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Mapping the Recent Evidence on Employee Silence: A Systematic Review and Future Research Agenda

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1. Introduction

Employee silence—employees' intentional withholding of ideas, concerns, or information relevant to work—has been widely recognized as consequential for organizational learning and effectiveness (Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). However, the employee silence literature remains fragmented. Prior studies often focus on different slices of the phenomenon (e.g., specific antecedents, particular silence motives/types, or isolated outcomes), which makes evidence accumulation difficult and leaves researchers with practical uncertainties when specifying empirical models (Morrison, 2023; Dehkharghani et al., 2023). In particular, the cumulative development of this field has been hampered by disparate findings, obscuring a clear understanding of the mediators through which silence operates in organizations (Whiteside & Barclay, 2013).

A further complication is conceptual heterogeneity. Silence is not simply the absence of voice (Pinder & Harlos, 2001), and it has been operationalized both as a general tendency to withhold and as qualitatively distinct forms (e.g., acquiescent, defensive, prosocial), each implying different motivations and potentially different consequences (Dyne et al., 2003). While this diversity is theoretically meaningful, it also raises design questions: what factors should be treated as antecedents versus proximal mediators, which moderators matter most, and which outcome categories best capture the unique consequences of silence? For example, the proliferation of identified mediators and moderators has fragmented the literature, making it difficult to determine which explanatory pathways are most robust (Morrison, 2023).

Given these issues, there is a clear need for a more structured and comparable review framework to integrate prior findings (Paul & Criado, 2020). Accordingly, my goal in this article is to provide a systematic synthesis of peer-reviewed research on employee silence indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection between 2020 and 2025 (cut-off: 1 December 2025), positioned as an update to recent stocktaking work and designed to complement rather than duplicate earlier decade-spanning reviews (Dehkharghani et al., 2023; Morrison, 2023) by situating the post-2020 evidence base relative to earlier reviews. The review is structured to be decision oriented, offering guidance for variable selection and empirical model specification by summarizing where evidence converges and where important gaps remain across studies. Rather than pre-committing to a single variable set, I organize the review using a modular evidence-mapping framework, which systematically codes each article into linked modules (Antecedents, Mediators, Moderators, and Outcomes) and summarizes the distribution of evidence in a user-friendly map to highlight clusters and gaps (Miake-Lye et al., 2016; Snilstveit et al., 2016).

This review addresses three key questions:

- What antecedent categories are most frequently examined and supported in recent research?
- What mediators have been proposed and tested to explain antecedent–silence links and silence–outcome links?
- What moderators and methodological patterns characterize the recent literature?

By answering these questions, I produce (a) an evidence map of recent findings and (b) a concise decision logic to inform future variable choices, especially regarding mediators and outcome categories. Overall, this approach offers a structured synthesis to address the noted heterogeneity and fragmentation, extending prior silence reviews and providing a practical framework for comparing results (Morrison, 2023; Dehkharghani et al., 2023).

2. Method

2.1 Database and scope

I conducted a systematic literature search in the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection (Tranfield et al., 2003; Williams et al., 2021). WoS was chosen because it provides curated coverage of peer-reviewed journals and consistent bibliographic and citation metadata, thus supporting transparent screening and documentation within a single platform. The review focuses on employee silence research published between 2020 and 2025 (cut-off: 1 December 2025) for three reasons. First, foundational conceptualizations of employee silence are well established (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001), and recent stocktaking work has already synthesized earlier phases of the silence literature; therefore, an update-focused window allows this review to complement rather than duplicate decade-spanning reviews (Morrison, 2023; Dehkharghani et al., 2023). Second, the post-2020 period reflects rapid growth and diversification in research contexts, proposed mechanisms, and outcome categories, making a concentrated synthesis valuable for identifying convergent evidence and emerging gaps. Third, because the review is designed to be decision oriented, emphasizing the most recent evidence provides the most relevant basis for guiding variable selection and empirical model specification in current employee silence research (Miake-Lye et al., 2016; Snilstveit et al., 2016).

2.2 Search strategy and refinement filters

I used topic-field searching in WoS (i.e., search within the title, abstract, author keywords, and Keywords Plus fields). In WoS syntax, “TS” denotes the Topic field. The search query was:

TS=((“employee silence” OR “organizational silence” OR “workplace silence” OR “silence behavior” OR “silence behaviours” OR “silence voice”) OR ((employee OR worker* OR staff OR workplace OR organization* OR organisational) NEAR/3 (silence OR silent)) OR (“acquiescent silence” OR “defensive silence” OR “prosocial silence” OR “quiescent silence”))*

I then refined the results using the following filters: Web of Science Index = Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) ; Language = English; Document Type = Article; Publication Years = 2020–2025. After applying these criteria, WoS returned 388 records. To align with the cut-off date, I removed three records dated after 1 December 2025. I also removed one exact duplicate during data cleaning, yielding 384

unique records for screening. Limiting the search to peer-reviewed journal articles in this way is consistent with recommended SLR practices to ensure the quality and relevance of sources (Williams et al., 2021).

