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Breaking the silence: A conservation of Resources Theory Perspective on voice behaviour in public sector organizations

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ABSTRACT

Employee voice, the discretionary expression of ideas, concerns, or criticisms aimed at improving organizational functioning, has become an indispensable asset in public governance. Despite its recognised value for accountability, learning, and innovation, silence remains pervasive in public organizations, reflecting a paradox between the need for open communication and the dominance of bureaucratic reticence. This article advances a novel theoretical integration by applying the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory to explain the dynamics of voice behaviour (VB) in public-sector contexts. COR Theory posits that individuals strive to acquire, retain, and protect valued resources while avoiding loss. When analysed through this lens, voice emerges as a resource transaction: employees weigh the potential gains of speaking up; recognition, influence, and trust versus the risks of resource loss, including damaged reputations, strained leader relationships, or career jeopardy. In the public sector, where rigid hierarchies, political oversight, and cultural norms amplify these risks, silence is often the rational choice. Drawing on a systematic literature review and qualitative analysis of empirical studies, this article identifies five critical issues constraining voice in public organizations: bureaucratic hierarchies, fear of retaliation, symbolic voice policies, cultural norms of deference, and resource ambiguity.

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Findings suggest that leadership style and organizational climate function as critical "resource passageways", determining whether VB generates gain spirals of engagement or loss spirals of withdrawal. The article contributes theoretically to organizational behaviour and offers practical recommendations for policymakers and leaders seeking to transform public institutions from cultures of silence into cultures of constructive voice.

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary governance, where citizens demand transparency, accountability, and innovation, the voices of public sector employees have become an indispensable asset. Employee voice, defined as the discretionary communication of ideas, concerns, or criticisms intended to improve organizational performance (Chamberlin et al., 2017; Morrison, 2014), is widely recognised as a critical ingredient for adaptive, responsive, and ethical governance (Zheng et al., 2022). However, despite its importance, silence remains the norm in many public organizations (Detert & Burris, 2007; Ng & Feldman, 2012). Employees frequently refrain from speaking up even when they witness inefficiencies, ethical breaches, or opportunities for improvement (Zheng et al., 2022). This paradox, the need for voice versus the prevalence of silence, constitutes a major governance challenge in the public sector.

The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018) offers a powerful framework for understanding this paradox. COR Theory posits that individuals are motivated to acquire, protect, and build resources defined broadly as objects, personal characteristics, conditions, and energies that help them achieve valued outcomes. Stress occurs when resources are threatened or lost, or when individuals fail to gain resources after significant investment. Voice behaviour (VB), when analysed through the COR lens, is inherently a resource transaction: employees risk losing resources such as reputation, social approval, or job security, but they may also gain resources such as recognition, influence, and trust (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Whether employees choose to voice or remain silent depends on their resource calculus, an evaluation of whether potential gains outweigh potential losses (Liang et al., 2017).

This theoretical framing is particularly salient in the public sector, where institutional and cultural dynamics amplify both the risks and rewards of voice. Public organizations are typically characterised by rigid hierarchies, strong accountability mechanisms, and bureaucratic rules (Wu & Ma, 2022). These features heighten the perceived risks of voice: speaking up may be considered insubordination, political disloyalty, or personal risk. At the same time, the potential rewards of having a voice in the public sector – improved service delivery, increased accountability, and enhanced legitimacy – are profound. Thus, the public sector represents a unique and fertile ground for extending COR Theory to understand the dynamics of voice.

In recent decades, both scholars and practitioners have emphasised the importance of employees' voices in advancing public accountability and innovation. From the standpoint of democratic theory, public employees are not merely bureaucrats; they are frontline agents of accountability who can expose wrongdoing, highlight inefficiencies, and champion reform (Mowbray et al., 2022). From the perspective of organizational learning, voice is a mechanism for surfacing errors and fostering adaptive capacity

(Edmondson, 2003). From a governance perspective, VB contributes to building trust between governments and citizens by demonstrating responsiveness to problems (Ullah et al., 2023).

Yet, despite these benefits, empirical evidence suggests that silence dominates voice in many public contexts. A meta-analysis by Chamberlin et al. (2017) found that voice is significantly associated with promotive leadership and organizational support but is also highly sensitive to contextual threats. Similarly, studies in public organizations reveal that employees often avoid speaking up due to fear of retaliation, a lack of trust in reporting mechanisms, and cultural norms discouraging dissent (Tian et al., 2025; Wu & Ma, 2022). This raises a critical question: Why do public employees choose silence despite the obvious value of their voice?

COR Theory provides a compelling explanation: employees avoid voice when the perceived risk of resource loss outweighs the expected gain. Speaking up may jeopardise job security (a conditional resource), damage relationships with superiors (a social resource), or drain emotional energy (an energetic resource) (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In contrast, silence is perceived as conserving resources, at least in the short term. However, COR Theory also provides evidence for gain spirals, where resource investment in voice leads to recognition, increased psychological safety, and further voice (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 2018). The dynamic is thus one of fragile balance: under hostile conditions, voice becomes a drain; under supportive conditions, it becomes an engine of resource accumulation (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

This duality has been underexplored in the public sector. Most existing studies apply the COR Theory to burnout, stress, or engagement but rarely to discretionary behaviours like voice (Hobfoll et al., 2018). By extending COR to VB, this article offers a novel theoretical integration: voice is both a site of potential depletion and a strategy of proactive investment. This framing allows us to understand why silence persists while also offering pathways to cultivate voice through the deliberate construction of resource passageways.

