

Mediated Model of Defensive Silence: An Empirical Case of the Banking Sector in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract

Organizations and industries characterized by highly competitive environments need organizational factors that foster voice behavior amongst their employees. Two critical factors amongst these are leader openness to voice and availability of open communication opportunity. A lack of leader openness to voice and a lack of open communication opportunity may lead to low levels of affective commitment. This influences employees' cognitive decision to engage in defensive silence, which also results in low levels of affective commitment. However, less consideration has been given to empirically explore these mechanisms while providing sound theoretical underpinnings, and using robust quantitative techniques. This paper presents a mediated model of defensive silence using the competitive banking sector of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan as the context. The research aimed to understand how these organizational factors, being the predictors of defensive silence, influence the conscious decision process of employees and as a consequence lead to low levels of affective commitment. The data for the paper were gathered from a sample of 1236 bankers from 258 branches of 8 commercial banks within 12 districts of the province. Reliability of the data instrument was measured through Cronbach alpha using SPSS 24. However, convergent and discriminant validity were established through confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS 18. Moreover, structural equation modeling was used for mediation analysis along with structural path diagram and model fit indices. The results show that the hypothesized mediated models regarding the mediating role of defensive silence between organizational factors and affective commitment were supported, thus extending theory to new empirical context. The paper concludes with a discussion on implications of these findings and recommendations for future work .

Keywords: Defensive Silence; Lack of Leader Openness to Voice; Lack of Open Communication Opportunity; Affective Commitment.

As a significant services sector stakeholder, the banking sector in Pakistan is under immense pressure to maintain profitability (Mustafa & Mehmood, 2015) further aggravated by severe competition due to the entry of multinational and private banks. This has led to an increased focus on reengineering, downsizing and restructuring within the banks (Shahid, Latif, Sohail, & Ashraf, 2011). Within this stressful working

environment, the performance of these banks is chiefly dependent on certain organizational factors such as leader openness to voice and open communication opportunity, which foster employee's voice behavior in terms of their participation and motivation to work. Moreover, these factors can also result in high levels of affective commitment (Erigüç, Özer, Turaç, & Songur, 2014). On the other hand, a lack of leader openness to voice and a lack of open communication opportunity leads employees towards a cognitive decision to adopt defensive silence behavior which consequently results in low level of affective commitment (Magotra, 2016; Nikmaram, Yamchi, Shojaii, Zahrani, & Alvani, 2012; Nikolaou, Vakola, & Bourantas, 2011).

Previous research provides some evidence regarding the importance of affective commitment in the banking sector of Pakistan, for retaining talented employees who take the initiative to participate in the organizational support programs and raise voice for providing innovative ideas and relevant information sharing. Most past studies have investigated the antecedents of organizational commitment in the banking sector of Pakistan and identified factors that predict employees' commitment, such as empowerment, leadership, organizational support and trust (Hassan, Bano, Shaukat, & Nawaz, 2013). Additionally, Khan and Zafar (2013) identified the effect of demographic and personal factors – age, tenure and management level – on affective commitment. Similarly, Abdullah and Ramay (2011) found work environment, job security, pay satisfaction and participation in decision making to be the antecedents of affective commitment. Although these previous studies highlight the importance of affective commitment in the banking sector of Pakistan, no attempts have been made to explain the effect of other organizational factors – particularly lack of leader openness to voice and lack of open communication opportunity, along with the defensive silence – on affective commitment.

Using international contexts, there are studies that have investigated the effect of these organizational factors on employee silence and organizational commitment (Amah & Okafor, 2008; Nikmaram et al., 2012; Vakola & Bauradas, 2005) as well as particularly on defensive silence (Mengenci, 2015). The direct relationship between employee silence and organizational commitment, along with very few studies focusing on investigating the impact of defensive silence on organizational commitment (e.g., Deniz, Noyan, & Ertosun, 2013; Laeeque & Bakhtawari, 2014) have also been conducted. Moreover, organizational silence has been identified as a significant determinant of organizational commitment in the education sector of Pakistan (Hussain, Ali, Khalid, Shafique, & Ahmad, 2016). Yet, all these studies have not investigated the mediating role of defensive silence between organizational factors and affective commitment. Some recent studies have highlighted the mediating role of defensive silence and tested it between ethical leadership and employee performance (Chehraghi,