2.3 Eligibility and screening

I included peer-reviewed journal articles that met both of the following criteria:

- examined employee/workplace silence as a focal construct (including specific silence motives or types)
- were situated in organizational or work settings

These inclusion criteria mirror those used in prior silence literature reviews (Dehkharghani et al., 2023), ensuring that only studies truly centered on the silence construct were considered.

I excluded records if any of the following conditions applied:

- the article was non-empirical (e.g., systematic review, meta-analysis, bibliometric review, or conceptual/theoretical paper without original data)
- “silence” was used in a non-organizational sense (e.g., a technical or clinical context)
- the work/employment context was absent
- silence was only mentioned tangentially, without actual conceptualization, measurement, or analysis

Screening proceeded in two stages: first a title/abstract screening, and second a full-text eligibility assessment for records that passed the initial screen. As a result of this two-stage process, 163 studies remained after the title/abstract review, and 93 articles were ultimately included in the review following full-text evaluation. I recorded screening decisions and, where applicable, documented reasons for exclusion at the full-text stage to enhance transparency (Page et al., 2021).

2.4 Data extraction and synthesis

For each included study, I extracted basic characteristics (e.g., context, sample, and research design) and coded substantive content using a modular evidence-mapping framework covering Antecedents, Mediators, Moderators, and Outcomes. I also coded how each study defined and operationalized employee silence to examine definitional variation and link it to differences in variable selection and model building in the discussion. I then synthesized the literature using a structured narrative approach (Snyder, 2019), which organizes and compares findings using predefined coding categories to identify recurring patterns, convergence, and gaps across studies. I summarized the evidence in three tables: (1) publication distribution, (2) an overview of study characteristics, and (3) a decision-oriented evidence

Table 1. Search and screening protocol and results

Step	Description	Total no. of publications reviewed
Step 1	WoS search (SSCI; English; Article; 2020–2025); records cleaned (cut-off exclusions and duplicates removed)	384
Step 2	Title/abstract screening for relevance (employee silence in work/organizational contexts)	163
Step 3	Full-text eligibility assessment; final inclusion	93

Source: Adapted from data collected in the review.

map intended to inform variable selection in future empirical work. I also provide Figure 1 to translate the evidence map into a core model and testable extensions. This systematic approach to data extraction and synthesis aligns with best practices for rigorous literature reviews in management research (Tranfield et al., 2003; Williams et al., 2021).

3. Results

3.1 Overview of Included Studies

A total of 93 articles met the inclusion criteria, spanning publication years 2020 through 2025 (see Table 2). The volume of silence research has grown in this period, peaking in 2025 with the largest number of publications. In terms of research design, the vast majority of these studies (~91%) are quantitative, primarily using survey methods. Only a small minority employ qualitative or mixed-method approaches, indicating a heavy reliance on cross-sectional self-report data. The studies cover a range of organizational contexts and regions. While some focus on specific sectors (e.g., healthcare or education), most draw from general multi-industry samples. Geographically, over half of the studies were conducted in Asia, with the remainder spread across Europe, North America, the Middle East, and other regions. Sample sizes tend to be moderate to large (median around 330 employees). Table 3 summarizes these methodological features.

3.2 Antecedents of Silence

Recent studies have investigated a variety of antecedents that lead to employee silence. These antecedents can be grouped into three broad categories: leader-related factors, organizational context factors, and individual differences. The most frequently examined are organizational context variables (appearing in roughly half of the studies). This category encompasses negative workplace climates and stressors—such as experiences of incivility, bullying, ostracism, or gossip—as well as perceptions of injustice, high organizational politics, and intense job stress (e.g. illegitimate tasks or heavy workload). These adverse contextual factors consistently correlate with greater silence, as employees who feel mistreated or threatened in their environment are more likely to withhold their input (Liao et al., 2024; Srivastava et al., 2023).