This article makes three primary contributions. First, it conceptually integrates COR Theory and VB in the context of public organizations, extending COR beyond stress and burnout to explain proactive, discretionary behaviour. Second, it develops a qualitative synthesis of empirical studies, meta-analyses, and systematic reviews, demonstrating how resource dynamics operate across multiple levels: individual, leadership, institutional, and cultural. Third, it offers a conceptual framework for policymakers and practitioners to strengthen resource passageways that enable voice and reduce silence.

It positions the public sector not as a barrier to voice but as a critical arena where voice is essential for accountability and innovation yet deeply constrained by resource dynamics. The objective of this paper is to critically integrate COR Theory and VB in the context of public sector organizations. Through a qualitative review of existing studies and systematic observation of recurring patterns, the analysis identifies theoretical gaps, practical barriers, and actionable strategies for cultivating voice. This approach contributes to organizational behaviour scholarship by reframing voice as a resource-dependent process and by offering administrators a roadmap for strengthening resilience, engagement, and innovation in resource-constrained environments.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Evolution of COR Theory

The COR Theory, first articulated by Hobfoll (1989), has become one of the most influential frameworks for understanding stress, motivation, and organizational behaviour. At its core, COR Theory posits that individuals strive to acquire, retain, and protect resources, which (Hobfoll, 2011; Hobfoll et al., 2018) defines broadly as objects, personal characteristics, conditions, and energies valued by individuals or serving as means to achieve valued goals. COR differs from earlier stress theories by emphasising that individuals are not only passive recipients of stress but also proactive resource investors (Hobfoll et al., 2018). This duality makes the theory particularly useful for understanding discretionary workplace behaviours, such as voices.

Over time, COR Theory has undergone significant conceptual refinement. Early iterations emphasised resource loss as the primary stress driver. Hobfoll (1989) argued that resource loss is disproportionately more salient than resource gain, creating a powerful psychological asymmetry. Later elaborations introduced the notions of resource caravans and gain/loss spirals (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Resource caravans are groups of resources that move together. People who have a lot of resources are more likely to get more, while people who don't have enough are more likely to lose more. Gain and loss spirals capture the dynamic, self-reinforcing nature of resource trajectories: small gains can accumulate into significant reserves, while small losses can cascade into chronic depletion (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

This resource-based perspective has been widely applied in occupational health psychology, particularly in research on burnout, work engagement, and stress (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Lesener et al., 2019). However, its application to discretionary behaviours – those not mandated by role but critical for organizational improvement – remains comparatively underdeveloped. This gap is striking, given that discretionary behaviours, including voice, often involve complex resource transactions: employees voluntarily expend psychological, social, and cognitive resources with uncertain prospects for replenishment.

VB: Conceptual Foundations and Development

VB has been defined as discretionary, prosocial communication of ideas, suggestions, or concerns aimed at improving organizational functioning (Morrison, 2014). Voice is not a mere complaint; it is generally intended to be constructive, future-oriented, and beneficial to the organization. The construct has gained prominence due to its relevance for innovation, error detection, ethical accountability, and organizational learning (Chamberlin et al., 2017; Sibunruang & Kawai, 2024).

The literature on voice has developed along several dimensions. First, scholars have distinguished promotive voice, which involves suggesting improvements and innovations, from prohibitive voice, which involves raising concerns about harmful practices or risks (Liang et al., 2012). A promotive voice is often more readily welcomed because it aligns with improvement, whereas a prohibitive voice can be perceived as criticism or resistance, making it riskier. Second, voice has been conceptualised as both an individual trait (e.g., a propensity to speak up based on personality or self-efficacy) and a contextually contingent behaviour shaped by leadership, climate, and institutional norms (Detert & Burris, 2007). Third, voice research has increasingly shifted from private-sector contexts to public and hybrid organizations, where the

dynamics of accountability, bureaucracy, and politics introduce unique challenges (Kim & Cho, 2024; Ng & Feldman, 2012).

Despite extensive theorising, the voice-silence paradox persists: while organizations rhetorically value openness, employees often choose silence (Morrison, 2014). Silence, like voice, can be strategic: it conserves resources, avoids conflict, and preserves relationships, at least in the short term. In public organizations, where rules and hierarchy dominate, silence is often the safest choice (Hassan et al., 2019). This paradox invites deeper theoretical integration precisely where COR Theory can provide clarity.

Integrating COR Theory and VB

Applying COR Theory to VB yields a compelling insight: voice is a resource gamble. Employees must decide whether to invest finite resources, such as time, emotional energy, reputation, and relational capital, in speaking up, with no guarantee of resource return (Halbesleben et al., 2014). If leaders are receptive, voice can generate resource gains such as recognition, psychological safety, and career advancement. If leaders are dismissive or punitive, voice leads to resource loss, including damaged relationships, social exclusion, or even career derailment (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

This framing clarifies why voice is so fragile. In contexts of high uncertainty, employees default to silence as a form of resource conservation. Ng and Feldman (2012) demonstrate that voice is less likely in organizations with low psychological safety, where the risk of reputational damage is high. Similarly, even employees who acknowledge serious issues often remain silent if they fear retaliation or futility (Hassan et al., 2019). COR Theory thus reframes silence not as apathy or disengagement but as a rational, resource-conserving strategy (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Moreover, the COR concepts of gain spirals and loss spirals map directly onto voice dynamics. In supportive climates, voice can create gain spirals: employees invest resources in speaking up, receive validation and reinforcement, and thereby accumulate additional resources, encouraging future voice (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Conversely, in unsupportive climates, voice triggers loss spirals: initial resource depletion leads to silence, which in turn perpetuates systemic inefficiencies, erodes trust, and deepens disengagement (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

The resource pathways concept is particularly relevant to public organizations (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Passageways refer to the social and institutional structures that facilitate or constrain resource flows. In public organizations, leadership styles, organizational justice, and cultural norms function as passageways that shape whether VB results in gain or loss spirals. For example, empowering leadership creates a passageway for resource gain, while authoritarian leadership creates a passageway for loss (Zheng et al., 2021).

