of this phenomenon: that is purposeful, organized and visible efforts, expressed internally and/or externally in the organization, aimed at social change by changing a company's stance and/or behavior towards certain social issues. This study conceptualizes EA as the active and conscious participation of employees, who usually join in groups to promote social change through collective actions that have public visibility on common social, political or environmental issues. The social issues employees advocate for can vary, including issues surrounding gender, LGBTQIA + rights, ethnicity, political affiliation, abortion, immigration laws, climate change and income inequality, which often are controversial topics.

Research also highlights the influencing factors that shape EA worldwide (e.g. Briscoe and Gupta, 2016; 2021; Krishna, 2021; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023): the rising expectations of the workforce, empowerment as a management principle, pressing societal challenges related to CSR and sustainability issues and emancipation enabled by digital technology. This appears particularly true for younger generations, who increasingly demand corporate responsibility, are tech-savvy and use platforms like social media to voice their concerns (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023; Reitz and Higgins, 2022). National culture can also shape employees' behavior and activism within the organization. Culture influences how individuals perceive and respond to workplace dynamics (Schein, 2017), making it key to understanding differences in activism behavior across countries (Knoll *et al.*, 2021). Other studies add the influence of individual and organizational factors. Individual factors include the degree of (dis)satisfaction with the workplace, the (mis)alignment of personal identity with the organization and personal moral attitudes about the organization's social impact (Hug and Zhang, 2024; Lee, 2022). Organizational factors relate to the organizational culture and more specifically the

Table 1. Definitions of employee activism

Author/s	Definition
Briscoe and Gupta (2021), p. 1	"Employees engaged in coordinated action to address a societal problem connected to the company they work for. This may entail promoting or countering change in their organization or using the organization as a platform to bring attention to an issue in society at large"
Brown <i>et al.</i> (2020), p. 128	"An individual employee, or group of employees, who lacks full access to official channels of influence, and thus engages in collective action to remedy a perceived wrong within the organization"
Duncan and Hille (2019), p. 34	"[Employees] who speak out for or against their employers on controversial issues that affect society"
Gautam and Carberry, (2020), p. 2	"Employees engaging in collective action to change organizational policies and practices from within"
Jin and You (2023), p. 173	"Employees who lack institutional channels to top management decision-making engaging in collective action to gain influence inside the organization"
Krishna (2021), p. 119	"Goal-oriented efforts organized and negotiated by individuals and/or groups of employees to internally and/or externally advocate for or against organizational policy and/or decision-making to generate social change"
Ninova-Solovykh (2023), p. 153	"Employees actively speaking out against their employer but still wanting to remain part of the organization and thus revolve around the positive notion of social responsibility and organizational loyalty at the same time"
Reitz and Higgins (2022), p. 1	"Voices of difference on issues of wider social and environmental concern, that seek to influence company action and challenge existing patterns of power"

Source(s): Authors' own creation

communication climate (Lee, 2022), transparent internal communication (Jin and You, 2023) and leaders' attitudes toward social advocacy (Hong and Ji, 2022; Ramirez and Islam, 2022).

Considering the understanding and practice of EA may vary given the combination of this set of influencing factors, this study follows Krishna *et al.*'s (2023) call for more research on EA in communication studies and seeks to further explore how communication professionals engaged in employee relations management and communication conceptualize this phenomenon (e.g. Jin and You, 2023; Krishna, 2021):

RQ1. How do corporate executives specialized in employee relations and internal communication conceptualize EA on socially relevant issues?

Forms and tactics of employee activism

EA can take different forms and be implemented using several tactics. From an organizational perspective, EA can be divided into *adversary or anti-corporate* EA, that is when employees raise issues or voice their concerns through confrontation and opposition to their employer, and *advocacy* EA, that is when employees advocate for their company while promoting actions that advance social change (Krishna, 2021; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023; Reyes, 2021). Brown *et al.* (2020) further distinguish between *internally-directed* EA, which refers to the constructive expression of opinion within an organization that is not publicized and therefore carries lower risks, and *externally-directed* EA, which includes actions attracting public attention and carrying the risk of organizational backlash. Rheinhardt *et al.* (2023) focus on externally-directed EA by elaborating on the subtype of "platform activism", the use of an organization's physical or symbolic resources by an employee to reach beyond internal boundaries and advocate for broader social issues. However, the perceived accessibility of such activism varies by company and is influenced by organizational culture.

When it comes to tactics, Briscoe and Gupta (2021) describe how employees act along a spectrum: from *disruptive tactics*, which involve disrupting internal routines and damaging public reputation to force leaders to comply with employee demands, such as employee walkouts, protest demonstrations or leaking internal information to NGOs; to *persuasive tactics*, which include more discreet employee communication approaches to influence colleagues and leaders, such as coordinating with employee activists in other organizations, petition campaigns and talking to the media. Many communication tactics used internally by employee activists are like those used externally (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016; McCown, 2007), such as articulating grievances, sharing reports, rallying with other groups, building political coalitions and using social or news media to increase pressure. McCown (2007) describes how employees typically mobilize by forming coalitions with those sharing their concerns and initially attempting to engage in two-way symmetrical communication with their organizations. When these efforts are unsuccessful, employees may escalate to asymmetrical and more confrontational tactics, such as engaging the media. When organizations use effective communication management strategies in addressing EA, two-way symmetrical communication and joint decision-making are more likely to occur.

The above discussion of various EA forms and tactics raises another question this study will attempt to deepen:

RQ2. What tactics do organizations face when considering both adversary and advocacy EA forms as well as internally- and externally-directed EA?

Communication management of employee activism

Many organizations have adopted strategic communication management to strengthen relationships with their employees and to engage and listen to employees in an open and balanced dialog.

Internal communication in the context of EA is crucial to address employee communicative needs and to prevent employee concerns from escalating adversary activism and its

externalization (Krishna *et al.*, 2023). Open internal communication and a participative decision-making culture promote symmetrical two-way communication, trust and collaboration (McCown, 2007). This aligns with the principles of *dialogic communication* (Kent and Taylor, 2021) on which companies are increasingly relying when communicating with their employees, and with consumers and the media, who all increasingly expect transparency and value alignment. As part of effective internal and dialogic communication, *organizational listening* represents a strategic communication approach where organizations actively engage with stakeholders through an open, two-way communication (Macnamara, 2016). Internally, this manifests in organizational policies and leadership actions that create a safe environment for employee voice (Qin and Men, 2021), including EA on socially relevant issues. Krishna *et al.* (2023) emphasize the role of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) in fostering internal social movements within organizations (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016; Krishna *et al.*, 2023) and providing a strategic platform to listen to employees and anticipate potential problems. While ERGs are intended to facilitate internally-directed activism, they could also support externally-directed platform activism (Rheinhardt *et al.*, 2023).

While these strategies help to build trust, openness and participation within the organization and promote more control and risk anticipation, difficulties may arise. Miles *et al.* (2021) warn that engaging with non-work-related issues can distract employees and reduce productivity while dissenting opinions can isolate dissenting employees and affect workplace harmony. Reitz and Higgins (2022) add that some leaders have claimed organizations are apolitical and should not deal with such issues. Yet, employees may resist EA if they perceive an unsafe environment or fear punishment (Rheinhardt *et al.*, 2023). Finally, organizations should consider and align other forms of activism when developing their EA communication management strategies, especially corporate activism (Villagra *et al.*, 2022), CEO activism (Hambrick and Wowak, 2021) and shareholder activism (Kalodimos and Leavitt, 2020), as all these forms involve taking a stand on social issues which either fit together or conflict with each other. While a detailed discussion of the nature and outcomes of different forms of activism is beyond the scope of this article, it is recognized that employees may respond to CEO activism (Brown *et al.*, 2020) or other corporate or shareholder activism by engaging in their activism and more adversary or advocacy forms.

Further research is needed to investigate the strategies and implications of communication management of EA. This includes examining how communicators perceive and manage the balancing act between EA as a risk and an opportunity for proactive change within organizations, and contribution to strategic communication:

RQ3. What communication management strategies exist for the expression, listening and regulation of EA?

Methodology

Data collection

This study is a cross-national qualitative investigation involving Italy and the U.S.A. As is typical of cross-cultural research (Bryman, 2012), each research group was responsible for conducting the study in their own country, with work coordinated to ensure comparability of interview questions and procedures.

Data was collected between August and November 2023 through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with corporate communications directors and senior internal communications executives. The interview guide was organized around the three research questions of this study, that is conceptualization and influencing factors of EA, forms and tactics and communication management strategies. Participants were allowed to expand on the themes of the questions from their perspective and practical experience, allowing new concepts and ideas to emerge from the data (Bryman, 2012). The interview guides in the two languages were tested in advance. Questions jointly developed in English by the two country teams were back-

translated to Italian by two independent native-speaking individuals. Ethical approval was obtained from the internal review committee of University of Georgia.

Participants were recruited using the non-probability technique of purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012). Contacts from two research centers in Italy and the U.S.A., which network experts in corporate and internal communications, were used to identify and select participants who were knowledgeable about employee dynamics and EA. Participants had to be employed in private companies or consultancies, hold managerial positions in their respective organizations and work in internal communication. Those working in consultancies were approached in their role as corporate communication directors or senior internal communication executives dealing with their staff, without considering their experience with external clients.

Two researchers from each country team were involved in the data collection and conducted the interviews via video conferencing. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from all participants, who were informed about the purposes of this research and how their responses would be used and stored.

The Italian sample comprised eight individual interviews and two group interviews, that is a total of 10 interviews with 15 informants. The group interviews involving multiple participants (five in one case and two in the other) allowed the collection of relevant information from those companies where EA was addressed with a cross-functional strategy, with the internal communication function supported by industrial relations, digital communication and sustainability functions. Participants were almost equally divided between male and female, and between those belonging to Generation X (44–59 years) and Millennials (28–43 years), with only one Boomer (60–69 years). All participants identified themselves as White. Three companies belonged to the communications industry, three were from the energy industry and the others from the banking, pharmaceutical, electronics and paint industries, respectively.