Table 2. List of publications by year

Publication Year	Authors	No. of Publications
2025	Ahmad et al.; Akdogan et al.; Bari et al.; Benbow et al.; El-Sayed et al.; Fida et al.; Gupta et al.; Holland et al.; Jungst & Verbeeck; Kamini et al.; Knoll et al.; Madan et al.; Mishra & Uppal; Moon & Kang; Ouyang et al.; Qiu et al.; Rai & Koodamara; Simacek et al.; Song & Cho; Sulphrey & Jasim; Triana et al.; X. Wang et al.; Y.-C. Wang et al.; Weiss & Zacher; Zettina et al.; Zhang et al.	26
2024	Andrieu et al.; Azeem et al.; Busse et al.; Camgoz et al.; Cobanoglu et al.; Hussain; Jeon & Jeong; Karapinar et al.; Krishna et al.; Liao et al.; C.-W. Liu et al.; F. Liu et al.; Reeves & Bristow; Saei & Liu; Sufi et al.; Yao et al.; Yuan et al.	17
2023	An et al.; Cheng et al.; R. Dong et al.; X. T. Dong et al.; Jain, Srivastava, & Cooper; Jain, Srivastava, & Sullivan; Krishna et al.; Lee et al.; Liu et al.; Singh et al.; Srivastava et al.; Wan et al.; Wu et al.; Xu et al.; Yu et al.; Zaman et al.	16
2022	AL-Abrow; Alarabiat & Eyupoglu; L. Chen et al.; S.-C. Chen et al.; Erdogan et al.; Imran et al.; H. Khan et al.; R. Khan et al.; Kritsotakis et al.; Lee et al.; Liao et al.; Vu & Fan; Wei et al.; Xu et al.; Yao et al.; Yu et al.	16
2021	Aboramadan et al.; Bani-Melhem et al.; Chou & Chang; Creese et al.; De Clercq et al.; Dong & Chung; Jahanzeb et al.; Knoll, Goetz, et al.; Knoll, Neves, et al.; O'Donovan et al.; Qian et al.	11
2020	Al-Hawari et al.; Bari et al.; Boadi et al.; Jung & Yoon; Liu et al.; Sarabi; Xu et al.	7
Total		93

Source: Adapted from data collected in the review.

Table 3. Overall characteristics of the included studies, summarizing research design, organizational context, sample region, and sample size.

Characteristic	Category	Count (N=93)	Percentage
Research Design	Quantitative	85	91.4%
	Qualitative	4	4.3%
	Mixed Methods	4	4.3%
Organizational Context	Healthcare	8	8.6%
	Education	4	4.3%
	Manufacturing	2	2.2%
	Hospitality	8	8.6%
	Public Sector	2	2.2%
	General (multi-sector/unspecified)	56	60.2%
	Other	13	13.9%
Sample Region	Asia	50	53.8%
	Europe	10	10.7%
	North America	18	19.3%
	Middle East	8	8.6%
	Africa	1	1.1%
Sample Size	Multi-region	6	6.5%
	<100	14	15.1%
	100–299	23	24.7%
	300–499	35	37.6%
	≥ 500	17	18.3%
	N/A	4	4.3%
	Average sample size	400	—
	Median sample size	349	—

Source: Adapted from data collected in the review.

The next most common antecedents are leader-related factors (about one-third of studies). Research shows that destructive or unsupportive leadership styles can foster a climate of silence. For instance, abusive supervision and toxic leadership behaviors reliably predict higher silence (Qiu et al., 2025; Simacek et al., 2025). Conversely, some evidence suggests that positive leadership qualities (e.g., ethical leadership or high leader–member exchange) are associated with lower silence, insofar as they promote trust and openness in communication.

Individual-level differences make up a smaller but notable portion of antecedents. These include stable characteristics of employees that predispose them toward silence, such as personality traits and personal beliefs. In the 2020–2025 corpus, individual differences appear less frequently and tend to show mixed or context-dependent effects; accordingly, recent studies often treat such characteristics as weaker standalone predictors and more often as boundary conditions that shape when adverse contexts translate into silence (C.-W. Liu et al., 2024; Chou & Chang, 2020). However, findings on individual differences tend to be less consistent, often showing that personal predispositions alone are weaker predictors of silence compared to situational factors.

In summary, the evidence is most convergent for negative contextual and leadership-related antecedents of silence, whereas personal traits show more mixed effects unless considered in conjunction with context.

3.3 Mediating Mechanisms

A central theme in the recent literature is understanding the processes through which silence unfolds and produces its effects (Dehkharghani et al., 2023; Morrison, 2023). Numerous studies have proposed mediating mechanisms – intervening variables that explain the linkage between antecedents and silence

or between silence and its outcomes. No single mediator dominates the literature; instead, a range of employee internal states have been examined.

The most prominent mediating pathways involve emotional and stress reactions. Negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, anger, or shame are frequently found to underlie silence behavior. For example, an abusive leader or unfair climate can instill fear or stress in employees, which in turn drives them to withhold voice (Ouyang et al., 2025; Liao et al., 2024). Heightened stress and emotional exhaustion (burnout) have similarly been shown to mediate the effect of workplace stressors on silence, suggesting that silence often arises as a stress response.

Another frequently examined set of mediators involves psychological safety and related perceptions. Low psychological safety – i.e. a sense that speaking up is unsafe or futile – is a critical explanatory variable in many models. When employees perceive a lack of interpersonal trust or feel little belongingness to the organization, they are far more likely to remain silent (Simacek et al., 2025; X. Wang et al., 2025). In several studies, adverse contexts (e.g., bullying or injustice) reduced employees' feelings of safety or identification, which fully or partially explained why those conditions led to silence.

A smaller subset of studies has explored well-being and health indicators as mediators. For instance, prolonged silence can erode morale and mental health over time; increased strain or burnout due to unspoken issues may translate into downstream outcomes like higher turnover intention (Akdogan et al., 2025; Liao et al., 2024).