VB in the Public Sector

The public sector presents a distinctive context for voice because of its dual pressures of bureaucratic accountability and democratic legitimacy. Unlike private firms that primarily pursue efficiency and profit, public organizations must balance efficiency with equity, legality, and transparency (Lapuente & Van de Walle, 2020). These unique mandates create both opportunities and risks for employee voice.

On one hand, voice is vital for public accountability. Employees are often the first to detect inefficiencies, corruption, or policy failures. Their voice can improve service delivery, protect public resources, and enhance trust in government (Iddrisu, 2025). On the other hand, voice in the public sector

often challenges entrenched hierarchies and political interests, making it risky. Whistleblowers, for example, frequently suffer retaliation despite legal protections (Iddrisu, 2025).

Empirical studies confirm the fragility of voice in public contexts. The hierarchical rigidity in Chinese public agencies suppressed prohibitive voice, even among employees motivated by strong public service values (Wu & Ma, 2022). Tian et al. (2025) showed that in government-owned enterprises, leader–member exchange significantly influenced whether voice was rewarded or punished. Dai et al. (2022) demonstrated that cultural factors, such as high-power distance, significantly reduced the likelihood of employees speaking up. These findings illustrate how public-sector passageways often constrain rather than enable voice.

The Constraints of VB in Public Organizations: A COR Perspective

VB has long been recognised as a vital mechanism through which employees contribute to organizational learning, accountability, and innovation (Detert & Burris, 2007; Morrison, 2014). Yet, in practice, silence often dominates public organizations, raising important questions about the structural, cultural, and psychological barriers that muffle employees' willingness to speak up. A synthesis of the literature identifies five recurring critical issues that constrain voice in public organizations: bureaucratic hierarchies, fear of retaliation, symbolic voice policies, cultural norms of deference, and resource ambiguity. When reframed through the COR Theory, these barriers reveal that silence is not merely the absence of courage or engagement but instead reflects rational strategies of resource preservation under conditions of perceived risk (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989). Each of these constraints, therefore, illustrates how employees balance resource gains against the threat of losses, shaping the calculus of whether to speak up or remain silent (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Public organizations are often characterised by rigid bureaucratic hierarchies, where authority and decision-making are centralised at higher ranks. In such environments, employees perceive that VB, especially when it involves critique, directly threatens relational resources (trust, rapport with superiors) and conditional resources (career progression, access to networks). Research on hierarchical dynamics demonstrates that employees in public agencies report lower VB than those in private organizations, with vertical distance magnifying fears of reprisal (Ullah et al., 2023). For instance, civil servants in large bureaucracies often describe voice as "career suicide", a choice that risks long-term resource depletion rather than gain.

From the COR perspective, this behaviour can be seen as a rational adaptation: employees protect valuable resources by avoiding actions that might destabilise their standing in the hierarchy (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Although bureaucratic structures may promote stability and compliance, they simultaneously constrain upward voice, undermining organizational innovation. This paradox reveals a critical misalignment: while public agencies emphasise accountability and responsiveness, their hierarchical resource structures inadvertently suppress the very behaviour that generates adaptability.

Even when formal protections exist, employees often remain silent due to a deeply ingrained fear of retaliation (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Studies on whistleblowing consistently demonstrate that employees anticipate loss spirals, including exclusion from informal networks, damaged reputations, hostile work climates, or slowed career trajectories (Iddrisu, 2025). Meta-analytic evidence confirms that fear of retaliation is one of the strongest negative predictors of voice across industries (Chamberlin et al., 2017). Political visibility and accountability pressures intensify these dynamics in the public sector. Public

employees frequently observe cases where colleagues who voiced concerns faced stalled promotions or subtle forms of ostracism, reinforcing silence as a protective strategy.

Viewed through COR Theory, these dynamics highlight how employees anticipate disproportionate losses relative to potential gains (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Even small acts of retaliation can damage social resources (like belonging and trust) and status resources (like recognition and legitimacy). This makes people less likely to speak up to avoid losing more. Importantly, this reveals why legal protections or whistleblower policies often fail to fully encourage voice: they mitigate overt sanctions but cannot protect against covert social and career-related costs, which remain central in employees' resource calculus (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2015; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Many public organizations adopt "open door" policies, suggestion schemes, or whistleblower protections, signalling formal support for employee voices. However, research suggests these often operate as symbolic policies rather than substantive protections (Morrison, 2014). Employees may perceive such mechanisms as managerial rhetoric rather than actionable support, leading to resource ambiguity and uncertainty about whether voice will yield recognition and respect or instead provoke disapproval. For example, studies in government agencies show that while voice channels exist on paper, employees frequently describe them as "black holes", where input disappears without feedback, leaving employees unsure whether they have gained or lost resources (Urbancová et al., 2024).

COR Theory reframes symbolic policies as destabilising factors in employees' resource evaluations (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Ambiguity leads to uncertain expectations, making potential gains unclear and risks prominent. In this context, silence becomes the safer strategy for resource preservation. Moreover, symbolic policies may backfire, producing cynicism and disengagement when employees conclude that organizational voice systems are hollow. Rather than promoting resource gains, they contribute to a perceived erosion of trust and predictability, further suppressing vocal behaviour (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Cultural norms of deference further constrain vocal behaviour in collectivist and high-power distant societies. Speaking up may violate deep-rooted expectations of loyalty, harmony, and respect for authority, creating not only organizational but also cultural costs (Dai et al., 2022). Employees risk being perceived as disloyal, confrontational, or disruptive, thereby threatening cultural resources such as belonging, identity, and social harmony (Yang et al., 2025). For example, studies in East Asian public organizations reveal that employees often equate silence with respect and conformity, while voice is interpreted as insubordination. Similarly, in Middle Eastern bureaucracies, collectivist norms magnify reputational costs, as challenging authority can damage family or community standing (Duan et al., 2018; Tian et al., 2025).