Moghadam, & Kasmaie, 2016) between organizational trust and organizational commitment as well as job satisfaction (Nikolaou et al., 2011) and between overall justice perceptions and emotional exhaustion as well as between physical withdrawal, and employee performance (Whiteside & Barclay, 2013). However, none of these studies seemed to have focused on investigating the mediating role of defensive silence between organizational factors and affective commitment. Therefore, this study aimed to empirically investigate the mediating role of defensive silence between specific organizational factors and affective commitment.

Research Objectives

The main objective of the study was to

1. examine the mediating role of defensive silence between the organizational factors (lack of leader openness to voice and lack of open communication opportunity) and affective commitment.

Review of Literature

Organizational Factors and Defensive Silence

Defensive silence is defined as the deliberate withholding of ideas, opinions, information and suggestions by the employees due to a perceived risk of facing negative consequences (Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Schlosser and Zolin (2012) suggest that defensive silence occurs due to the prevailing organizational factors that leads employees to perceive it as dangerous and futile to raise their voice. These perceptions are basically the result of lack of leader openness to voice and lack of open communication opportunity (Amah & Okafor, 2008; Nikmaram et al., 2012; Vakola & Bouradas, 2005).

Morrison and Milliken (2000) highlighted negative attitudes of a leader and top management towards voice as the critical motive behind employee silence. Additionally, Milliken, Morrison and Hewlin (2003) provide a list of employee silence motives that include fear of: being considered a troublemaker, losing relationships, isolation, punishment and feeling of futility. However, various researchers mention two organizational factors as the most critical antecedents of employee silence, i.e., lack of leader openness to voice and lack of open communication opportunity (Akbarian, Ansari, Shaemi, & Keshtiaray, 2015; Çakici, 2010; Eroglu, Adiguzel, & Ozturk, 2011).

Leader openness to voice refers to a leader's ability to engage in two-way communication, where s/he listens to, supports, encourages, facilitates and involves employees in decision-making process (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Lu & Xie, 2013). Thus, when employees perceive their leader to be open to voice, their fear of having negative consequences decreases and they deliberately engage in voice behavior (Nikolaou et al., 2011; Nikmaram et al., 2012). There is strong evidence supporting the argument that firms incur a high cost due lack of leader

openness to voice, which adversely effects organizational development, organizational commitment and fosters defensive silence behavior (Mengenci, 2015; Ng. & Feldman, 2012; Nikmaram et al., 2012; Yalçın & Baykal, 2012).

Moreover, Eunson (2012) stresses the importance of open communication opportunity for development of the firm, enhancing the level of organizational commitment (Dedahanov, Kim, & Rhee, 2015) and increased sense of security (Alparslan, Can, & Erdem, 2015). Open communication opportunity refers to openness and trust in free flow of information with the top management and colleagues (Lu & Xie, 2013). However, past researches indicated lack of open communication opportunity, in terms of centralization of decision making and a lack of formal upward feedback mechanisms, to be the key reasons for employee silence behavior (Karaca, 2013; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Hassan et al., (2013) go a step further to point out that change management fails due to a lack of open communication opportunity.

Affective Commitment and Defensive Silence

Affective commitment is described as one's emotional attachment with the firm and having a strong sense of identification with the organizational values and willingness to maintain membership of the firm based on one's psychological attachment (Deniz et al., 2013; Nikmaram et al., 2012). Employees that have a higher affective commitment tend to be more dedicated and demonstrate greater willingness to participate in organizational work (Akbarian et al., 2015). Yet, it has been found that when a climate of silence prevails in the firm, it adversely effects employees' level of affective commitment and they are demotivated to take part in organizational activities or work for the betterment of the firm (Laeque & Bakhtawari, 2014). Moreover, previous literature provides evidence about the negative association between employee silence and organizational commitment (Deniz et al., 2013; Jaffari & Javed, 2014; Nikmaram et al., 2012; Sayğan, 2011).