The American sample included 10 individual interviews. Eight of the ten participants were male, and all participants identified as White, with one identifying as White/Other. The ages of the participants were skewed, with six belonging to Generation X (44–59 years), two Boomers (60–69 years) and only one Millennial (28–43 years). Four participants came from the communications industry, three from the healthcare industry and three from the utilities, higher education and food industries, respectively.

All interviews lasted one hour on average. They were recorded and transcribed, and the Italian interviews were back-translated into English for joint data analysis.

Data analysis

Two researchers from each country team were involved in the data analysis. The coding scheme was first piloted on each qualitative dataset to ensure inter-coder reliability. Then the coders carried out an iterative process of data coding and interpretation across the entire data set to allow for continuous (re)discussion and agreement (Bryman, 2012).

The analysis was done manually and followed a thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke, 2012) for systematically identifying, organizing and synthesizing patterns of meaning and experience (themes) across the overall dataset. A combination of deduction and induction was used: the researchers brought to the data a set of concepts and ideas derived from previous literature on EA, with the study's three research questions providing the general coding framework; at the same time, content emerging from the data itself was used to refine the coding and interpretation of themes and subthemes. The iterative process was facilitated by structuring two coding tables for the two datasets. This procedure eventually facilitated the systematic cross-country comparison, providing valuable insights into the general trends and at the same time the specific nature and characteristics of EA in the two national contexts.

Results

The results are explained based on five core themes: (1) the conceptualization of EA and (2) the national cultural, organizational and individual factors influencing it (RQ1); (3) the forms of activism and (4) the tactics used (RQ2); (5) the elements related to the communication management of EA (RQ3). The description of each theme is supplemented by sub-themes and underpinned with examples and quotes from the interviews. If relevant cross-country differences emerged from the data, these are emphasized in the explanation of subthemes. Figure 1 offers a visual overview.

Conceptualization of employee activism

Framing employee activism. Participants associated their conceptualization of EA with *employee prosocial engagement*, *active citizenship*, *active participation*, *freedom of expression* and *megaphoning* with external resonance. Some elaborated on employee-centered definitions: “All the ways in which an employee actively engages in supporting the social causes that are important to them” (Italian Participant 8) or “being able to let people express themselves” (American Participant 2). In contrast, Italian Participant 3 expressed a more organization-led conceptualization, still embodying the above concepts: “It is a journey that companies are undergoing in terms of evolution and transformation related to active participation, collaboration, and inclusion of employees who are no longer seen as colleagues to whom only information is directed, but as individuals to involve even outside the company”.

Cultural change within companies. A key subtheme from all interviews concerns the strong link between the emergence and development of EA and *cultural change* within companies. EA entails a culture valuing *empowerment*, *participation in corporate decision-making* and *openness*. Italian Participant 4 emphasized: “Employee activism is linked to (...) the ability of corporate stakeholders to express a position regarding broader roles and projects related to purpose”. Agreeing, American Participant 6 stated, “[employees] have expectations now of their employers to support the things that they believe in or to advocate for things that they believe”.

Prevalent social issues. Prevalent social issues in Italy include Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) and CSR. Conversely, there is a reluctance to discuss religion or politics. In the U.S.A. they include racial justice, COVID-19, the return to office movement and the

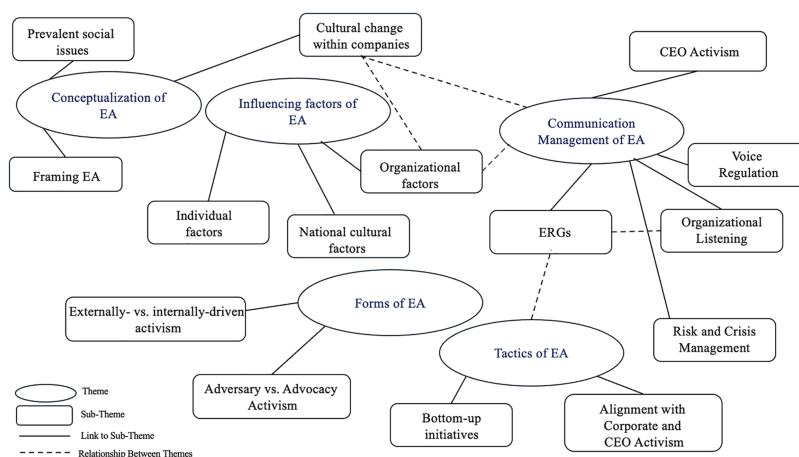


Figure 1. Thematic map. Source: Authors' own creation

Israeli–Hamas War. Political issues, such as abortion, climate and equal pay were also discussed.

Influencing factors

National cultural factors. Unions were highlighted as a powerful lever to intensify or solve employee concerns: “The union becomes the main interlocutor within the company around employee issues related to work organization” (Italian Participant 6). Three American Participants agreed, stating unions create a more *organized and established method* of discussing issues with employees. The absence of clear processes for addressing concerns leads to more internal conflict. Compared to the U.S.A., in Italy, employees tend to voice *softer and less divisive topics*, as “Italian culture tends not to let people fully express themselves in the workplace, not because the company does not want to, but because people think that the organizational setting is not the most suitable place” (Italian Participant 2).

Organizational factors. Several *organizational factors* were mentioned across all interviews: *open communication climate and corporate culture; purpose-driven companies; corporate activism* on socially relevant causes in line with employees; *active listening; transparent communication and leadership style*. EA appears to prevail in purpose-driven companies, which authentically practice corporate activism on socially relevant issues, and are open to employee dialog and voice. Participants explained, “If the company knew how to listen and was attentive to the needs of its employees, (...) [it] would be the privileged place where they would feel free to communicate and actively participate” (Italian Participant 2), and “culture dictates how open that door really is” (American Participant 5).

Individual factors. The analysis highlighted the influence of *individual factors* such as *generational differences*. Italian findings suggest younger organizational newcomers may initially display less involvement but become highly active once integrated into the organization over time. In Italy, different age groups prioritize activism differently: younger members focus on environmental concerns, and senior members on social issues, though there are instances of shared activism. Conversely, American findings found younger individuals were highly active while older employees “just want to hold on to their pension, (...) finish off strong” (American Participant 5). Moreover, EA relates to *employee internal values*, including the *manifestation of individual identity, sense of belonging, sense of identification, perception of authenticity, alignment and trust relationships*. In the words of Italian Participant 6: “[EA] is a manifestation of the individual’s identity, the brand purpose of each person”. This was found to be especially true among newer generations, who prioritize aligning personal values with their organization values as “religion, family, and school have less influence, and young people seek identification with companies” (Italian Participant 9) and, therefore, they want employment with “an organization on their side that supports the same issues” (American Participant 10).

Forms of EA

Adversary versus advocacy forms. The most prevalent form of EA in Italy is *advocacy activism which adheres to and supports corporate activism*. An Italian example of advocacy activism is an employee’s spontaneous initiative to promote slow mobility, which resonated with the company’s goals and led to the creation of a platform encouraging employee well-being and sustainability. This form is present in the U.S.A. too: an example occurred when an organization educated their employees to lobby their legislators and post on social media against taxation changes, eventually resulting in the changes not occurring.

There are also cases of *adversary activism*, albeit less frequent. The cases mentioned in the interviews range from controversies over inadequate investments and infrastructure within an energy company, where isolated voices grew to the point where they culminated in organized union protests and spontaneous actions on social media (Italian Participant 6), to angry employee reactions voiced through corporate channels in response to a company’s contracts

with multiple government agencies that were rejected by employees and resulted in “hundreds of employees literally storming corporate headquarters and the CEO’s office” (American Participant 10).

Externally-directed versus internally-directed forms. In Italy, EA tends to be *internally-directed* within the organization. Dissent-based and externally-driven activism are less common, and when this happens, social media is the primary platform for expressing individual dissent publicly. In the U.S.A., while *externally-directed activism* is present while not very frequent like in Italy, *dissent-based EA that is expressed internally* is the most common form. Dissent could come from individual employees contacting a manager or HR, or from an ERG.

Tactics of EA

Bottom-up initiatives. Participants across all interviews, when asked about tactics, focused almost exclusively on those associated with internally-directed EA. They commonly referred to bottom-up initiatives, that is *spontaneous employee suggestions and proposals* on relevant social issues involving the organization and its operations “ranging from corporate volunteering and sustainability-related activities to others aimed at integrating more disadvantaged groups or sustaining inclusion activities” (Italian Participant 8). Challenges in implementation were highlighted in both countries, especially when “proposals from colleagues (...) clash with other strategic issues that are rooted in a strongly established and influential corporate culture” (Italian Participant 9) or when proposals are rebuffed because “I can’t talk to my manager, or I did, and they ignored me, or they laughed me out of the room” (American Participant 3). Having a proposal ignored can then lead to an escalation outside of the organization as “[more external EA] is the way that I’m going to get everybody’s attention” (American Participant 3).

Alignment with corporate and CEO activism. Both Italian and American employees tended to express opinions in *direct connection with existing company projects, linking EA to corporate activism, CEO activism* or other company-led initiatives, for example employee ambassador programs or existing programs promoting DEI and sustainability. Italian Participant 1 stressed, “[...] company initiatives are supported by employees who, voluntarily, lend their voices and spontaneous resonance to the company’s projects”.

Employee Resource Groups. Participants in all interviews mentioned ERGs as a tactic from the perspective of employee activists. Italian Participant 6 explained that, particularly “on Yammer, there are spontaneously emerging subgroups and communities” which can subsequently be converted into better-structured ERGs. Interestingly, in both countries, EA manifests itself as isolated voices rather than a widespread movement, if not through ERGs. Simultaneously, participants indicated that companies view ERGs as a strategic way to monitor internal conversations about these issues and maintain an open dialog.

Communication management of employee activism

Voice regulation. Participants from both countries highlighted voice regulation for risk management, implemented through *company guidelines and policies*: ethical guidelines, codes of conduct, whistleblowing policies and especially social media policies. Social media policies encourage the expression of voice “within safe boundaries, a tool that allows everyone to speak up, express their voice and enable change” (Italian Participant 9). American Participant 6 shared an example of regulating social media use by requesting employees post a disclaimer “that those are [the employee’s] views and not the views of their employer”. This could alleviate reputational damage to the company if an employee makes controversial statements. Regulating voice was also framed as a *strategic communication opportunity* to promote dialogic communication and position employees externally as credible spokespeople for the company “emphasizing a key internal-external synergy” (Italian Participant 7). Some

organizations harness their employees to act as social media ambassadors for their organization and provide resources such as talking points and coaching.