From the COR perspective, cultural transgressions represent particularly costly forms of resource loss because they threaten both personal identity and collective acceptance (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Unlike bureaucratic hierarchies, which primarily affect relational and conditional resources, cultural norms shape the symbolic and social resources underpinning identity and belonging (Yang et al., 2025). Employees may therefore silence themselves not only for career preservation but also for the deeper goal of maintaining cultural alignment. This dynamic underscores the need to contextualise VB within cultural resource structures, recognising that silence may serve adaptive cultural functions in addition to organizational ones (Duan et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2025).

Finally, a pervasive challenge in public organizations is resource ambiguity and uncertainty regarding how voices will be treated (Cappellaro et al., 2023). Employees often lack clear cues about whether speaking up will lead to recognition or punishment, creating heightened perceptions of risk. Research on psychological safety demonstrates that ambiguous climates where norms for voice are inconsistent or unclear strongly predict silence, as employees default to conservative strategies of resource preservation (Tian et al., 2025). This dynamic is particularly acute in public organizations, where shifting political priorities, frequent leadership changes, and bureaucratic opacity create unstable signals about acceptable VB (Cappellaro et al., 2023; Tian et al., 2025).

Through the COR lens, ambiguity erodes the predictability necessary for resource investment (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Just as investors hesitate under volatile market conditions, employees hesitate under ambiguous organizational climates. This prevents the creation of gain spirals (where voice leads to recognition and trust) and instead fosters resource stagnation, where silence dominates despite potential opportunities for innovation (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Ambiguity thus represents not a neutral absence of clarity but an active barrier to voice, reinforcing resource-conserving silence in environments already constrained by hierarchy and risk (Tian et al., 2025).

Toward a Resource-Based Model of Voice in Public Organizations

Taken together, these five issues illustrate how the COR Theory deepens our understanding of VB in the public sector. Silence is not simply irrational or disengaged; rather, it reflects rational, adaptive strategies of resource management under constrained and high-risk conditions (Cappellaro et al., 2023; Duan et al., 2018; Tian et al., 2025). Employees calculate whether voice will generate resource gains or trigger resource loss spirals, and in public organizations, the structural and cultural environment often skews this calculus toward silence (Duan et al., 2018). Importantly, this reframing shifts the interpretation of silence from a deficit to an adaptive strategy, highlighting that organizational reform must focus not on exhorting employees to "speak up" but on altering the resource structures that make silence the safer choice (Yang et al., 2025).

Synthesising these insights, a resource-based model of voice emerges. At the individual level, voice is shaped by employees' resource reserves (e.g., self-efficacy, social capital) and their resource calculus (perceived risks vs. gains). At the organizational level, leadership, climate, and justice perceptions constitute resource passageways that amplify or diminish voice. At the institutional level, bureaucratic structures, accountability systems, and cultural norms define the broader resource ecology in which voice occurs. This multilevel integration aligns with calls for more comprehensive models of voice. By embedding voice in the COR framework, we see not only why silence persists but also how leaders and policymakers can actively design environments that shift the calculus from loss to gain.

3. METHODOLOGY

Theory Research Design and Methodological Orientation

This article adopts a qualitative narrative critical review grounded in an interpretivist–constructivist paradigm to develop an integrated conceptual framework explaining how COR Theory advances understanding of employee VB within public-sector organizations. Consistent with narrative critical review methodology, the purpose of this conceptual study was not to synthesise empirical effect sizes, evaluate

intervention effectiveness, or establish causal relationships but to integrate fragmented theoretical, empirical, and public administration literature into a coherent conceptual explanation of employee voice as a resource investment process (Grant & Booth, 2009). This methodological orientation is particularly appropriate because employee voice in public organizations is socially constructed, context dependent, and shaped by organizational interpretation, institutional structures, leadership practices, cultural norms, and resource availability rather than operating as a linear behavioural response (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Accordingly, the review seeks to advance theoretical understanding by synthesising multidisciplinary evidence into an integrated framework that explains why public employees choose either to express constructive voice or remain silent under varying organizational resource conditions.

The review focused on literature published between 2000 and 2025, a period characterised by substantial developments in employee voice research, organizational behaviour, public administration, occupational psychology, and COR Theory. During this period, scholarly attention expanded considerably from viewing employee voice primarily as an organizational communication mechanism towards recognising its strategic importance for innovation, organizational learning, ethical governance, accountability, and public-sector performance. Simultaneously, COR Theory evolved beyond its original application to occupational stress and burnout, providing increasingly sophisticated explanations of proactive workplace behaviours, resource investment, resource passageways, and gain and loss spirals (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The review followed five interconnected stages comprising literature identification, source screening, thematic synthesis, theoretical integration, and conceptual framework development. Rather than representing a formal systematic review protocol, these stages illustrate the interpretive process through which multidisciplinary evidence was progressively synthesised into an integrated conceptual framework explaining employee VB in public-sector organizations.

To ensure comprehensive coverage of both theoretical and empirical perspectives, literature was retrieved from three major multidisciplinary academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and ProQuest. These databases were selected because they collectively provide extensive coverage of organizational behaviour, public administration, human resource management, psychology, leadership, and governance scholarship. To strengthen conceptual completeness, backward citation tracking was undertaken by examining the reference lists of highly influential publications on employee voice, organizational silence, and COR Theory, including seminal contributions by Morrison (2014), Hobfoll et al. (2018), and Chamberlin et al. (2017). Unlike conventional systematic reviews that emphasise exhaustive retrieval, the narrative critical review prioritised conceptual relevance, theoretical richness, and analytical contribution to facilitate development of an integrated theoretical explanation.