Organizational Factors and Affective Commitment

Leaders who are supportive and encourage employee participation act as a strong force for employees and influence their behavior and commitment level (Panahi, Veiseh, Divkhar, & Kamari, 2012). Moreover, when a firm encourages two-way communication and listens to employees' ideas and concerns it results in an increase in level of organizational commitment (Deniz et al., 2013; Karaca, 2013). However, the relationship of lack of open communication opportunity and lack of leader openness to voice with affective commitment has been found to be negative (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005).

Mediated Model of Defensive Silence

With the recent developments in the field of employee silence behavior, some studies have emphasized the mediating role of employee silence between certain organizational factors and organizational outcomes (Chehraghi et al., 2016; Fard & Karimi, 2015; Nikolaou et al., 2011; Whiteside & Barclay, 2013). However, none of the previous work seems to focus on the mediating role of defensive silence between organizational factors such as lack of leader openness to voice, lack of open communication opportunity, and affective commitment. Hence, more consideration is needed in this regard.

As evident from the literature review, lack of leader openness to voice is adversely related to organizational commitment (Nikolaou et al., 2011). Moreover, it also leads to employee silence (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). Thus, employees remain silent to avoid negative consequences (Knoll & Dick, 2013).

Employee silence in turn influences organizational performance adversely and the firm incurs high cost in terms of low levels of commitment (Danish, Ramzan, & Ahmad, 2013; Ng. & Feldman, 2012; Nikolaou et al., 2011; Whiteside & Barclay, 2013). It is evident from the literature that employee silence mediates the relationship between lack of leader openness to voice and organizational commitment (Schlosser & Zolin, 2012).

Additionally, it is also argued that there is a negative correlation between lack of open communication opportunity and organizational commitment (Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). Similarly, Dedahanov et al., (2015) stated that a lack of open communication channel results in employee silence. However, a negative correlation has been found between employee silence and organizational commitment (Deniz et al., 2013). Subsequently, when employees feel less valued and are silent, they are less likely to value, identify, trust, and commit to the organization (Nikolaou et al., 2011). Hence, employee silence mediates the relationship between lack of open communication opportunity and organizational commitment (Whiteside & Barclay, 2013). Deriving from the above discussion, the following theoretical framework guided this paper:

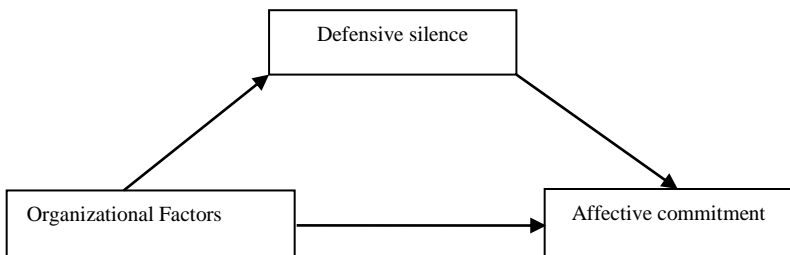


Figure No. 1: Mediating Role of Defensive Silence Between Organizational Factors and Affective Commitment

Research Hypotheses

- H1: Defensive silence mediates the relationship between lack of leader openness to voice and affective commitment.
- H2: Defensive silence mediates the relationship between lack of open communication opportunity and affective commitment.

Research Methodology

Research Setting, Participants and Procedures

For the purpose of this quantitative study, the data were collected from 1236 employees of 258 branches of 8 commercial banks within 12 districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The sample was drawn through a two-step stratified proportionate random sampling. Before administering the questionnaire, the respondents were briefed about the study through a covering letter and were assured about confidentiality of the data collected.

Instrument and Measurement

A questionnaire was used to collect the empirical data. A five-point Likert-type scale ranging from '1' = Strongly agree, '2' = Agree, '3' = Neutral, '4' = Disagree and '5' = Strongly Disagree, was used for coding the data throughout the questionnaire. The concepts of lack of leader openness to voice and lack of open communication were measured through two separated sets of 5 items adopted from the seminal instrument developed by Vakola & Bouradas (2005). Moreover, defensive silence was measured through five items adopted from the scale developed by Dyne et al., (2003). The instrument developed by Meyer and Allen (1991) comprising of 8 items was used to measure affective commitment.