Organizational listening. Organizational listening is widely implemented to promote an *open culture within organizations based on feedback and dialog*, where EA can influence the way social issues are addressed within the company. The common tools identified across the interviews include annual climate surveys, structured reporting systems for anonymous and non-anonymous feedback including whistleblowing procedures, town hall meetings, bottom-up communication tools and listening in informal settings, non-retaliatory and non-discrimination policies, as well as policies for creating synergy between internal and external communication. Italian Participant 3 explained: “We promote structured internal processes of listening and a feedback path with managers, characterized by planned moments throughout the year to foster not only performance evaluation but also corporate well-being”. Participants also stressed the *role of the direct supervisor* in creating an environment of active listening. American Participant 3 stated when activism situations “come to a head”, it is often because “there’s not a strong relationship between the employees and their immediate managers”.

Employee Resource Groups. According to the interviews, ERGs for EA have evolved into a dual role: *a tactic used by employee activists and a strategic tool for dialog, listening and risk prevention* from an organizational perspective. In both the U.S.A. and Italy, ERGs assist internally-directed activism and foster a more inclusive organizational culture by facilitating meaningful conversations, open dialog, freedom of expression and action. According to Italian Participant 2: “ERGs (...) help to create a culture of voice in the organization because individuals feel freer to raise issues in the workplace that they would otherwise find difficult to raise”.

CEO activism. CEO activism was highlighted across interviews as a strategic approach that organizations should consider in their efforts to manage EA. In Italy, CEO activism was identified as a source of inspiration for advocacy forms of EA. In both countries, emphasis was placed on authenticity and overall alignment with corporate values to balance all positions and maintain credibility: “If the issue is not aligned, you shouldn’t be doing it” (American Participant 10). CEO activism can also be detrimental when it conflicts with corporate and shareholder positions. For example, American Participant 6 discussed when CEO “activism was going to be 100% based on their personal values and beliefs, and they were going to do what they were going to do regardless of the impact on an organization (...) it created tremendous amounts of friction”. Careful monitoring and strategic alignment of all forms of organization-related activism therefore proved essential in all interviews to facilitate collective purpose on social issues and motivate employees to engage in EA aligned with the company’s goals and values.

Risk and crisis management. The last sub-theme relates to risk and crisis management. The participants emphasized *voice regulation* and *organizational listening* are also essential for risk management purposes. Participants across countries also mentioned the value of *strategic communication*, with continuous reminders of corporate policies, guidelines and values to anticipate a crisis due to EA. American Participant 3 stated: “People need to know what the rules are to not break them”. The *proactive monitoring of internal and external social media channels* to protect the company’s reputation was presented as crucial in Italy, while American participants were mixed on the topic as some perceived this as “sneaky” (American Participant 2). ERGs were also mentioned as they “can contribute to risk management in healthy companies” in cases of “healthy activism” (Italian Participant 2). When externally-directed and adversary forms of EA quickly turn into crises, *crisis prevention strategies* mentioned include: managing *union relations*; using *participatory models of industrial relations*; *restoring dialog and trust* through one-on-one interactions with dissenting employees; having a framework and trained *team* ready to respond to a crisis; reviewing and analyzing crisis responses to “continually grow and evolve” (American Participant 7) and taking *corrective actions* “instead of reacting each time to every dissenting voice (...) through concrete actions such as awareness-raising campaigns” (Italian Participant 6).

Discussion

Given that the essence of EA is to generate social change through organized efforts of employees advocating for or against organizational policy and/or decision-making (Krishna, 2021) and the generally negative perception of EA (e.g. EA is seen as an obstacle to strategic communication, see Ninova-Solovykh, 2023; EA is perceived as a threat to the company's reputation, see Briscoe and Gupta, 2016, Miles *et al.*, 2021, Reyes, 2021), it is crucial to broaden the view of EA as an opportunity for proactive change within organizations. To do so, organizations must clearly define and understand EA, its influencing factors, forms and tactics, to manage such organized efforts effectively and ethically.

Our findings, based on in-depth interviews with communication experts in Italy and the U.S.A., provide a timely picture of how EA is perceived and managed by organizations. Communication professionals should counsel their organizations on proactively assessing and regulating EA, especially from a risk management and crisis prevention approach. Acknowledging this need, we outline four theme-based takeaways related to EA that emerged from our participants' insights.

Issue social relevance and internal value alignment

Social change is at the core of the EA definition (Krishna, 2021), which must be addressed internally via proactive communication management. According to insights gained from RQ1, employee prosocial involvement is expressed in employee active citizenship, active participation, freedom of expression and megaphoning with external resonance. Issue involvement is rooted in employees' internal values (e.g. manifestation of individual identity and sense of identification). Cultural change within companies is a central concern, as employees are increasingly advocating for positive transformation of organizational behaviors on socially relevant causes, which parallels their increased empowerment and engagement in organizational decision-making. This echoes prior literature on the importance of optimizing organizational culture and fostering a transparent communication climate (Jin and You, 2023) that allows information flow in the workplace (Lee, 2022), as well as aligning organizational leadership attitudes towards social advocacy regardless of personal stance on controversial issues (Hong and Ji, 2022).

Three-tier model of EA influencing factors

The principles of dialogic communication (Kent and Taylor, 2021) and organizational listening, which engages with stakeholders through two-way communication (Macnamara, 2016), were applied to EA, especially in identifying influencing factors. Based on insights gained from RQ1, a three-tier model emerges highlighting the influencing factors of EA from an organizational perspective: national cultural, organizational and individual.

At the *national cultural level*, the role of unions is commonly described as a focal, powerful lever, which can either intensify or help solve employees' expressed concerns. At the *organizational level*, having an open communication climate and culture of change (or not), performing active listening (or not), whether a company is purpose-driven (or not) and the degree to which an organization's corporate and CEO activism on socially relevant issues resonates with employees (or not) all play a key role in effective EA communication management. At the *individual level*, generational differences resulting in differing issue prioritizations and employee internal values manifested different patterns among American and Italian participants.

This three-tier factor model provides the framework for the emergence of EA and its more or less supportive forms. It also provides the basis for developing effective communication management that is truly responsive to stakeholder concerns, both through organizational policy and leadership actions (Qin and Men, 2021) and through influential individuals and groups such as ERGs that act formally and informally as internal movement influencers (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016).

Varied forms of EA: a call for culturally-tailored approach

The most prevalent social issues associated with EA manifest differently among American and Italian employees, as evidenced by what we learned from RQ2. While DEI and CSR are the focal issue concerns in Italy, religion or politics are less discussed. In contrast, racial justice, COVID-19 and the return to office movement and the Israeli–Hamas War have emerged as the most prevalent social issues in the U.S.A., with political issues highlighted. Another set of differences lies in the activism stance toward organizations in the two countries: (1) American EA tends to be adversarial with instances of externally-directed activism; (2) Italian EA tends to be advocacy activism supporting corporate activism and is almost exclusively internally-directed.

Considering prior research on national and organizational culture influences, a culturally-tailored approach to proactively manage EA must consider both national culture (Schein, 2017) and internal culture (e.g. Briscoe and Gupta, 2016; 2021; Knoll *et al.*, 2021). Considering the observed differences between Italy and the U.S.A., especially related to focal issues and forms and direction of efforts, these different prevalence levels require culturally-tailored strategic communication management measures.

Key strategies: voice regulation, corporate and CEO activism, dissent communication management

Organizational approaches to managing EA must take into consideration intersecting open internal communication (Macnamara, 2016; McCown, 2007), dialogic communication (Kent and Taylor, 2021) and organizational listening (Krishna *et al.*, 2023), which help identify and respond to employees' concerns and prevent adversary activism and its externalization. Echoing these findings from prior literature, insights we gained from RQ3 further provide strategic recommendations for proactive EA communication management in organizations.

First, *voice regulation*, via social media policies and internal voice processes (e.g. ethical guidelines), emerged as a central theme across our interviews to authentically promote transparency while ensuring free expression of voice within secure boundaries. Voice regulation and listening processes can provide organizations an advantage in anticipating and mitigating EA risks (Krishna *et al.*, 2023) and shaping better organizational culture via opportunities EA may present.

Second, EA appears to prevail in purpose-driven companies. Therefore, alignment with *corporate activism and CEO activism* on socially relevant issues can create strong individual-organization synergy and internal-external stakeholder synergy. The key to this strategy is continuous monitoring and alignment of all forms of organization-related activism for effective storytelling and credible actions aligned with corporate values. This can be challenging especially for CEOs of multinational companies, given the national cultural factors discussed earlier.

Finally, in cases of public and more adversary forms EA, especially prevalent in the U.S.A., *dissent communication management* in view of possible risks and crises is essential, as reckoned by our participants across the board: (1) managing union relations as the union serves as an intermediary between organizations and dissenting employees, playing a key role in escalating or resolving issues; (2) fostering/restoring trust through one-on-one interactions with dissenting employees, providing opportunities for open dialog; (3) having a system and trained team ready to respond to disruptions triggered or amplified by adversary activism.

Theoretical implications

Built upon the conceptual foundation laid by scholars (see Table 1), our study provides an advanced conceptual definition of EA from an organizational perspective, which regards EA as a complex, dynamic and ongoing process influenced by and forming pressure between organizations and their employees on socially relevant issues essential to employees' internal values and identity. The forms and fluctuations of EA as experienced by the senior

communication executives interviewed in Italy and the U.S.A., provide a solid framework for further investigation of EA communication management and for strategy development and performance benchmarking in practice.