A structured search strategy employing Boolean operators was used to maximise retrieval across databases. Principal search terms included employee voice, VB, employee silence, COR Theory, resource investment, resource caravans, resource passageways, gain spirals, loss spirals, psychological safety, leadership, organizational climate, bureaucracy, public organizations, public administration, whistleblowing, innovation, accountability, and governance. The search strategy was refined iteratively throughout the review to ensure balanced representation of classical theoretical literature and contemporary empirical studies examining employee voice across governmental agencies, healthcare organizations, higher education institutions, public services, and state-owned enterprises.

Explicit inclusion and exclusion principles were applied to enhance conceptual consistency while preserving the interpretive flexibility characteristic of narrative critical reviews. Included sources

comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, theoretical papers, empirical studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses examining employee voice, organizational silence, COR Theory, leadership, organizational climate, psychological safety, public administration, or organizational resource dynamics. Emphasis was placed on literature examining public-sector organizations or comparative studies where employee voice demonstrated direct conceptual relevance to governmental and public-service contexts. Excluded materials comprised duplicated records, conference abstracts, editorials, opinion papers, unpublished reports lacking methodological transparency, and studies focusing exclusively on private-sector operational issues without meaningful theoretical implications for public-sector VB.

The search and screening process yielded an initial corpus of 189 publications. Following duplicate removal and preliminary relevance screening, 92 articles were retained for full-text assessment. Subsequent conceptual quality appraisal, based on theoretical contribution, methodological rigour, conceptual richness, and relevance to the objectives of the review, resulted in the selection of 48 core publications for detailed synthesis. These publications represented considerable methodological diversity, including quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, case studies, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses, while encompassing public-sector settings across North America, Europe, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and other comparative administrative systems. Selection was guided by conceptual relevance rather than methodological hierarchy because the objective of the review was to integrate complementary theoretical and empirical evidence capable of informing conceptual framework development rather than evaluating intervention effectiveness.

The retained literature was analysed using an iterative thematic synthesis informed by Braun & Clarke (2021) and Mahdzir and Ghani (2022). Analysis commenced with repeated reading of all selected publications to achieve familiarity with the literature and identify recurring concepts associated with employee voice, organizational silence, leadership, organizational climate, institutional constraints, and resource dynamics. Open coding was subsequently undertaken to identify meaningful concepts emerging inductively across the literature. Through constant comparison and iterative refinement, related codes were progressively grouped into broader conceptual categories reflecting common organizational processes and theoretical constructs. This analytical process generated seven overarching themes: voice as resource investment under uncertainty, leadership as resource passageways, institutional resource constraints, resource ambiguity and organizational climate, resource gain spirals, resource loss spirals, and organizational and public value outcomes. These themes constitute the principal analytical outcomes of the review and are presented explicitly in the subsequent Findings section before being interpreted through the proposed conceptual framework. Maintaining this distinction between thematic findings and conceptual interpretation strengthens methodological transparency by ensuring that the analytical products of the review remain analytically distinguishable from the authors' theoretical synthesis.

Following theme generation, the analysis proceeded to theoretical integration by examining the relationships between the seven themes and the four theoretical perspectives underpinning the review. COR Theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018) served as the principal explanatory framework by conceptualising employee voice as a process of resource acquisition, protection, investment, and conservation. Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) explains how reciprocal relationships between employees and organizational leaders influence trust, perceived organizational support, and employees' willingness to invest personal resources through VB. The Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008) complements this perspective by explaining how organizational resources buffer

workplace demands and encourage work engagement, thereby increasing employees' readiness to engage in constructive voice. Finally, Self-Determination (SDT) Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) provides additional explanation by demonstrating how satisfaction of employees' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness strengthens intrinsic motivation to express ideas and concerns for organizational improvement. Rather than applying these theoretical perspectives independently, they were integrated as complementary analytical lenses supporting the broader COR framework and enriching explanation of employee voice within complex public-sector environments.

The conceptual framework was developed inductively from the thematic synthesis rather than imposed a priori. Across the reviewed literature, the recurring organizational challenges identified through the seven themes consistently highlighted the importance of resource dynamics operating simultaneously at institutional, organizational, leadership, and individual levels. These recurring patterns demonstrated that employee voice emerges through continuous resource evaluation, whereby individuals assess anticipated gains, potential losses, leadership responsiveness, organizational climate, and contextual uncertainty before deciding whether to speak up or remain silent. Accordingly, the framework conceptualises employee voice as a dynamic resource investment process, integrating public-sector institutional conditions, leadership resource passageways, organizational resource climates, resource caravans, and gain and loss spirals into a unified explanation of organizational learning, innovation, accountability, service quality, and public trust. Consequently, the framework is presented as an integrative conceptual synthesis proposed for future empirical examination rather than as an empirically validated causal model.