Finally, there has been conceptual interest in work engagement (and lack thereof) as a potential mechanism, though empirical tests are still rare. Only a very small number of studies explicitly examined employee engagement or motivation in relation to silence. Initial evidence suggests that when employees stay silent, their work engagement tends to drop (“quiet quitting”), which could mediate impacts on performance (Holland et al., 2025; Simacek et al., 2025).

In sum, recent research highlights that silence operates through multiple internal pathways—primarily via emotional strain and diminished feelings of safety—underscoring the psychologically taxing nature of silence.

3.4 Outcomes of Silence

The literature overwhelmingly indicates that employee silence is associated with negative outcomes across several domains. Broadly, the documented consequences of silence can be categorized into well-being/health outcomes, job attitudes, engagement/motivation, and behavioral/performance outcomes.

In terms of personal well-being, a modest subset of studies link silence to deteriorating health and stress outcomes. Employees who withhold their concerns tend to experience higher stress, emotional exhaustion, and even mental strain, as unresolved issues fester. For example, remaining silent about workplace problems has been tied to increased burnout and lower overall morale (Akdogan et al., 2025; Liao et al., 2024).

Silence also corresponds with poorer job attitudes. A similarly modest subset focuses on attitudinal outcomes like job satisfaction and organizational commitment. These works find that silence often coexists with reduced satisfaction and commitment – unsurprising, since employees who feel unable or unwilling to speak up become less psychologically invested in their jobs (Rai & Koodamara, 2025;

Holland et al., 2025).

A closely related consequence is lowered engagement or motivation. Though only a few papers explicitly measure work engagement as an outcome, those that do report that silence is accompanied by disengagement – in extreme cases manifesting as “quiet quitting” or withdrawal of effort (Holland et al., 2025; Simacek et al., 2025).

Finally, a substantial portion of silence research examines behavioral and performance outcomes. The consensus is that silence can undermine individual and organizational effectiveness. When employees withhold ideas or concerns, their task performance and innovation suffer, and teams lose out on potential improvements. Moreover, silence has been linked to increases in counterproductive work behaviors (such as deviance or retaliation born from unaddressed grievances) and stronger turnover intentions (Ahmad et al., 2025; Qiu et al., 2025). In aggregate, these studies portray silence as a costly phenomenon: it not only harms employee well-being and morale but also diminishes valuable work outcomes.

Notably, the included studies rarely test potentially functional or neutral consequences of silence; instead, outcome operationalizations concentrate on well-being, attitudes, engagement, and performance costs. This imbalance suggests a harm-centered outcome-selection tendency and reinforces a future agenda to distinguish different forms of silence and their boundary conditions rather than treating silence as uniformly detrimental (Chou & Chang, 2020; Dehkharghani et al., 2023).

3.5 Boundary Conditions and Moderators

Several studies have probed the boundary conditions of silence relationships by incorporating moderators, though this area is less developed than the main effects. The moderators investigated fall mainly into two groups: contextual factors and individual difference factors. Contextual moderators are the most frequently examined boundary conditions, which typically refer to features of the work climate or situation that can alter the impact of antecedents or silence itself.

Examples include supportive workplace conditions, leadership styles, or team climates. For instance, a strong climate of trust and openness might weaken the link between a negative event (like leader mistreatment) and employee silence, by providing alternative outlets or assurances (Ouyang et al., 2025). Similarly, an organizational culture that encourages speaking up can buffer employees from the silencing effect of fear. On the other hand, certain climates (e.g., a job insecurity climate or highly competitive culture) might amplify silence tendencies under the same conditions (Holland et al., 2025).

Individual characteristics are also used as moderators, though the overall moderator evidence base remains thinner than the main-effects literature. These are personal attributes that make some employees more or less likely to respond with silence. Research indicates that traits such as proactive personality, assertiveness, or a low power-distance orientation can mitigate silence – these individuals may speak up even in difficult environments. In contrast, employees who are more passive, conflict-averse, or who strongly defer to authority are more prone to remain silent, especially when faced with mistreatment or uncertainty (C.-W. Liu et al., 2024; Chou & Chang, 2020).

Thus, the effect of a given antecedent on silence can vary depending on “who” the employee is. Overall, moderation findings suggest that the silence process is highly context-dependent. The same organizational factor can produce different silence outcomes under different conditions, and the personal

makeup of employees plays a role in shaping their silence behavior. It is also evident that relatively few studies in the 2020–2025 period have systematically tested moderators (only about one-third included any moderators), signaling that many potential boundary conditions of silence remain underexplored. Future research would benefit from examining these contingencies more deeply, but as it stands, the current evidence map identifies trustful climates and individual dispositions as the key moderators receiving initial support.

4. Discussion and Implications

Building on the evidence map in Section 3, this discussion translates the 2020–2025 findings into a practical variable-selection roadmap for future employee silence research. Rather than re-listing the same categories, I focus on how the mapped evidence can be used to make defensible model-design choices—namely, which variable categories are best treated as “default options,” which are better positioned as extensions for novelty, and which research designs are most suitable for strengthening causal and process claims. Table 4 summarizes this roadmap across Antecedents (A), Mediators (M), Moderators (Mod), and Outcomes (O).