The reliability of the instrument was assessed through Cronbach alpha using SPSS 24 whereas both convergent and discriminant validity were measured through confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS 18. Moreover, structural equation modeling was used for mediation analysis, structural path diagram and model fit indices, using AMOS 18.

Data Analysis and Results

Reliability and Validity

As shown in Table 1 reliability analysis was conducted through Cronbach Alpha whereby the coefficient values for each scale are approximately equal to or more than the recommended level of 0.7. Hence, reliability of all variables was established. Moreover, to measure construct validity both convergent and discriminant validity were established through confirmatory factor analysis. Two parts of convergent validity i.e., Average Variance Extracted test (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) were calculated. Table 2 depicts that convergent validity was established for all the variables as the value of

AVE and CR of each of the variable is greater than the recommended value of 0.5 and 0.7 respectively (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Moreover, to establish discriminant validity, it is stated that the value of squared correlation between all the variables must be less than the value of AVE of each variable measured (Walsh, Beatty, & Shiu, 2009). Therefore, as shown in Table 3, to measure the discriminant validity first, the squared correlation between all the variables was calculated and then compared with the AVE values of each variable involved. All values of AVE for each of the variables involved were greater than the squared correlation, hence discriminant validity was also established.

Table 1. Reliability Analysis: Cronbach Alpha

Variables	Cronbach Alpha
Lack of Leader Openness to Voice	.876
Lack of Open Communication Opportunity	.766
Defensive Silence	.846
Affective Commitment	.785

Table 2. Convergent Validity

Convergent Validity	Lack of Leader Openness to Voice	Lack of Open Communication Opportunity	Defensive silence	Affective commitment
AVE	.715	.822	.759	.865
CR	.873	.924	.866	.829
Convergent Validity	Established	Established	Established	Established

Table 3. Discriminant Validity

Discriminant Validity	Factor Correlation	Correlation Squared	AVE 1 AVE2	Discriminant Validity
LLV ↔ LCO	.453	.205	.715 .822	Established
LLV ↔ DS	.468	.219	.715 .759	Established
LLV ↔ AC	.487	.237	.715 .865	Established
LCO ↔ DS	.419	.175	.822 .759	Established
LCO ↔ AC	.286	.082	.822 .865	Established
DS ↔ AC	.373	.139	.759 .865	Established

Note: LLV= Lack of Leader Openness to Voice, LCO= Lack of Open Communication Opportunity, DS= Defensive silence, AC- Affective commitment

Structure Equation Modelling

Structure equation modeling was employed to test the mediated role of defensive silence between the organizational factors and affective commitment. The standardized estimates and significance level of the relationship between the variables is shown in Table 4. While depicting the results of Model 1, Table 4 demonstrates that defensive silence significantly and partially mediates the relationship between lack of leader openness to voice and affective commitment. Thus hypothesis 1 is supported. The structural relationship is shown in Fig.2.

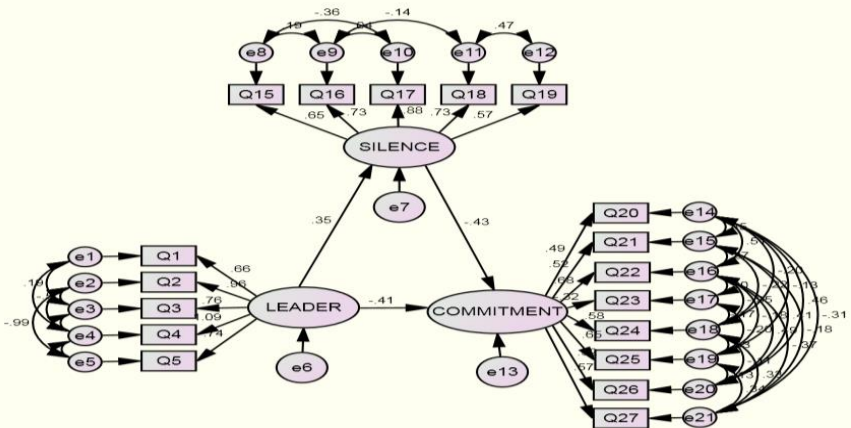


Figure 2. Structural Model: Mediating Role of Defensive Silence Between Lack of Leader Openness to Voice And Affective Commitment