The trustworthiness of the conceptual synthesis was enhanced through methodological triangulation across four complementary dimensions. Source triangulation integrated evidence from theoretical literature, empirical studies, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and documented public-sector organizational cases. Theoretical triangulation combined COR Theory, Social Exchange Theory, the Job Demands–Resources Model, and Self-Determination Theory to interpret employee voice from multiple but complementary analytical perspectives. Contextual triangulation compared findings across governmental agencies, healthcare organizations, higher education institutions, and state-owned enterprises to strengthen conceptual transferability across public-sector environments. Finally, analytical triangulation integrated thematic synthesis, conceptual comparison, and interpretive analysis throughout framework development to ensure analytical coherence. Collectively, these triangulation strategies strengthened the credibility, conceptual robustness, and explanatory power of the proposed framework while remaining fully consistent with the interpretive nature of a qualitative narrative critical review (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

4. FINDINGS

The analysis produced a set of interconnected findings organised into five core themes, each of which illustrates how COR processes intersect with VB in the public sector. The figure presents an integrated theoretical framework explaining employee voice behaviour in public-sector organisations through the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory perspective, supported by Social Exchange Theory, the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Model, and Self-Determination Theory. It conceptualises employee voice as a dynamic process of resource evaluation in which individuals continuously assess the potential gains and losses associated with speaking up. External organisational resources, internal personal resources, and resource caravans interact through leadership and the organisational climate to shape employees' willingness to express constructive voice. Simultaneously, bureaucratic hierarchies, fear of retaliation,

symbolic voice policies, cultural norms of deference, and resource ambiguity create contextual barriers that increase the perceived risks of voice behaviour.

The framework further illustrates that organisational responses represent a critical turning point. Supportive responses, characterised by recognition, feedback, protection, and action, initiate resource gain spirals that strengthen trust, psychological safety, engagement, innovation, organisational learning, accountability, service quality, and institutional legitimacy. In contrast, dismissive or punitive responses generate resource loss spirals, resulting in withdrawal, organisational silence, resource depletion, reduced innovation, governance failures, and declining public trust. A recursive feedback loop demonstrates that previous voice experiences continually reshape employees' future resource evaluations and behavioural intentions. Overall, the figure synthesises the article's central argument that employee voice is not merely an individual behaviour, but a strategic process of resource management embedded within organisational and institutional contexts, where leadership, organisational climate, and public-sector conditions determine whether voice generates cycles of resource enrichment or resource depletion. Figure 1 illustrates the findings of theoretical integration of COR Theory and employee VB.

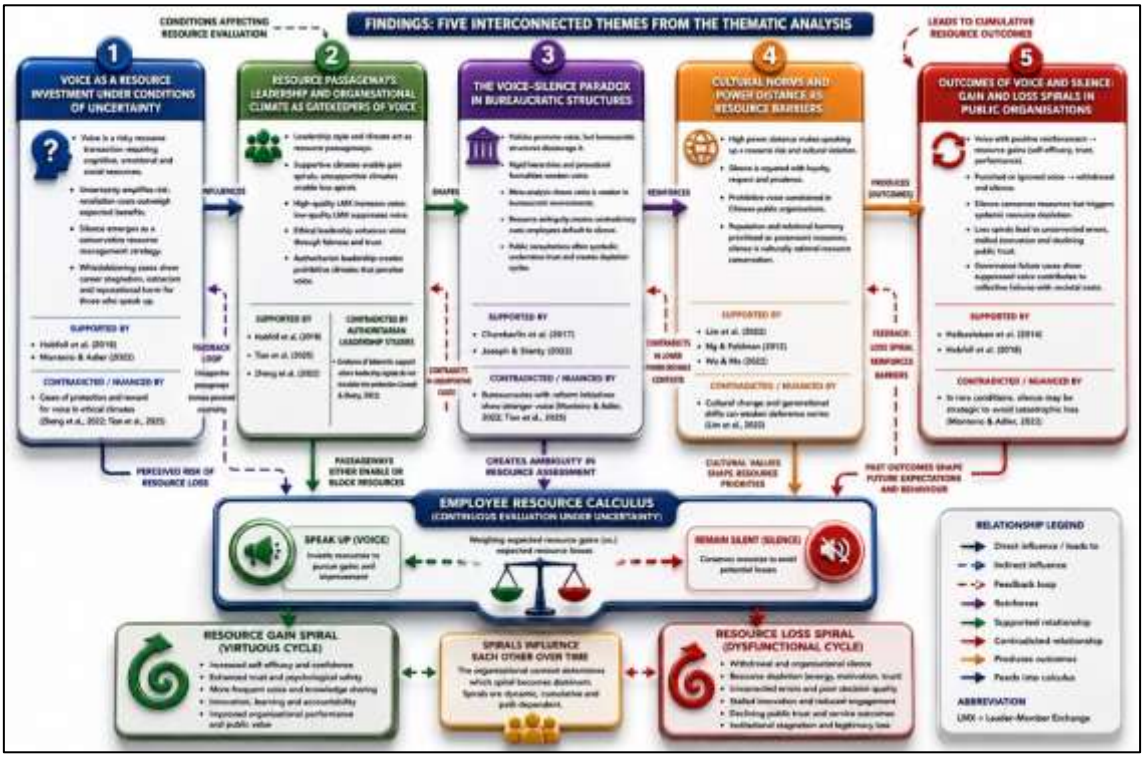


Fig. 1. Thematic synthesis and conceptual integration of employee VB through the COR perspective

Voice as a Resource Investment under Conditions of Uncertainty

A consistent finding across studies is that employees in public organizations perceive voice as a risky resource transaction. Unlike routine tasks, voice requires the discretionary expenditure of personal resources: cognitive effort (to frame issues constructively), emotional labour (to overcome fear of reprisal), and social capital (to maintain relationships while challenging authority). The uncertainty of outcomes amplifies this risk.