4.1 What the recent evidence implies for theory building

A clear implication of the reviewed studies is that silence is most consistently explained as a response to situational risk and threat cues, especially those embedded in (a) the broader work context and (b) leadership signals. Across contexts, negative workplace conditions (e.g., mistreatment-related climates or perceived injustice) are repeatedly associated with higher silence (Liao et al., 2024; Srivastava et al., 2023). Leadership is similarly central: destructive or unsafe leadership cues predict silence, whereas leadership that signals fairness and safety tends to be associated with lower silence (Qiu et al., 2025; Simacek et al., 2025). This pattern supports a model-building stance in which context and leadership are treated as primary antecedent modules, with individual differences playing a more secondary role (Chou & Chang, 2020; C.-W. Liu et al., 2024).

A second implication concerns process explanation. The most frequently supported mediating pathways in the recent literature cluster around (1) emotional/strain reactions and (2) safety-related perceptions, which help explain why adverse conditions translate into withholding behavior (Liao et al., 2024; Ouyang et al., 2025; Simacek et al., 2025). In contrast, engagement-based pathways appear promising but still under-tested. Early evidence suggests silence may co-occur with disengagement narratives (e.g., quiet quitting), but the pathway is not yet as cumulative as strain- or safety-based mechanisms (Holland et al., 2025; Simacek et al., 2025). Therefore, a roadmap that prioritizes “high-support mediators” (strain and safety) while treating engagement as an extension is most consistent with the current evidence density.

Notably, outcomes in the recent literature are overwhelmingly detrimental. Silence is repeatedly linked to employee costs (e.g., burnout/strain), attitudinal costs (e.g., satisfaction/commitment), and behavioral/performance costs (e.g., counterproductive behavior, turnover intention, performance/innovation) (Akdogan et al., 2025; Rai & Koodamara, 2025; Ahmad et al., 2025; Qiu et al., 2025). This

consistency implies that future research can strengthen its contribution not by “proving silence is harmful again,” but by clarifying when and through what pathways these harms are most likely—where moderators and stronger designs become especially valuable.

However, the predominance of detrimental outcomes should not be interpreted as evidence that silence is uniformly dysfunctional. Conceptually, employee silence is multidimensional; for example, prosocial silence refers to intentionally withholding information to protect others or the organization (Dyne et al., 2003). This highlights the need to theorize boundary conditions—namely, to whom, under what circumstances, and in what forms silence occurs—before generalizing from the largely harm-centered outcome tests in the reviewed studies (Chou & Chang, 2020; Dehkharghani et al., 2023).

Moreover, silence may function as communicative restraint that preserves relationships and short-term coordination (e.g., prosocial silence), especially when enacted briefly and interpreted as deference or professionalism. Consistent with this possibility, De Clercq et al. (2021) show that abusive supervision may be associated with higher performance ratings among silent employees high in neuroticism, suggesting that silence can coincide with favorable evaluations under specific person–context configurations. Relatedly, recent work treats silence as a contingent element within broader relational dynamics, such as its role in leadership–satisfaction linkages (Alarabiat & Eyupoglu, 2022) and in coping responses to ostracism with implications for creativity (Jahanzeb et al., 2021).

4.2 A variable-substitution roadmap for A/M/Mod/O

This section translates the evidence map into a modular roadmap for empirical model design (Table 4) and an operational template (Figure 1). Because variable choices depend on how silence is conceptualized and measured, I will first clarify definition-sensitive implications for model building.

4.2.1 How different definitions of silence shape variable selection and model building

Silence is definition-sensitive: different conceptualizations of silence do not merely change terminology, but alter (a) which predictors are theoretically “upstream,” (b) which mechanisms are plausible as mediators rather than components of the focal construct, and (c) whether outcomes should be expected to be uniformly detrimental.

In the influential core view, employee silence is conceptualized as the intentional withholding of work-relevant ideas, information, or concerns in contexts where speaking up is possible but perceived as risky or futile (Morrison, 2023; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). This definition implies that a central explanatory task is to account for perceived threat, futility, and safety surrounding voice.

Accordingly, leadership and broader contextual cues become primary antecedent categories, because they shape the perceived interpersonal and political conditions under which speaking up may be punished or ignored (Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison, 2023). This aligns with the convergence pattern in the reviewed evidence, where leadership signals and adverse work contexts repeatedly appear as salient predictors.

This framing also supports process explanations in which safety-related perceptions and emotional/strain reactions serve as proximal mechanisms that help explain how adverse cues in the work environment become translated into a decision to withhold voice (Sherf et al., 2021; Whiteside & Barclay, 2013).

The roadmap presented below (Table 4) is best interpreted as a roadmap that most directly reflects evidence accumulated under this influential “intentional withholding under risk/futility” view. Under this view, prioritizing leadership- and context-related antecedent categories are theoretically coherent, and psychological safety–related perception and emotional/strain reaction categories are defensible mediation candidates because they capture how situational cues become a decision to withhold (Morrison, 2023; Whiteside & Barclay, 2013).