Employee activists have often been unfairly portrayed as obstacles to be controlled rather than valuable contributors to communication strategies (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023). Different ways of managing EA, such as organization-centric or de-organization-centric, seem feasible depending on the nature and forms of EA and the influencing factors at play. Considering our findings, we advocate for the value of integrating interdisciplinary theories, such as the safety valve theory (e.g. Emerson, 1963) in future EA research especially related to managing dissent communication. The strategies discussed earlier regarding whether and how to open the valve, via different strategies, such as voice regulation, internal-external regulation (e.g. employee ambassadorship), CEO activism and union relations management, are aimed to manage dissent expression, foster positive disruption and (co-) create with employees positive organizational and social changes.

Practical implications

Organizational decision-makers and communication professionals play an important role as: “They are not only responsible for elaborating and implementing an intelligent communication strategy in case of employee activism; by engaging in issue management, they can also reduce the risk that employee turn to external audiences” (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023, p. 152). Therefore, how can organizations play a positive and proactive role in managing EA with socially relevant issues and internal value alignment at its core? Our study argues it is time to bring corporate back to EA and communication management. Our cross-national study offers important implications for organizations and their strategic communication management in different forms and shapes of EA and varied levels of pressure. In addition to the theme-based takeaways elaborated earlier, strategic communication practitioners should keep in mind these three key areas: (1) risk management and communication to deal with dysfunctional forms of EA while supporting organic activism that drives positive change for both the organization and broader society; (2) internal communication and voice climate to support employees to constructively raise their voices and contribute to the well-being of society and (3) the potential of corporate and CEO activism that work with employee voices to realize a truly purpose-driven organization.

Limitations and future directions

Our study presents limitations that need to be addressed in future research. First, as our participants came from Italy and the U.S.A., perspectives and experiences from organizations from other parts of the world are needed to expand the conceptual and empirical foundation of the current work. Second, employees’ perspectives need to be further examined. Third, given the nature of the qualitative research, future research should consider larger industry areas and practitioner populations. Lastly, although our qualitative data did not render evidence regarding how internal communication guidelines affect different forms of EA or concerns about artificial intelligence in managing EA, these are important topics to be explored in future scholarly research.

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Attachment 2: Published journal article. “From voice to action? A survey on organizational and individual factors impacting employee activism intentions”

Milan, 11 September 2025

We, the undersigned, Sara Conti, Yijing Wang and Silvia Ravazzani, co-authors of the journal article:

Conti, S., Wang, Y., and Ravazzani, S. (2025). From Voice to Action? A Survey on Organizational and Individual Factors Impacting Employee Activism Intentions. *International Journal of Business Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23294884251384721>

hereby declare that

although the publication represents the result of a joint research and reflection carried out by all co-authors, the specific contributions of Sara Conti can be identified as follows:

Conceptualization	Prominent
Methodology	Prominent
Data collection	Prominent
Data analysis	Central
Visualization	Central
Writing – first draft	Prominent
Writing – review & editing	Central
Corresponding author	Yes
Funding acquisition	----

Sara Conti	
Yijing Wang	
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Abstract

Activism is increasingly shaping social and political arenas and influencing the corporate world. This study examines the factors that drive employee activism within organizations, focusing on how organizational and individual factors influence both communicative and actionable activism intentions. Drawing on a survey of 324 Italian public and private sector employees, we investigate the impact of: (a) organizational factors, specifically climate of voice, transparent leadership communication, and perceived corporate authenticity; and (b) individual factors, specifically perceived external prestige, organizational identification, and employee engagement. Additionally, we explore the moderating role of (c) corporate and CEO activism, as leaders' active involvement in social, political, and environmental issues may influence employee activism intentions. Findings underscore that a supportive voice climate, authentic alignment of corporate values, and transparent leadership communication empower employees toward activism. This study provides strategic implications for integrating purpose-driven values into internal communication and leadership practices to cultivate an organizational culture that encourages proactive employee engagement and advocacy.

Keywords

employee activism, socially relevant issues, corporate activism, CEO activism, employee advocacy, employee voice

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Introduction

In recent years, corporate governance and employee relations have evolved significantly, driven by increased stakeholder expectations that are pushing companies to adopt responsible practices. Companies are moving towards purpose-driven models (Adi, 2019), shifting from traditional profit-centered business models and rediscovering the importance of dialogic conversations with stakeholders (Kent & Taylor, 2021). A new wave is emerging that emphasizes the importance of listening to employees' voices and expectations, as employees are no longer just passive participants but are actively voicing their concerns on socially relevant topics such as inequality, climate change (Rheinhardt et al., 2023), social and environmental responsibility, diversity and inclusion (Herbert Smith Freehills, 2019). Employees are increasingly seeking alignment with values-based goals, pushing organizations to expand their purpose beyond profit and shareholder value to create value for communities and society (Adi, 2019).

Employee activism can be defined as “goal-oriented efforts organized and negotiated by individuals and/or groups of employees to internally and/or externally advocate for or against organizational policy and/or decision-making to generate social change” (Krishna, 2021, p. 119). This phenomenon includes various actions by activist employees such as media campaigns, advocacy, and direct actions such as boycotts and strikes (Belfield, 2020), which push companies to address broader social, environmental, and economic concerns. However, challenges remain as employees' willingness to discuss these issues openly and collaboratively often depends on a safe and supportive organizational climate (Frazier & Bowler, 2012). As a result, organizations are shifting to purpose-driven approaches (Adi, 2019) to strategically drive this change from within, positioning themselves through actions of corporate and CEO activism (e.g., Rheinhardt et al., 2023; Villagra et al., 2022) that influence each other.

The rise of these interconnected forms of activism reflects evolving employee expectations and societal demands, presenting organizations with challenges and opportunities as they seek to balance business objectives with social responsibility. As this trend accelerates, it is critical for researchers and practitioners to explore what drives activism in organizations by examining the interplay between individual and organizational factors driving activism from within. There are gaps in the literature for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of employee activism, which often lacks the integration of organizational and individual factors. For this reason, this study aims to examine employee intentions to actively engage in activism from both a communicative and behavioral perspective. It does so by developing a research model to test the influence of organizational and individual factors on such intentions and to advance theoretical and practical understanding of cultivating employee activism as a core driver of a cohesive and purpose-driven organization.

Theoretical Framework

The Dynamics of Activism at the Employee, Corporate, and CEO-Level

Activism has emerged as a significant socio-cultural phenomenon influencing change in social, political, environmental, and economic arenas (Rheinhardt et al., 2023). As the discourse on activism continues to evolve, its manifestations in the corporate context have gained increasing attention, underscoring the need for a deeper understanding of how activism functions and its impact on organizations.

The dynamics of activism in the corporate arena are determined by the different forms of organizational activism and their connections to each other, including *employee activism*, *corporate activism* and *CEO activism*. Understanding these distinctions allows a clearer analysis of the way these forms interact, influence each other, and collectively play a role in shaping organizational culture, employee engagement, and corporate reputation.

This paper will examine the phenomenon of *employee activism*, which is receiving increasing attention in the academic literature but still needs further understanding, particularly for its impact on organizational behavior and corporate strategy. Early studies on employee activism (e.g., Brown et al., 2020; Krishna, 2021) focused on the internal dynamics of workplace dissent, showing how employees, often lacking formal means of influence, take collective action to address perceived grievances and disclosures within their organizations. These activities range from advocacy and internal lobbying to more disruptive methods of protest, including strikes and public disclosures. As a communication-driven phenomenon, employee activism plays a crucial role in shaping the development and reputation of an organization (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023). Ignoring employee concerns can lead to adversarial activism and potentially cause crises if these issues are externalized (Krishna et al., 2023). As the previously given definition suggests, literature (e.g., Krishna, 2021; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023; Reyes, 2021) categorizes employee activism into two main types: (1) *adversarial or anti-corporate activism*, where employees raise concerns through confrontation and opposition to their employer; and (2) *employee advocacy*, where employees support their company while promoting actions that drive social change. Both forms of activism show the desire of employees to make a positive impact and improve society (Ninova-Solovykh, 2023). Although much of the existing research on employee activism portrays employees as obstacles or problems, this study emphasizes their role as insider activists and constructive contributors to strategic communication.

Corporate activism (CA) has been researched from the perspective of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate sociopolitical activism (CSA). CA is defined as “a company’s willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of actors in its institutional environment” (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020, p. 463). Companies are increasingly turning to corporate activism as a strategic approach to integrate social awareness into their core business activities (Villagra et al., 2022).

Scholars have examined how companies are taking a stand on controversial issues from climate change to social justice in response to societal pressures and stakeholder expectations (Li & Soule, 2021; Nalick et al., 2016). The motivations for corporate activism are often linked to a desire to improve the company's reputation, build loyalty and align with the values of consumers and employees (McDonnell, 2015).

Similarly, *CEO activism* involves corporate leaders publicly expressing their stance on socially relevant issues in order to influence public opinion (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). CEO activism examines the role of corporate leaders who speak out publicly on socially relevant issues that go beyond the traditional business domain. Research shows that CEO activism depends on personal values, stakeholder pressure, and broader corporate culture (Cycyota, 2023; Hambrick & Wowak, 2021) and can influence corporate reputation, consumer attitudes, employee engagement, and organizational culture (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019).

Employee activism differs fundamentally from corporate and CEO activism in terms of its origin, scope, and impact. While corporate and CEO activism usually reflects top-down initiatives driven by management or corporate strategy, employee activism is a bottom-up initiative that originates from employees themselves. Employee activism arises from within the workforce, often in response to company policies, cultural dynamics, or societal issues, and is therefore deeply connected to internal company processes.

Despite the growing body of research on forms of activism, there are still gaps in understanding the phenomenon of employee activism, the factors that may lead employees to choose activism within the workplace, and the strategic implications for long-term business sustainability. Furthermore, it is also within the aim of our study to investigate how these two additional forms of activism, namely corporate activism and CEO activism, may influence employees' intentions to engage in activism.