For instance, Monteiro and Adler (2022) found that civil servants in hierarchical bureaucracies weighed the potential gain of improving efficiency against the likely loss of social standing when raising concerns. Employees often suppress valuable ideas because the risk of retaliation outweighs the perceived benefits. From a COR perspective, this reflects conservative resource management: silence is a strategy to conserve resources in environments where voice does not reliably produce returns (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Observation-based insights reinforce this pattern. In many documented whistleblowing cases in the public sector, employees who attempted to expose inefficiencies or malpractice experienced career stagnation, ostracism, or reputational harm. These experiences support the COR prediction that the fear of losing resources discourages individuals from speaking out, even in serious situations (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Resource Passageways: Leadership and Organizational Climate as Gatekeepers of Voice

The analysis highlights that leadership style and organizational climate function as resource passageways (Hobfoll et al., 2018), determining whether voice is resource-enhancing or resource-depleting. In supportive climates, leaders act as facilitators of resource gain spirals: they validate employee input, reward proactive suggestions, and foster psychological safety. In unsupportive climates, leaders act as gatekeepers of loss, punishing or ignoring voice. Empirical studies confirm this duality. Tian et al. (2025) demonstrated that high-quality leader–member exchange relationships increased promotive voice in state-owned enterprises, while low-quality relationships suppressed it.

Ethical leadership amplifies employees' willingness to speak up by signalling fairness and trustworthiness (Zheng et al., 2022). Conversely, Zheng et al. (2022) repeatedly linked authoritarian leadership, prevalent in many public organizations, to prohibitive climates that penalised voice. This finding underscores that voice is not purely an individual choice but is profoundly conditioned by institutional passageways. Without resource-enabling pathways, even employees with abundant personal resources are unlikely to sustain vocal behaviour.

The Voice: Silence Paradox in Bureaucratic Structures

One of the most striking findings is the persistence of the voice–silence paradox in public organizations. While governments often emphasise transparency and employee input, the bureaucratic structure simultaneously discourages voice through rigid hierarchies and procedural formalities (Joseph & Shetty, 2022). Chamberlin et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis revealed that VB are significantly weaker in bureaucratic environments compared to more flexible organizational forms.

Public employees often face ambiguous or contradictory cues: official policies promote open dialogue, yet daily practices reinforce silence. This paradox reflects resource ambiguity: employees cannot accurately predict whether voice will yield gains or losses, leading them to default to silence as a safer option. Field observations further support this tension. Public consultations are frequently conducted as symbolic exercises, where employee contributions are noted but not integrated into policy. This practice erodes trust

and discourages future voice, demonstrating how systemic ambiguity creates resource depletion cycles (Joseph & Shetty, 2022).

Cultural Norms and Power Distance as Resource Barriers

A prominent cross-cultural theme is that voice is deeply mediated by cultural norms of deference and power distance. In high-power-distance societies, particularly in parts of Asia, speaking up against authority constitutes not only a resource risk but also a cultural violation (Lim et al., 2022; Ng & Feldman, 2012). Employees in such settings often equate silence with loyalty, respect, or prudence, reinforcing collective norms at the expense of innovation and accountability.

Studies in Chinese public organizations show that prohibitive voice faces significant constraints due to its easy interpretation as insubordination (Wu & Ma, 2022). In these contexts, COR dynamics intersect with cultural resource frames: reputation and relational harmony are treated as paramount resources, which employees prioritise over organizational improvement. Thus, silence is not merely fear-driven but culturally rational resource conservation.

Outcomes of Voice and Silence: Gain and Loss Spirals in Public Organizations

Finally, the findings emphasise the cumulative outcomes of voice and silence, conceptualised as gain-and-loss spirals. When employees voice and receive positive reinforcement, resource gains accumulate increased self-efficacy, enhanced trust, and improved organizational performance. These gains encourage further voice, creating virtuous spirals. Conversely, when voice is punished or ignored, employees withdraw. The resulting silence conserves personal resources and triggers systemic resource depletion: errors remain uncorrected, innovation stalls, and public trust declines. Halbesleben et al. (2014) argue that such loss spirals are particularly damaging in the public sector, where the consequences extend beyond the organization to citizens and society.

Observation-based analysis of public enquiries into governance failures, such as procurement scandals or service delivery breakdowns, frequently highlights a pattern of suppressed voice—employees were aware of problems but refrained from speaking up due to anticipated losses. These cases illustrate how resource dynamics at the individual level cascade into collective failures with profound societal costs. Taken together, the findings illuminate a resource-based logic for voice in public organizations. Employees' decisions to speak up or remain silent reflect a calculus of resource risk and gain. Leadership, climate, culture, and bureaucracy act as passageways that determine whether voice produces spirals of resource enrichment or depletion. Silence, rather than being pathological, emerges as a rational strategy of conservation in contexts where voice is consistently unrewarded or punished.

This synthesis contributes to the literature by redefining voice not merely as an outcome of psychological traits or contextual cues but as a strategic act of resource management embedded in the ecology of public organizations. It also underscores the urgency of redesigning public-sector institutions to reduce ambiguity, lower resource risks, and enable gain spirals of constructive voice.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the usefulness of the COR Theory as a unifying lens for explaining the persistent dilemmas of VB in public organizations. While earlier models of VB have emphasised

constructs such as psychological safety, leader-member exchange, or social exchange dynamics, these frameworks often fail to capture the deeper logic underpinning employee decisions to remain silent or speak up. By contrast, COR Theory provides a resource-centred explanation that views voice as both a potential site for resource investment and a potential trigger for resource depletion. Employees calculate whether voicing concerns or suggestions will protect, enhance, or undermine their existing resources such as job security, reputation, emotional stability, and career prospects. Public servants often choose silence because they perceive resource loss as disproportionately more damaging than equivalent resource gain. From this vantage point, silence should not be interpreted solely as disengagement or apathy but rather as a rational conservation strategy within bureaucratic environments where the balance between resource loss and gain is heavily skewed toward probable loss. Figure 2 illustrates the integrated resource dynamics framework explaining employee VB in public-sector organizations.