Outcome categories also tend to be selected and interpreted in a relatively consistent way in this stream of work. The reviewed studies predominantly test detrimental outcomes (well-being, attitudes, and behavioral/performance costs), which is expected when silence is primarily treated as a threat- and futility-driven response (Morrison, 2023; Sherf et al., 2021).

Importantly, several constructs can be modeled either as antecedents or mediators depending on time ordering and design. For example, psychological safety may be treated as a relatively stable, climate-like perception, or as a more proximal state shaped by recent leadership cues. This is why Table 4 is offered as a modular menu of categories rather than a fixed causal template (Morrison, 2023).

However, when silence is operationalized as qualitatively distinct motives or types (e.g., acquiescent, defensive, prosocial), variable selection and model positioning should be type-contingent rather than assuming a single mechanism or uniformly negative consequences (Dyne et al., 2003; Knoll et al., 2021b). What “should” be a mediator, antecedent, or outcome can shift under type-based definitions.

In particular, some mediation choices become conceptually redundant under type-based definitions. For defensive silence, fear/risk-related constructs may be close to the meaning of the type itself; therefore,

Table 4. Recommended Variable Categories for Empirical Model Design on Silence

Variable Category (A/M/Mod/O)	Strength of Evidence	Recommended Priority	Suggested Designs (examples)
A1 – Leadership-related factors (e.g., abusive supervision, toxic/authoritarian leadership, low leader support, low-quality LMX)	High	High	Multi-source (leader/employee); time-lagged
A2 – Negative contextual factors (e.g., incivility/bullying/ostracism, injustice, organizational politics, illegitimate tasks, high workload)	High	High	Multi-wave surveys; multi-level if climate aggregated
A3 – Individual differences (e.g., proactive personality, power distance orientation, conflict avoidance, assertiveness)	Low–Medium	Low	Use as controls; stronger use as moderator
M1 – Emotional/strain reactions (e.g., fear, anxiety, stress, emotional exhaustion, burnout)	High	High	Time-lagged mediation; longitudinal
M2 – Psychological safety–related perceptions (e.g., psychological safety, interpersonal trust, belongingness/identification, perceived speaking risk/futility)	High	High	Time-lagged; team-level safety when relevant
M3 – Well-being deterioration as mediator (e.g., reduced morale, mental strain, exhaustion leading to withdrawal)	Medium	Medium	Longitudinal; delayed outcomes
M4 – Work engagement as mediator (e.g., reduced engagement, motivational withdrawal, “quiet quitting” pathway)	Low–Medium	Medium–Low	Multi-wave; compare competing mediators
Mod1 – Supportive context/climate (e.g., trust/open climate, speak-up climate, job insecurity climate, competitive climate)	Medium	Medium	Multi-level moderation; cross-level interactions
Mod2 – Individual dispositions/orientations (e.g., proactivity, assertiveness, power distance orientation, risk tolerance)	Medium	Medium	Interaction tests; ensure adequate power
O1 – Well-being/health outcomes (e.g., stress, burnout, mental health strain)	Medium	Medium	Longitudinal; repeated well-being measures
O2 – Job attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction, organizational commitment)	Medium	Medium	Time-lag outcomes; multi-source if feasible
O3 – Engagement/motivation outcomes (e.g., work engagement, withdrawal of effort)	Low	Low–Medium	Longitudinal; pair with behavioral outcomes
O4 – Behavioral/performance outcomes (e.g., turnover intention, CWB, task performance, innovation)	High	High	Multi-source (supervisor/HR); longitudinal

Source: Adapted from data collected in the review.

Note. Evidence priorities mainly reflect the influential “withholding under risk/futility” framing; alternative operationalizations may shift model specification (see Section 4.2.1).

modeling “fear” as a mediator of “defensive silence” can blur the boundary between construct definition and causal mechanism. In such cases, fear- or safety-related constructs are often better positioned as antecedent categories explaining which type of silence emerges, or as concurrent correlates used to validate motivational distinctions (Dyne et al., 2003; Knoll et al., 2021b).

Outcome selection should also be adjusted accordingly. Prosocial silence, by definition, may not map cleanly onto the same harm-centered outcome set that dominates threat-based silence research, and researchers may need to incorporate relational or coordination-relevant outcomes (and boundary conditions) to avoid misclassifying strategic restraint as dysfunction (Dyne et al., 2003; Morrison, 2023).