Employee Activism Intentions

When studying employee activism, it is essential to focus on employee activism intentions as they provide insight into what influences employees' decision to engage in activism. This helps organizations align their values with policies and effectively manage activism to support business goals and social impact. Employee activism intentions are defined as "employees' intentions to participate in collective actions with other coworkers to influence their organization" (Lee, 2022, p. 6). This definition highlights the collective nature of activism, where employees collaborate with colleagues through coordinated efforts to drive organizational change. However, employee activism involves more than just communication but also concrete actions to achieve this influence. Hence, in this study, a distinction is made between communicative and actionable intentions. The communicative intentions of employee activism refer to employees' motives to voice their concerns or support for activism in the organizational context. This includes raising awareness, participating in discussions, and advocating for change. These communicative intentions often serve as precursors to employee activism concrete actions, that involve direct and observable efforts, such

as participating in protests, signing petitions, or organizing collective initiatives. By distinguishing these two behaviors, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of employee activism and highlight both verbal and action-oriented contributions to employee activism.

In this study, employee activism intentions are conceptualized as the active and intentional involvement of employees in promoting social change through collective actions that have public visibility for common social, political, or environmental issues. These intentions are closely related to their communication behavior within the company and can lead to concrete actions by employees. In this context, especially in companies that actively promote employee voice, employees' intentions towards activism may vary due to a number of organizational and individual factors, which are described in the following section.

Before discussing these organizational and individual factors, it is important to consider some conditions that positively or negatively influence the emergence of employee activism.

First, organizational culture emerges as key in framing how activism is perceived and expressed within the workplace. It refers to the shared norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions developed to address problems of adaptation and integration, forming a framework for socializing new members into the organization's norms (Schein, 2017). Research has consistently demonstrated that a strong, healthy workplace culture significantly contributes to organizational success, by improving effectiveness, employee performance, cohesiveness, and identification (Yue et al., 2021). These characteristics make organizational culture a crucial element in fostering an environment in which activism can thrive.

Second, internal communication plays an important role in supporting employee activism, which can have a positive impact on the organization. Effective internal communication and participative decision-making play a critical role in fostering a culture of openness where communication between an organization and its employees is symmetrical and mutually beneficial (McCown, 2007). Symmetrical communication in organizations promotes positive outcomes for employees by prioritizing trust, credibility, openness, and a willingness to allow for different perspectives and negotiations (Yue et al., 2021). By empowering employee voice and encouraging feedback, a symmetrical communication system creates an environment where employees feel valued and can participate in decision-making processes (Yue et al., 2021), which also encourages activism.

Finally, leadership has a significant impact on how activism is expressed in organizations. Managers and hierarchical structures can either encourage or hinder activist practices, with leadership practices shaping pathways for activism (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Morrill et al., 2003; Ramirez & Islam, 2022). Rather than attempting to suppress employee activism, managers could improve organizational effectiveness by nurturing employees' activist motivations. This approach is not only consistent with the social mission but also opens promising avenues for collaboration with activist researchers to drive meaningful social change (Ramirez & Islam, 2022).

Activism is often viewed negatively in the workplace, making people reluctant to embrace it. Many associate the term with conflict, disruption, or questioning authority, leading to discomfort with these issues. McCown (2007) found that while participants avoided labeling themselves as activists, they still wanted to take action to address communication deficits and bring these issues to the attention of leaders. This shows that despite the negative perception of activism, there is a desire for change. Uncertainty is a critical factor in the workplace, especially when employees are considering speaking up. A complex interplay of individual, interpersonal, and organizational factors therefore influences their decisions. In this study, the modified ecological model of information disclosure decision-making from Li and Lee (2020) is used to examine how individuals cope with perceived uncertainty at different levels of influence. The model highlights the interaction between these levels and emphasizes how factors such as perceived risks and benefits, social capital, and organizational culture influence disclosure uncertainty (Li & Lee, 2020).

Organizational Factors

This study examines the role of climate of voice, transparent leadership communication, and authenticity as key organizational factors that can influence employees' intention to actively engage in activism. These factors were selected because they are critical to cultivating an organizational culture that encourages employees to speak up (e.g., Kim et al., 2022; Knoll & van Dick, 2013; Morrison et al., 2011). It is believed that such a culture is also crucial for encouraging extra-role voice behaviors (e.g., Van Dyne & LePine, 1998), such as activism, especially when it comes to socially relevant issues in the workplace.

Climate of Voice. Before deciding to engage in voice behaviors, individuals weigh the potential risks and benefits associated with speaking out (Detert & Burris, 2007). The concept of climate refers to employees' shared perceptions of practices, norms, and behaviors that are supported in a work environment (Morrison et al., 2011). Organizations can shape this climate to either encourage or inhibit open communication and expression (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), with workgroup climate significantly influencing individual behavior (Morrison et al., 2011). Employees who actively share ideas and suggestions in the workplace demonstrate a proactive attitude, which is encouraged by a supportive voice climate within their teams (Frazier & Bowler, 2012; Morrison, 2011). This climate of expression is largely shaped by the behavior of leadership and creates an environment in which employees feel comfortable expressing their opinions without fear of repercussions (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Morrison et al., 2011). An important component of this climate is psychological safety (Frazier & Bowler, 2012), which allows employees to speak out freely without fear of negative consequences, increasing the likelihood that they will advocate for social causes. In addition, workplaces that promote respect, open communication, and mutual support from colleagues and supervisors further encourage employees to express their opinions (Morrison, 2014). Employees are particularly motivated to voice their opinions when they play a central role in the team's work processes and social networks, a

tendency that is reinforced when team leaders also hold influential positions (Venkataramani et al., 2016).

All this considered, a positive climate of voice empowers employees to engage in constructive activism and potentially minimizes adversarial approaches to employee activism. Hence, this study posits that:

Hypothesis 1a: A positive climate of voice within the organization is positively associated with employee activism communicative intentions.

Hypothesis 1b: A positive climate of voice within the organization is positively associated with employee activism actionable intentions.

Transparent leadership communication plays a critical role in fostering social change by enabling open information sharing, promoting accountability, and strengthening stakeholder relationships (Ji & Hong, 2023). This communication approach goes beyond superficial interactions and focuses on consistently providing timely, reliable, and relevant information as it builds trust and increases credibility in various situations, such as social responsibility efforts, organizational change, and crisis management. Transparent communication helps leaders create an environment of mutual understanding, strengthen employee-organization relationships, and enhance organizational reputation and stakeholder engagement (Jin & You, 2023). Leadership communication literature emphasizes the importance of transparency in fostering employee trust, shaping a positive organizational culture, and improving internal relationships (L. R. Men & Stacks, 2014; Rawlins, 2009). Leaders who value transparent communication bridge information gaps, cultivate trust, and support the legitimacy of social engagement within the organization. Key components of transparent communication include active participation, which is the inclusion of stakeholders in the decision-making process; accountability, which ensures that leaders take responsibility for their actions and messages; and substantiality, which focuses on providing information that is accurate, relevant, and meaningful. When leaders encourage open and honest communication, they not only boost their employees' self-esteem but also contribute to a healthier work environment (Hong & Ji, 2022; Ji & Hong, 2023).

Acknowledging the importance of transparent leadership communication in shaping trust relationships and a culture of open voice, this study advances the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: Transparent leadership communication is positively associated with employee activism communicative intentions.

Hypothesis 2b: Transparent leadership communication is positively associated with employee activism actionable intentions.

Authenticity in corporate behavior reflects the extent to which a company's actions are consistent with its stated values and principles (Schallehn et al., 2014). It is characterized by three dimensions: consistency, that is, the fulfillment of commitments; continuity, that is, the adherence to fundamental values over time; and individuality, that is, the expression of the company's unique identity (Schallehn et al., 2014).

Authenticity plays a crucial role in shaping organizational outcomes and employee behaviors. Companies that are perceived as authentic are often considered to be deeply value-driven, led by intrinsically motivated leaders who engage in transparent and reliable communication while demonstrating a strong social commitment (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Men and Hung-Baesecke (2015) argued that employees who perceive their organization as authentic are more likely to become vocal advocates for the company. Shen and Kim (2012) found that employees' perceptions of an organization's authenticity have a strong influence on how they communicate about the organization, depending on how strong their relationship with the organization is. This alignment between organizational authenticity and employee behavior highlights how promoting authentic practices can encourage employees to support and promote their organization's values, especially in the context of employee activism.

Grounded in this framework, this study posits the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a: Perceived corporate authenticity is positively associated with employee activism communicative intentions.

Hypothesis 3b: Perceived corporate authenticity is positively associated with employee activism actionable intentions.

Individual Factors

In this study, perceived external prestige, organizational identification, and employee engagement are identified as key individual factors that affect employees' activism intentions. These factors were selected because they contribute significantly to influencing employees' sense of belonging, motivation, and alignment with organizational values (e.g., Einwiller et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2010), which in turn are critical to their willingness to engage in activism.

Perceived External Prestige (PEP) refers to employees' perceptions of how their organization is viewed by external parties (Kim et al., 2010). PEP is an important factor that indirectly shapes the external image of the organization, as it fulfills employees' intrinsic needs for self-esteem and self-worth, thus fostering pride and strong identification with the organization. Employees develop their perceptions of external prestige through external channels such as reference groups, media coverage, and word-of-mouth (Smidts et al., 2001). Since PEP is an individual-level construct, differences may occur between employees in the same organization due to different personal interpretations of external feedback. The relationship between PEP and employee activism is influenced by organizational values, workplace culture, and the level of employee engagement. A good external reputation can motivate employees to become actively engaged if this is in line with the organization's values and commitment to social responsibility. Based on these considerations, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 4a: Perceived external prestige of the organization is positively associated with employee activism communicative intentions.

Hypothesis 4b: Perceived external prestige of the organization is positively associated with employee activism actionable intentions.

Organizational identification reflects the emotional and psychological connection that employees develop to their workplace, which influences their alignment with the organization's goals and their supportive behavior (Smidts et al., 2001). It occurs when individuals see themselves as an integral part of their organization. It encompasses a sense of belonging and emotional pride that is determined by the need for self-categorization and self-worth (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Smidts et al., 2001). Employees with a strong identification with the organization internalize its values, align their behavior with its goals, and demonstrate positive attitudes such as trust, commitment, and cooperation (Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). This identification brings numerous benefits, including higher employee retention, higher job satisfaction, and stronger organizational citizenship behavior (Yue et al., 2021). Several factors contribute to the promotion of organizational identification, including effective communication, strong leadership, perceived organizational support, perceived external prestige, and individual characteristics (Yue et al., 2021). This bond is particularly strengthened by effective communication practices that emphasize message clarity and quality and promote a positive communication climate that fosters openness, trust, and active participation so that employees feel valued and included in organizational decision-making. When employees feel that their personal values are aligned with those of the organization, their sense of connection is strengthened, and a shared sense of purpose and community is fostered. In addition, perceived external prestige increases identification with the organization by instilling pride and enhancing employees' self-esteem (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Smidts et al., 2001). We therefore assume that a high degree of organizational identification not only motivates employees but is also a catalyst for constructive activism within the organization.