Moreover, as shown in Table 4, in support of H2, Model 2 depicts that the relationship between lack of open communication opportunity and affective commitment is significantly and partially mediated by defensive silence. The structural model is presented in Fig.3.

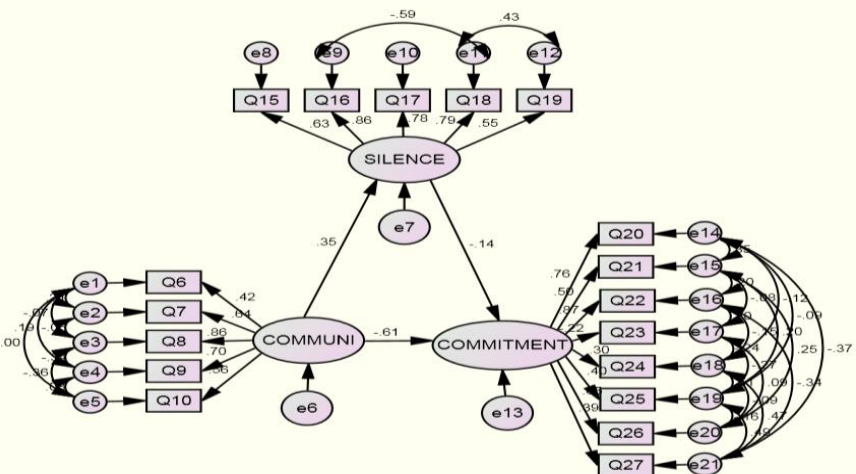


Figure 3. Structural Model: Mediating Role of Defensive Silence Between Lack of Open Communication Opportunity And Affective Commitment

Table 4. Regression Weights (Paths of Structural Equation Modeling)

	DV	IV	Est.	S.E.	C.R.	P	Result
H1	Silence	Leader	.376	.036	10.348	***	Accepted
	Commitment	Leader	-.410	.043	-9.501	***	
	Commitment	Silence	-.400	.045	-8.949	***	
	Std Indirect Effects				-.152		
H2	Silence	Communication	.384	.045	8.626	***	Accepted
	Commitment	Communication	-.985	.090	-0.932	***	
	Commitment	Silence	-.208	.044	-4.686	***	
	Std Indirect Effects				-.050		

Note. *** denotes beta's are significant.

Model Fit Indices

In Table 5 the Chi-square value, degrees of freedom and p-value for model 1 and 2, do not meet the minimum condition of model fitness as p-value should be insignificant ($p > 0.05$) and chi-square should be either greater than 2 or as low as 2.0 (Wheaton, Muthen, Alwin, & Summers, 1977). However, it might be because chi-square is responsive to sample size (Lei & Wu, 2007). Therefore, it is necessary to consider other indices before rejecting fitness of model 1 and 2. As shown in Table 5, RMR for both models is less than .08, thus the model is acceptable. Table 5 also reveals that GFI and AGFI values for both models are not equal to or greater than .9, yet they should not be considered for rejecting the model as their values are adversely affected by sample size (Marsh, Hau, & Wen, 2004). Table 5 shows that CFI for both models is .863 and .897 respectively, which shows that both models are moderate or acceptable. Lastly, the value of RMSEA for both models indicates that the models are acceptable or exhibit a mediocre fit. Hence, overall both the models exhibited a mediocre model fitness and are acceptable.