Therefore, the practical implication is that Table 4 should be applied in a definition-first manner. Researchers should specify whether silence is treated as general withholding under risk/futility, as motive/type-based silence, or as a more collective/climate-level phenomenon, and then select and position A/M/Mod/O categories accordingly (Dyne et al., 2003; Morrison, 2023; Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

4.2.2 Operationalizing the roadmap: Table 4 and Figure 1

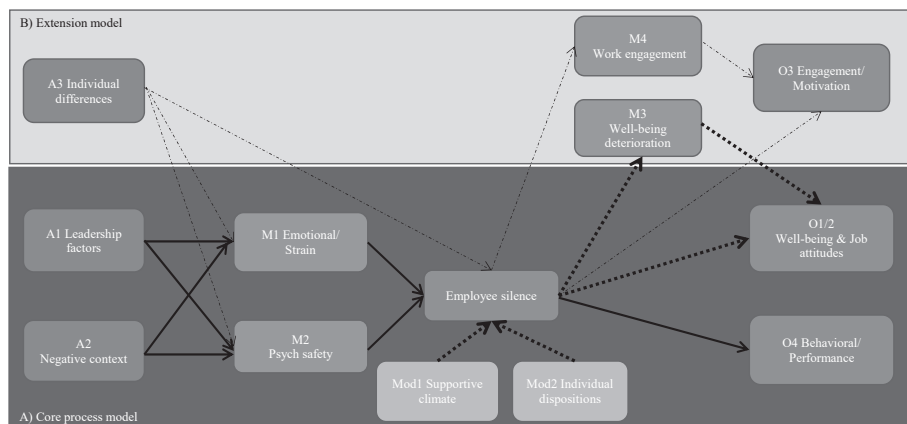
With these definitional boundaries in place, Table 4 and Figure 1 translate the review evidence into an A/M/Mod/O roadmap, indicating which variable categories have the most consistent support and how they can be combined in model building.

Table 4 provides an actionable way to design models without relying on a fixed “one best” variable list. The roadmap uses a simple logic: select at least one high-evidence category within each module (A/M/O), add one moderator (Mod) category when theory requires boundary conditions, and then introduce one lower-evidence category only if it directly supports the intended novelty.

Antecedents (A). I recommend treating A2 (organizational context stressors) and A1 (leadership-related factors) as “default antecedent anchors” because they are both frequent and convergent in recent studies (Liao et al., 2024; Srivastava et al., 2023; Qiu et al., 2025). In contrast, A3 (individual differences) is best positioned as (a) a secondary antecedent when strongly theory-driven or (b) a moderator candidate, because evidence is more mixed and typically weaker compared with situational factors (Chou & Chang, 2020; C.-W. Liu et al., 2024). Practically, a defensible baseline model can be built by combining A2 + A1 before adding more predictors.

Mediators (M). For mediation, the safest route is prioritizing M1 (emotional/strain reactions) and M2 (psychological safety-related perceptions), which are repeatedly used to explain why adverse conditions trigger silence (Liao et al., 2024; Ouyang et al., 2025; Simacek et al., 2025). M3 (well-being deterioration) can be used when the model is explicitly health-oriented and when time-lag logic is plausible (Akdogan et al., 2025; Liao et al., 2024). M4 (work engagement) is best used as an extension mechanism when the paper’s novelty is motivational withdrawal, but it should be paired with stronger designs (e.g., multi-wave data) because empirical accumulation is still limited (Holland et al., 2025; Simacek et al., 2025).

Moderators (Mod). Moderator evidence is thinner than main-effect evidence, but the reviewed studies suggest two practical moderator categories: Mod1 (supportive context/climate) and Mod2 (individual dispositions/orientations). Mod1 is appropriate when theorizing that climate (e.g., trust/open climate)



Source: Adapted from data collected in the review.

Note. Author-developed from Table 4. Solid, dotted, and light-grey dashed arrows denote high-, medium-, and low-convergence evidence. Panel A shows the core process model; Panel B highlights potential extensions for future testing. Labels (A1–O4) correspond to Table 4.

Figure 1. Promising future research models on employee silence based on the evidence map (Table 4).

buffers or amplifies risk signals (Ouyang et al., 2025; Holland et al., 2025). Mod2 is appropriate when theorizing heterogeneity in how employees react to adverse cues (Chou & Chang, 2020; C.-W. Liu et al., 2024). Importantly, moderators should not be added as “decorations.” A single well-justified moderator can materially improve theoretical precision by identifying *for whom* or *under what conditions* silence processes are most intense.

Outcomes (O). When the goal is to demonstrate organizational relevance, O4 (behavioral/performance outcomes) is a high-priority outcome category because it links silence to tangible effectiveness and retention risks (Ahmad et al., 2025; Qiu et al., 2025). For human-cost framing, O1 (well-being/health outcomes) is a strong companion outcome (Akdogan et al., 2025; Liao et al., 2024). O2 (job attitudes) is well suited for attitudinal/commitment framing (Rai & Koodamara, 2025). O3 (engagement/motivation as an outcome) can support contemporary withdrawal narratives but remains more exploratory due to limited direct testing (Holland et al., 2025; Simacek et al., 2025). Overall, the roadmap suggests prioritizing O4 and/or O1 as core outcomes, then adding O2 or O3 when they directly serve the research question.

Figure 1 operationalizes Table 4 by presenting a high-evidence core model (Panel A) and lower-evidence extensions for future testing (Panel B). The line styles indicate evidence convergence (high/medium/low), thereby linking the evidence map directly to model-design choices.