Based on these foundations, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 5a: Employee organizational identification is positively associated with employee activism communicative intentions.

Hypothesis 5b: Employee organizational identification is positively associated with employee activism actionable intentions.

Employee engagement is an enduring motivational and psychological state in which employees are cognitively, physically, and emotionally invested in their work. This state is characterized by energy, enthusiasm, involvement, efficacy, and deep connection. As a dynamic and evolving process, engagement is influenced by personal traits and situational factors and leads to cognitive absorption, emotional dedication, and vigor (Mazzei, 2018; Schaufeli et al., 2006). The effects of employee engagement benefit both the organization and the employee, leading to improved performance, competitive advantage, innovation, retention, and long-term success (Einwiller et al.,

2021; Mazzei, 2018). Engaged employees contribute positively to organizational performance through behaviors that promote innovation, advocacy, and loyalty. In addition, engaged employees often act as catalysts for organizational growth and foster an environment where collaboration and innovation thrive (Einwiller et al., 2021).

Building on these aspects, this study examines whether highly engaged employees are more inclined to participate in activism, especially in contexts that promote open dialog, transparent communication, and supportive leadership. The study proposes that:

Hypothesis 6a: Employee engagement is positively associated with employee activism communicative intentions.

Hypothesis 6b: Employee engagement is positively associated with employee activism actionable intentions.

The Moderating Role of Corporate Activism and CEO Activism

Corporate and CEO activism are both an external expression of corporate values and an internal driver that encourages employee activism when aligned with core principles. This alignment reinforces a purpose-driven culture and motivates employees to support and advocate for the organization's goals (e.g., Hong & Ji, 2022; Ji & Hong, 2023; Villagra et al., 2022). Corporate activism encompasses social, political, and reactionary forms that address societal problems, political discourse, and government failures, respectively (Villagra et al., 2022). CEO activism also shapes corporate strategy and public perception, especially when it is seen as ethical and value-driven (e.g., Briscoe et al., 2014; Chatterji & Toffel, 2019; Lee & Tao, 2021). Building on this, this study examines whether corporate and CEO activism can support the selected organizational and individual factors (climate of voice, transparent leadership communication, authenticity, perceived external prestige, organizational identification, and employee engagement) in fostering employees' activism intentions.

We consider corporate and CEO activism as moderators rather than main variables in studying employee activism because they shape the environment in which employee activism occurs. They can promote a positive orientation or reinforce resistance (e.g., McKean & King, 2019; Wowak et al., 2022). Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 7a: Corporate activism moderates the impact of organizational and individual factors (H1-6) driving employee activism communicative intentions. With stronger corporate activism, the influence of these six factors on employee activism communicative intentions will be strengthened.

Hypothesis 7b: Corporate activism moderates the impact of organizational and individual factors (H1-6) driving employee activism actionable intentions. With stronger corporate activism, the influence of these six factors on employee activism actionable intentions will be strengthened.

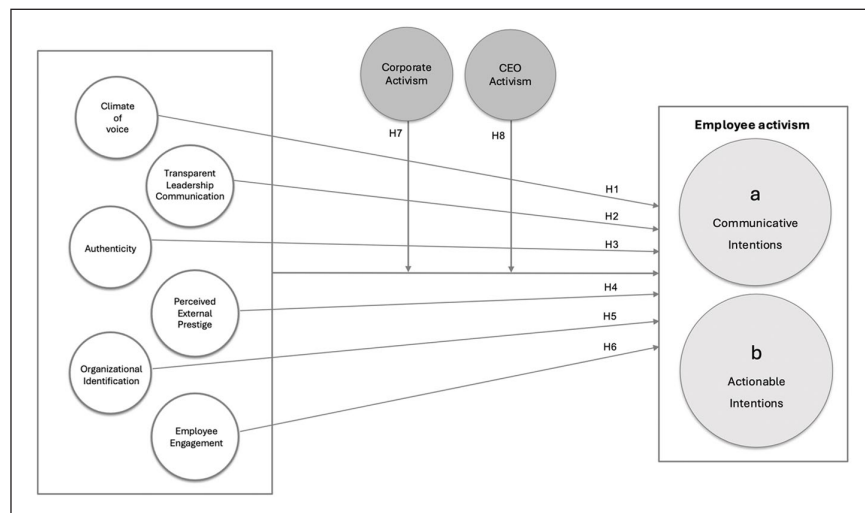


Figure 1. Research model.

Hypothesis 8a: CEO activism moderates the impact of organizational and individual factors (H1-6) driving employee activism communicative intentions. With stronger CEO activism, the influence of these six factors on employee activism communicative intentions will be strengthened.

Hypothesis 8b: CEO activism moderates the impact of organizational and individual factors (H1-6) driving employee activism actionable intentions. With stronger CEO activism, the influence of these six factors on employee activism actionable intentions will be strengthened.

All in all, Figure 1 illustrates the research model for this study, which has two distinct outcomes: Model (a) focuses on employee activism communicative intentions, while Model (b) deals with employee activism actionable intentions. The model hypothesizes that the selected organizational factors (i.e., climate of voice, transparent leadership communication, and authenticity) and individual factors (i.e., perceived external prestige, organizational identification, and employee engagement) positively influence these two different outcomes. Additionally, corporate and CEO activism are positioned as moderators to examine how they influence the relationships between these factors and the two types of employee activism intentions.

Methodology

Sample

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a survey among Italian employees currently employed in public and private companies. This study was approved by the Research

Ethics Committee of one of the researchers' institution (approval no. 0025278). The survey was outsourced to SWG S.p.a. (<https://www.swg.it>), and the questionnaire was administered through the survey company on its proprietary platform. The data was collected between June and July 2024, with a total of 324 employees participating and completing the questionnaire. After data cleansing, the final dataset consisted of 324 valid responses.

The demographics of the participants, detailed in Table A1 (Appendix A), show a gender split of 55% male and 45% female respondents. In terms of generational breakdown, 25% of participants were born between 1946 and 1964, 43% between 1965 and 1979, 26% between 1980 and 1996, and 7% from 1996 onwards. In terms of job positions, 73% of respondents were professionals or staff, 17% were employees, and 10% held a managerial or supervisory position. Employee tenure varied: 57% had more than 10 years' experience, 17% between 5 and 10 years and a smaller percentage had a shorter length of service. Education levels were diverse: 40% had a high school diploma, 22% had a master's degree, and smaller percentages in other categories, including 2% with a PhD.

Company demographics show that 66% of respondents worked in the service sector, while 10% worked in manufacturing and other industries. The product sector was led by travel and transportation (28%) and citizen services (24%), with other sectors such as information and communication (11%) and personal services (7%) also represented. Company size was spread out, with 28% working in companies with less than 50 employees and 21% in those with more than 5,000 employees. Finally, 60% of participants worked in private companies, 31% in public and 6% in publicly held organizations. The vast majority of companies (92%) were Italian-owned.

Data Analysis

The statistical analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS (version 29.0) with the Macro PROCESS extension (version 4.2).

Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations were calculated for all variables. Previously validated scales were used in the study, and the reliability of all scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α) to ensure internal consistency.

The relationship between the variables in the study was first examined by correlation analysis. Linear regression analysis was applied to test H1–H6, both a and b. Then, a moderation analysis was conducted using Model 1 in PROCESS to test the moderation effect of corporate activism and CEO activism (H7–H8, both a and b).

Measures

Dependent Variables. We utilized previously validated measures and adapted them to suit the specific context of our study. All scales were measured using a five-point Likert scale, except for the employee engagement scale, which was assessed using a seven-point Likert scale.

Employee activism communicative intentions were measured by adapting nine items from the validated scale of Lee (2022) on communication behaviors (e.g., “As an employee, while thinking of social, environmental or political issues I am concerned with, I would express my opinions actively in discussion with my company”).

Employee activism actionable intentions were measured using the four-item validated scale of Lee (2022) on activism intentions (e.g., “I intend to join the walk out with other employees”).

Independent Variables. *Climate of voice* was measured by adapting a 6-item scale developed by Frazier and Bowler (2012), which in turn was adapted from LePine and Van Dyne (1998). An example of an item is: “The members of my work group are encouraged to speak up and encourage others in this group to get involved in issues that affect the group.”

Transparent leadership communication was measured using a nine-item scale adapted from Rawlins (2009) and Men and Bowen (2017). The scale assessed the three dimensions of transparent leadership communication: participation (e.g., “My leaders ask for feedback from people like me about the quality of its information”), substantiality (e.g., “My leaders are prompt when responding to requests for information from people like me”), and accountability (e.g., “My leaders are open to criticism by people like me”).

Perceived corporate authenticity was measured by adapting one item from Tran and Keng (2018) (“I perceive my company as authentic in its statements and actions”) and four items adapted from Alhouti et al. (2016). An example of an item is: “My company’s actions are in accordance with the company’s values and beliefs.”

Perceived external prestige was measured through five items selected and adapted from Mael and Ashford (1992). Examples are “People in my community think highly of my company” and “It is considered prestigious to be an employee of my company.”

Organizational identification was measured through a five-item scale adapted from Mael and Ashford (1992). Examples of items are: “When someone criticizes my company, it feels like a personal insult” and “When I talk about my company, I usually say ‘we’ rather than ‘they’.”

Finally, *employee engagement* was measured using the scale from Schaufeli et al. (2006) to investigate employee engagement in its three components of cognitive absorption (e.g., “I am immersed in my work”), emotional dedication (e.g., “I am enthusiastic about my job”), and vigor (e.g., “At my work, I feel bursting with energy”).