Table 5. Model fit indices

Model	CMIN	DF	P	CMIN/DF	RMR	CFI	RMSEA
Model 1	1727.496	98	.000	17.628	.074	.903	.0116
Model 2	1870.079	103	.000	18.156	.016	.917	.0118

Discussion and Conclusion

The overall aim of the study was to investigate the mediating role of defensive silence between organizational factors and affective commitment in the context of banking sector of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The results of the study support the hypotheses that defensive silence partially mediates the relationship between lack of leader openness to voice and affective commitment, and between lack of open communication opportunity and affective commitment. These findings are supported by the previous work (e.g., Panahi et al., 2012; Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Vakola & Bouradas, 2005), which reported that due to lack of leader openness to voice firms incur heavy costs in the form of defensive silence behavior, which in turn reduces the level of employee commitment. Consequently, we were able to extend the existing theory to the new empirical context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's banking sector.

The results of the study also reveal that defensive silence partially mediates the relationship between lack of open communication opportunity and affective commitment. In supporting this finding, past research work (e.g., Fard & Karimi, 2015; Karaca, 2013) also shows that a lack of open communication opportunity motivates employees to deliberately engage in silence behavior, which adversely effects the commitment level of employees. Similar to the first hypothesis, these results confirm a relatively recent theoretical stance through new evidence drawn from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's banking sector that has experienced increased competitive pressures during the last few years.

Research Implications

The findings of this empirical study provide some major managerial implications for any services sector including banking that is characterized by increased demands for profitability and efficiency. The literature reviewed for this study and the findings confirm that lack of leader openness to voice leads to defensive silence, which then results in low level of affective commitment. Our findings show that managers in the services sector such as – banking – need to develop positive attitudes and behaviors such as openness to voice. Executives and managers should listen to the problems and ideas of their employees and provide positive feedback, if they want to strengthen affective commitment of their employees. The results also suggest that managers should develop a healthy organizational culture where employees feel safe and open to express themselves without any fear of facing negative consequences. Only then the employees' feelings of futility will decrease and they will feel encouraged to adopt voice behavior. This will inturn increase their level of affective commitment.

Moreover, the results of the study confirm that lack of open communication opportunity leads to defensive silence which ultimately results in low levels of affective commitment. Hence, it is suggested that an open communication channel should be provided for a fair exchange

of information both upwards in the hierarchy as well as among colleagues. Managers should develop such a mechanism where employees feel free to express themselves without the risk of facing negative consequences. Hence, employees should be given fair chances and opportunities to speak up and must be provided with the conducive environment which promotes a free flow of information. In this way the working environment can become more conducive for progress as well as generating incentives both for employees and organizations.

Employees can often have thoughts, ideas, information and suggestions for constructive ways to improve functioning of an organization. The more they start demonstrating defensive silence and do not voice their opinions or share ideas with top management, the more it can lead to weakening organizational performance and competitiveness. Also, since defensive silence is characterized by withholding ideas and opinions, it is a more covert behavior and can be misunderstood or misinterpreted by supervisors and managers leading to further complications within organizational settings. Most importantly organizations that suffer from low affective commitment from employees can face problems such as low levels of employee life satisfaction negatively influencing their work performance, low employee retention, low levels of loyalty and others. Through this study we have demonstrated the importance of leader openness to voice and open communication opportunity and how it can influence affective commitment. Consequently, policy makers within the services sector in general and the banking sector in particular need to identify ways and means to improve leader openness to voice and open communication opportunity in order to reduce defensive silence and improve employees' affective commitment. Affective commitment is a valuable intangible asset. Organizations where employees possess greater affective commitment can achieve greater tangible long-term benefits. Employees with greater affective commitment will make every effort to maintain a win-win situation as they see the organization as their own.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

As this study only focused on one dimension of employee silence, that is defensive silence, future research may focus on comparisons between different dimensions of silence and their relation with these organizational factors. Moreover, this study considered two key organizational factors as the predictors of defensive silence and only affective commitment as its consequence. Investigating as well as empirically testing the effect of other factors on one's decision to engage in silence behavior and considering some other individual focused factors, such as stress levels, attitudes to change, sense of responsibility, as the consequence presents further avenues for future research. While this study found initial support for the mediating effects of defensive silence between organizational factors and affective commitment, future

work may also focus on investigating the moderating effect of other factors such as psychological safety climate.

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