4.3 Design implications and future directions

A recurring limitation in the recent evidence base is the heavy reliance on single-source, cross-sectional survey designs. Moreover, Table 3 shows that qualitative and mixed-method studies constitute only a small minority of the included research; thus, qualitative or mixed-method approaches would be especially valuable for capturing how silence episodes emerge, are interpreted, and evolve over time and across contexts. This does not invalidate the field’s cumulative patterns, but it does constrain causal inference and process testing, particularly when silence is operationalized in definition-sensitive ways

(e.g., general withholding vs. motive/type-based silence). Accordingly, Table 4 pairs each variable category with design suggestions that strengthen what the roadmap aims to test:

- Mediation claims are best supported with time-lagged or longitudinal designs (e.g., antecedents at T1, mediators at T2, silence/outcomes at T3).
- Performance/behavior outcomes are strengthened by multi-source measurement (e.g., supervisor ratings or HR indicators) to reduce common-method concerns.
- Climate moderators are more credible when operationalized at the group level (multi-level designs), rather than only as individual perceptions.
- When silence is motive/type-based, separate type-defining content from mediators and consider episode-level or within-person designs (e.g., diary/ESM).

Future research can therefore contribute most by combining (a) high-evidence variable categories with (b) stronger temporal and multi-source designs, and by using moderators to explain heterogeneity in silence processes rather than merely re-confirming negative main effects, while applying a definition-first logic that keeps variable positioning comparable and conceptually clean across alternative operationalizations of silence.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review mapped 2020–2025 employee silence research into a modular evidence framework (A/M/Mod/O) and translated the resulting evidence density into a practical roadmap for future model design. Consistent with the descriptive patterns in Section 3 and the decision logic summarized in Table 4, the most robust building blocks for cumulative research are (a) negative contextual factors and leadership-related factors as default antecedent anchors, (b) emotional/strain reactions and psychological safety-related perceptions as the most supported mediating pathways, and (c) behavioral/performance and well-being outcomes as the most defensible outcome categories for demonstrating organizational relevance and human costs.

To clarify how this review complements prior stocktaking, it is useful to situate the evidence base relative to the two most recent syntheses. Dehkharghani et al. (2023) review employee silence studies published between 2000 and 2019, whereas Morrison (2023) takes stock of the 2014–2021 voice-and-silence literature. In common with these reviews, the post-2020 literature synthesized here continues to frame silence largely around adverse contextual and leadership cues, with explanatory pathways often clustering around strain- and safety-related perceptions and with outcomes predominantly discussed in cost/harm terms. In contrast, three post-2020 updates stand out in this evidence map: (1) the empirical base is even more survey-dominant (with qualitative and mixed-method studies remaining rare), which sharpens the urgency of the design priorities articulated in this paper; (2) evidence density is especially concentrated in a small set of high-support A/M/O building blocks, which the variable-substitution roadmap translates into decision-oriented guidance for model specification; and (3) publication volume increases markedly after 2022, alongside emerging (but still sparsely tested) motivational extensions such as reduced engagement or “quiet quitting” as potential pathways and outcomes.

A key implication is that future studies can improve comparability without converging on a single

“best” variable list. Instead, cumulative progress is more likely when researchers select at least one high-support category within each module, introduce moderators only when boundary-condition logic is theoretically necessary, and treat lower-support categories as targeted extensions for novelty (e.g., engagement-based pathways). At the same time, I emphasize that design choices must match the claims being made: mediation arguments are substantially strengthened by multi-wave or longitudinal designs, behavioral/performance outcomes benefit from multi-source measurement, and climate moderators are more credible when modeled at higher levels (e.g., team/organization).

This review also highlights methodological constraints in the recent evidence base, especially the heavy reliance on single-source, cross-sectional surveys. These patterns do not invalidate the field’s core conclusions, but they do limit causal inference and process testing. Accordingly, the most valuable next steps are not simply to replicate “silence is harmful,” but to clarify (a) to whom silence is directed, (b) under what circumstances it unfolds, (c) how it is enacted, and (d) to what extent and for how long it persists—and when and through which pathways these features produce specific harms—using stronger temporal, multi-source, and (where appropriate) multi-level designs.

Given that qualitative and mixed-method evidence is scarce in the included studies (Table 3), future work should also employ qualitative or mixed-method approaches (e.g., interviews, diary/ESM, and case-based process tracing) to unpack how silence episodes arise, evolve, and are interpreted in context. Future research should examine potentially functional silence: depending on its motive (e.g., prosocial), expression, situational demands, and duration (e.g., short span), silence may support relationship maintenance and group/team cohesion rather than harm. In contexts where relational harmony and hierarchical sensitivity shape the meaning of communicative restraint (e.g., Japanese workplaces), “appropriate silence in appropriate situations” may be interpreted as professionalism or respect and thus relate to more positive supervisor–subordinate relationships and favorable evaluations.

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