We assessed the reliability of the variables by calculating Cronbach’s alpha (α) for each of the dependent, independent, and moderating variables. In the case of perceived external prestige, we had to remove one item (“My company does not have a good reputation in my community (R)”) to improve the reliability of the scale. Table B1 (Appendix B) provides a comprehensive report of the descriptive statistics.

Moderators. *Corporate activism* was measured by adapting seven items from the scale of Villagra et al. (2022) and one item adapted from Paul et al. (1997). Through this

scale it has been possible to measure corporate activism through the nuances of *corporate social activism* (e.g., “My company has an ethical obligation to promote social change”), *corporate political activism* (e.g., “My company positions itself politically”), *corporate reactionary activism* (e.g., “When the government does not solve the citizens’ problems, my company takes the initiative”), and *corporate environmental activism* (e.g., “My company has an obligation to encourage environmentally responsible behaviors” from Villagra et al., 2022, and “My company promotes good environmental practices” from Paul et al., 1997).

In line with the measures of corporate activism, *CEO activism* was measured using the same items for corporate activism, replacing the word “corporate” with “CEO.” Hence using the seven items adapted from Villagra et al. (2022) and one item adapted from Paul et al. (1997). Also in this case, it was possible to measure CEO activism in its nuances, hence *CEO social activism* (e.g., “My CEO has an ethical obligation to promote social change”), *CEO political activism* (e.g., “My CEO positions itself politically”), *CEO reactionary activism* (e.g., “When the government does not solve the citizens’ problems, my CEO takes the initiative”), and *CEO environmental activism* (e.g., “My CEO has an obligation to encourage environmentally responsible behaviors” from Villagra et al., 2022, and “My CEO promotes good environmental practices” from Paul et al., 1997).

Results

This section presents the results of the correlation and regression analyses, highlighting the key relationships between the constructs in the study. In addition, results are provided on how corporate and CEO activism moderate these relationships.

Main Effects

Results of the multiple linear regression analysis can be found in Table 1. In Model a, with employee activism communicative intentions as the dependent variable, the climate of voice proves to be a strong positive predictor ($B = .238, p < .001$), and organizational identification also shows a positive association ($B = .165, p < .05$), supporting respectively H1a and H5a. Transparent leadership communication shows a marginally significant relationship ($B = .125, p < .1$), confirming H2a, while authenticity is negatively associated ($B = -.158, p < .05$), rejecting H3a. In this model, neither perceived external prestige nor employee engagement significantly predict communicative intentions, rejecting H3a and H6a. In contrast, Model b, in which employee activism actionable intentions is the dependent variable, shows no significant predictors, rejecting hypotheses from H1b to H6b.

Moderating Effects

The moderation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS Macro in SPSS. The results suggest that both corporate and CEO activism can increase the strength of associations, particularly in relation to employee activism and communicative intentions.

Table 1. Linear Regression Analysis.

	Model a – Employee activism communicative intentions	Model b – Employee activism actionable intentions
Variables	<i>B</i> (<i>Std Error</i>)	<i>B</i> (<i>Std Error</i>)
(Constant)	2.405 (.173)	2.731 (.240)
Climate of voice	.238*** (.060)	.046 (.083)
Transparent leadership communication	.125 [†] (.072)	.116 (.099)
Authenticity	-.158* (.073)	-.159 (.102)
Perceived external prestige	.058 (.068)	.049 (.094)
Organizational identification	.165* (.065)	.147 (.091)
Employee engagement	.005 (.044)	.002 (.061)
R-squared	.221	.032
F-value	14.948***	1.730

[†] $p < .1$. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Corporate activism strengthens the positive relationships between all independent variables and employee activism communicative intentions, suggesting that employees feel more encouraged to support and participate in activism when companies actively engage in activism, confirming H7a. For example, the relationship between the climate of voice and employee activism communicative intentions is significantly stronger when corporate activism levels are high ($p = .002$). In addition, transparent leadership communication has a stronger influence on communicative intentions in the presence of corporate activism ($p = .008$). Similarly, corporate activism enhances the effects of authenticity and organizational identification on communicative intentions, with significant results for authenticity ($p = .000$) and organizational identification ($p = .013$). However, not all moderation effects of corporate activism are significant, rejecting H7b. The relationship between the climate of voice and actionable intentions does not reach significance for corporate activism ($p = .533$), nor does the moderation effect between perceived external prestige and actionable intentions ($p = .067$).

CEO activism also moderates critical relationships in relation to employee activism communicative intentions, particularly with perceived authenticity ($p = .000$) and organizational identification ($p = .016$). CEO involvement in activism increases the effect of transparent leadership communication ($p = .011$) and climate of voice ($p = .001$) on communicative intentions, confirming H8a. However, the impact on actionable intentions remains inconsistent, with non-significant results for both the climate of voice ($p = .179$) and perceived external prestige ($p = .121$), rejecting H8b. These results emphasize that while leadership-driven activism fosters a supportive environment for activism-related communicative intentions, its effect on actionable intentions is more nuanced and may be influenced by additional situational, individual, or external factors.

Discussion

The results provide important insights into how organizational and individual factors influence employee activism, which is reflected in employees' intentions. The significant positive correlations between communicative and actionable intentions and corporate activism suggest that a positive communicative environment can not only encourage employees to express activism but also potentially act upon it.

When examining individual and organizational factors, the *climate of voice* is essential in both corporate and CEO activism. This involves an environment where employees feel valued and inspired by the leadership's stance on socially relevant issues. This sense of psychological safety and empowerment encourages employees to voice their concerns and ideas without fear of retaliation (Detert & Burris, 2007) and therefore engage in communicative forms of activism. Voice climate is directly related to the idea of activism as it encourages open dialog and makes employees feel that they have an impact on organizational outcomes (Morrison, 2014). This reinforces the idea that a strong voice climate fosters not only open dialog but also aligns with the core purpose of activism: to drive social change through communication and self-expression (Krishna, 2021). *Transparent leadership communication*, which is closely linked to corporate and CEO activism and the climate of voice, also plays a reinforcing role, as the idea that open, trust-building dialog promotes employee alignment with organizational goals (Men et al., 2021) can inspire activism-oriented intentions. *Authenticity* has also emerged as key, suggesting that employees who perceive their leaders and organizations as authentic are more likely to engage in activism-related communication. Furthermore, the positive correlations between perceived external prestige and organizational identification are consistent with studies showing that employees are more likely to advocate for or against organizational practices when they perceive the organization as reputable and aligned with their personal values (Ashforth et al., 2008). However, *employee engagement* did not significantly predict communicative intentions, suggesting that emotional and cognitive connection to work may not directly lead to activism. This finding aligns with Saks (2006), who asserts that engagement alone may not drive discretionary behaviors like activism.

The regression analysis in relation to Model (a) (Figure 1) confirms the significant role of *climate of voice* and *organizational identification* in predicting communicative intentions but also highlights the complexity of authenticity. Higher perceptions of *organizational authenticity* may reduce employees' need for activism. One possible explanation for this is that employees who perceive their organization as authentic have a lower sense of urgency or moral obligation to speak up because the organization is already addressing the relevant social or political issues. In this sense, authenticity can act as a substitute for a corrective voice by signaling that leadership is responsive and fulfilling stakeholder expectations, reducing the need for employee intervention. This is consistent with social identity theory (e.g., Hogg et al., 1995), which suggests that strong identification with a positively perceived organization can lead to greater trust in leadership and greater confidence in the organization to

implement positive change. Employees may therefore exhibit a form of passive engagement, where trust in the organization's values and practices reduces their motivation to voice their concerns as activists.

At the same time, employees who feel a sense of belonging and identification with the organization are *likely to advocate for causes that align with its identity and mission*, as they view such activism as part of their commitment to the organization's success.

Moreover, the regression analysis shows that transparent leadership communication seems to *overlap with the climate of voice*, albeit only marginally significant: although both are important for fostering a communicative and open culture, climate of voice might be more strongly related to employees' activism communicative intentions because it is directly related to their sense of empowerment and autonomy.

Finally, perceived external prestige and employee engagement do not significantly predict communicative intentions in Model (a). As mentioned earlier, the lack of significant effects for perceived external prestige and employee engagement on communicative intentions suggests that these constructs likely influence outcomes such as loyalty, satisfaction, or retention more strongly than activism-related behaviors. While *perceived external prestige* is important for overall organizational reputation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994), it may not directly influence employees' willingness to engage in activism communication because activism is often driven by internal motives and the desire to align organizational practices with personal values (e.g., Davis & White, 2015; Lee, 2022). In terms of *employee engagement*, activism often involves challenging the status quo (Curtin et al., 2015; King, 2016), and employees who are highly engaged or who view their organization as representative may be less likely to voice dissenting opinions if they perceive the current direction of the organization to be in line with their expectations. Highly engaged employees in particular may prioritize maintaining organizational stability and therefore feel less compelled to advocate for change, especially if they trust that the company is already moving in the right direction.

The non-significance of all predictors of actionable intentions (Model b, Figure 1), in contrast to the predictors of communicative intentions, indicates the presence of an intention-behavior gap (Sheeran & Webb, 2016), which refers to the discrepancy between individuals' stated intentions and their actual behavior. While employees feel motivated to express their opinions verbally, the move to concrete action may be associated with higher perceived risks and costs. These include concerns such as job security, fear of retaliation and reputational consequences that may prevent action despite strong attitudinal support. This disconnect is particularly relevant in activism, where employees express support but are reluctant to act due to perceived risks or lack of enabling conditions.

Furthermore, actionable activism often depends on group dynamics and collective coordination, pointing to the potential role of collective efficacy, that is, the belief that a group can effectively bring about change (Bleh et al., 2024; Politi et al., 2022). Similarly, self-efficacy and feeling that an issue is personally important or relevant can

influence whether someone decides to act (e.g., Bleh et al., 2024). For some employees, communicative engagement can already be a significant step, an example of aspirational talk, especially in environments where activism is stigmatized or controversial. The transition from voice to action can also be influenced by politicized identification, that is, seeing oneself as part of a group that actively advocates for or supports social change (e.g., Bleh et al., 2024). Moreover, personal core values offer important insights into the reasons why people may want to participate in a wide range of sociopolitical behaviors (Vecchione et al., 2015). These values interact with individual characteristics and broader social, economic, and cultural contexts to influence action. Research consistently shows that personal values have a significant impact on sociopolitical engagement, although cultural factors may influence the way these values are expressed (Vecchione et al., 2015). As per the Italian socio-cultural context, for example, the tradition of trade unionism tends to canalize activism through formalized structures, making voice more culturally acceptable and less risky than individual action, thus reducing the prevalence of spontaneous employee activism (Armaroli, 2022).

The moderation analysis emphasizes the influence of corporate and CEO activism on the reinforcement of communicative intentions. The strengthening effect of *corporate activism* on employee activism communicative intentions suggests that employees feel more motivated to engage in activism communication when organizations are visibly committed to social or ethical causes, as has been found in previous studies (e.g., Rheinhardt et al., 2023). This visible engagement fosters an environment in which an open climate of voice has a stronger influence (e.g., Frazier & Bowler, 2012) and encourages employees to express activism. Consequently, an organization's external stance on activism can significantly influence its internal communication dynamics and enhance the impact of a supportive communication culture (e.g., Lee & Tao, 2021; Rheinhardt et al., 2023; Wowak et al., 2022). The interaction between corporate activism and transparent leadership communication also shows that open communication combined with active corporate engagement can inspire employees. Similarly, the increased influence of authenticity and organizational identification on communicative intentions in corporate activism underscores that employee perceptions of genuine leadership and shared values are critical to fostering activism.

CEO activism, with its symbolic and strategic meaning, further motivates employees to advocate, especially when it is accompanied by authenticity and identification. This aligns with the idea that leadership visibility in social causes serves as a role model and motivator for employees (e.g., Lee & Tao, 2021).

However, similarly to communicative intentions, the non-significance of certain moderation effects for actionable intentions indicates that while corporate and CEO activism can strengthen the climate of voice, they do not automatically lead to concrete actions. This may be due to various factors such as organizational barriers, perceived risks, or insufficient empowerment mechanisms (e.g., Hug & Zhang, 2024; Lee, 2022; Ramirez & Islam, 2022) that prevent employees from moving beyond communicative intent to actual behavior, but it is also linked to psychological reasons linked to the attitude-behavior gap (Boulstridge & Carrigan, 2000). This finding further underscores the persistence of the intention-action gap. One interpretation is that

leadership activism plays a critical role in shaping a cultural climate that legitimizes voice (e.g., Mkrtchyan et al., 2024), but this symbolic influence may not be sufficient to enable concrete activist behaviors. While leaders can foster a culture of expression, it is important to consider whether they are also addressing the practical and psychological barriers that prevent employees from translating their intentions into action. In addition, alignment between the specific causes championed by corporate or CEO activism and employee activist causes may be necessary for this moderating effect to translate into actionable behaviors. Without this alignment, leadership activism can be an important signal for dialog, but not a sufficient catalyst for employee-led action.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study broaden the understanding of employee activism in organizations by highlighting the critical role of individual, organizational, and leadership dynamics in fostering employee activism intentions and presenting both theoretical insights and practical recommendations for managers.

Theoretically, the findings enrich research on employee activism by highlighting the different influences of communicative and actionable intentions. This nuanced understanding illustrates how especially the climate of voice and organizational identification act as fundamental elements that enable employees to communicate activism. In addition, the role of leadership, particularly through a climate of voice, transparent communication, and perceived authenticity, plays a critical role in shaping an environment that fosters activism. This study also advances the academic discourse on corporate and CEO activism by demonstrating their moderating effects on employee activists' intentions to act and emphasizing that visible and aligned leadership activism not only strengthens employee engagement but also aligns corporate strategies with social responsiveness.

Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings underscore the strategic importance of leaders' visibility in activism and their alignment with organizational values to inspire employee activism. Companies should prioritize cultivating a supportive climate of voice and transparent leadership communication, as this is critical to fostering employee empowerment. Anchoring authenticity in corporate strategies through consistent purpose orientation can strengthen employees' identification with corporate goals and motivate them to engage in constructive activism. To close the observed gap between communicative and actionable intentions, managers should also consider tangible mechanisms such as resource support, formal channels for advocacy, or employee resource groups and practices that enhance platform accessibility, openness to social issues, and visibility of activism efforts to external stakeholders (e.g., Rheinhardt et al., 2023). Such measures are critical for organizations seeking to transition to purpose-driven models (e.g., Rey et al., 2019) that leverage internal advocacy to align with broader societal expectations. By creating a psychologically safe environment for

dialog, managers can use activism as a strategic resource rather than a disruptive force (Briscoe & Gupta, 2021). These findings underscore the need for leaders to embody the principles of corporate and CEO activism and ensure coherence between internal and external practices to effectively inspire and support employee activism.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions to theory and practice, this study is not without limitations. First, the focus on Italian employees limits the generalizability of the results to other cultural or economic contexts. Future research should broaden the scope to include different geographical and cultural settings to examine how varying national cultures and societal norms may shape the dynamics of employee activism. The specific Italian socio-cultural context may have influenced the results. Italy has a long history of strong trade unionism, where activism is often institutionalized through formal channels rather than initiated informally by individual employees (Armaroli, 2022). This dynamic may help explain why people were more willing to express their views, since speaking up is more acceptable in the culture and less risky than taking action alone. In this context, speaking out can act as a symbolic way to show support, while actual actions usually happen through unions or formal agreements. This may make individual or spontaneous activism less likely.

Second, the study focuses primarily on organizational and individual factors without specifically addressing external pressures or societal influences that may affect employees' activism communicative intentions and actions, apart from perceived external prestige, which may act as external pressure. For example, external factors such as the rise of prominent social movements such as climate justice initiatives and LGBTQ+ rights advocacy or evolving public opinion, media coverage of activism, and changes in the regulatory environment can strongly influence employees' willingness and ability to engage in activism. Future research could therefore explore the interplay between internal organizational dynamics and external societal pressures.

Further research is also needed to understand the underlying factors that facilitate or hinder the transition from employee activism intentions to actions. In particular, variables such as self-efficacy, perceived risks, social norms, collective efficacy, or politicized identification can help explain the gap between communicative intentions and actionable activism. These factors, as well as organizational support mechanisms (e.g., dedicated advocacy channels, employee resource groups, leadership support) and individual motivators are likely to determine whether employees may close this gap. In this regard, while this study has demonstrated the moderating effects of corporate and CEO activism on employee activism intentions, further research is needed to understand the mechanisms by which these forms of activism, together with other organizational characteristics (e.g., organizational type and size, type of issue), may influence employees' transition from communicative to actionable activism.

Finally, the inclusion of other factors, such as generational differences, technology usage, or external stakeholder influences, could contribute to a better understanding of the complex nature of employee activism. Furthermore, given the cross-sectional

design of this study, it is not possible to draw causal conclusions from the observed relationships. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to better examine how activism intentions evolve over time and whether they lead to concrete actions, especially as new generations enter the workforce and potentially reshape norms related to employee voice and activism.

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Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Università IULM Research Ethics Committee (approval no. 0025278) on February 14, 2025.

Consent to Participate

Written informed consent for participation was obtained and managed by the survey research company SWG S.p.A. (<https://www.swg.it>). Permission to conduct the interviews for the purposes of this study was obtained from all respondents, who were fully informed about the purpose of this research and how their responses would be used and stored.

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Data Availability Statement

The raw data supporting the discussion of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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Appendix A

Table AI. Participants and Company’s Demographics.

Participants’ demographics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	178	55
Female	146	45
Generation		
1946 to 1964	80	25
1965 to 1979	138	43
1980 to 1996	83	26
1996 onwards	23	7
Position		
Professional/staff	236	73
Employee	54	17
Manager/supervisor	34	10
Employee tenure		
Less than 1 year	15	5

(continued)

Table A1. (continued)

Participants' demographics	Frequency	Percentage
1 to 3 years	41	13
3 to 5 years	28	9
5 to 10 years	55	17
More than 10 years	185	57
Education		
High school diploma	131	40
Some years of university, without degree	38	12
Bachelor's degree (3-year undergraduate degree)	31	10
Master's degree (4-year undergraduate degree or postgraduate degree)	71	22
Master's degree or specialization	32	10
PhD	8	2
Professional certification	9	3
Other	4	1
Companies' demographics	Frequency	Percentage
Industrial sector		
Manufacturing	34	10
Other industries	32	10
Services	214	66
I don't know/prefer not to answer	44	14
Product sector		
Furniture	8	2
Automotive, mechanical, and metallurgy	13	4
Banking and insurance	18	6
Chemicals and pharmaceuticals	11	3
Construction	11	3
Electronics and home appliances	7	2
Energy, gas, hydrocarbons	7	2
Fashion and luxury	7	2
Food and beverage	12	4
Information and communication	37	11
Citizen services	79	24
Personal services	22	7
Travel and transportation	92	28
Company size		
Up to 50	90	28
51 to 250	55	17
251 to 500	27	8
501 to 750	17	5
751 to 1,000	22	7
1,001 to 2,000	16	5

(continued)

Table A1. (continued)

Participants' demographics	Frequency	Percentage
2,001 to 5,000	30	9
Over 5,000	67	21
Nature		
Private	196	60
Public	100	31
Publicly held	18	6
Cooperative	9	3
Don't know/prefer not to answer	1	0
Ownership		
Italy	297	92
North-central Europe	9	3
South of Europe	1	0
East of Europe	1	0
U.S.	10	3
China	1	0
Japan	1	0
Don't know/prefer not to answer	4	1

Appendix B

Table B1. Descriptive Statistics.

Construct (n item)	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha (α)
Climate of voice (6)	3.190	1.112	.955
Transparent leadership communication (9)	2.919	1.049	.952
Authenticity (5)	3.101	1.062	.936
Perceived external prestige (5)	3.016	.838	.694
Organizational identification (6)	3.103	.960	.876
Employee engagement (9)	3.629	1.360	.953
Employee activism common intentions (7)	3.746	.852	.916
Employee activism actionable intentions (4)	3.332	1.060	.895
Corporate activism (8)	2.830	.858	.840
CEO activism (8)	2.672	.949	.892