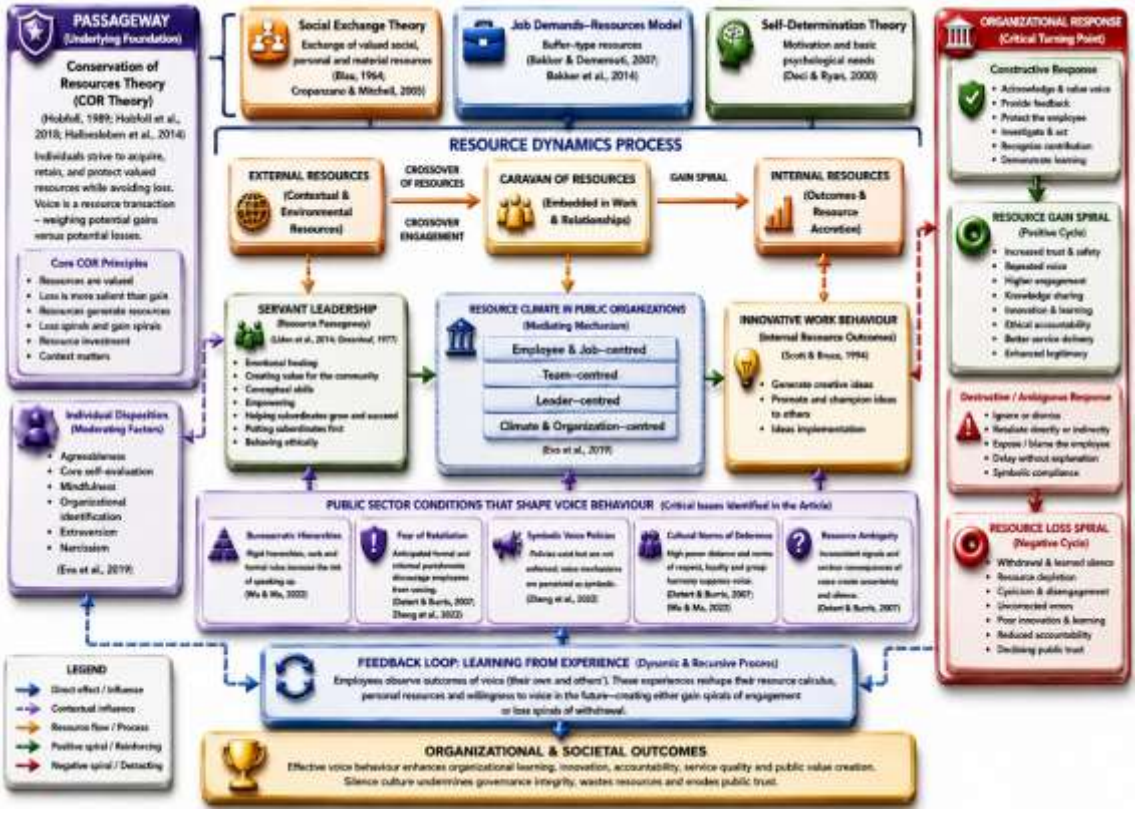


Fig.2. Integrated thematic framework of employee VB in public-sector organizations: A COR perspective.

Theoretically, this analysis extends the COR Theory into a domain where it has only recently begun to gain traction: the dynamics of VB. Although COR has long been applied to stress, burnout, and work engagement, its potential to explain proactive behaviours, such as voice, has been underdeveloped. The

present conceptualisation demonstrates how COR's foundational constructs, such as resource investment, resource spirals, and resource passageways, map directly onto the voice process. Voice is an investment of finite psychological and social resources, and the organizational response determines whether this investment yields gain spirals, such as increased confidence, recognition, and reputational capital, or loss spirals, such as withdrawal, diminished trust, and learnt silence. Leaders and institutional arrangements act as passageways that either facilitate resource enrichment or exacerbate resource depletion. In this way, COR Theory deepens theoretical understanding and reconciles longstanding contradictions in the voice literature, particularly the puzzle of why some employees consistently voices while others remain silent under similar conditions. By highlighting the role of personal resource reservoirs, the theory explains why individuals with abundant resilience, political skill, or self-efficacy may perceive voice as a viable investment, while those with depleted reservoirs rationally avoid the risk.

The insights gained also highlight the specificity of the public-sector context, where the asymmetry between voice-related resource gains and losses is particularly stark. Unlike in private firms, where innovative voices may be rewarded with recognition, financial bonuses, or promotions, the gains for public servants are often intangible or symbolic, while the risks are tangible and severe. Bureaucratic hierarchies, political oversight, and institutional inertia combine to make voice a high-cost, low-return endeavour. Therefore, public organizations amplify the calculus of resource protection, often adopting silence as the dominant adaptive strategy. This reality further emphasises the value of designing leadership practices and institutional mechanisms that shift the calculus by reducing potential losses and increasing potential gains from speaking out.

Practical implications flow directly from these theoretical insights. First, the findings stress the central role of leadership in shaping employees' perceptions of whether voice is resource-enriching or resource-draining. Leaders must be trained to act as resource amplifiers who encourage open dialogue, demonstrate non-retaliatory responses, and visibly follow up on voiced concerns. Leadership styles such as servant leadership, inclusive leadership, and ethical leadership create environments where employees see voice not as a dangerous gamble but as a pathway to resource accumulation. Second, organizational design must bridge the gap between symbolic compliance and substantive trust-building. Too often, public organizations establish formal voice channels that exist on paper but fail to protect their employees in practice. Confidentiality, legal safeguards, and streamlined procedures are necessary to ensure that voice channels are not themselves resource-depleting through bureaucratic inefficiency. Third, organizations must recognise the importance of managing resource spirals. The initial responses to employee voice are decisive: positive reinforcement sets in motion virtuous cycles of increasing voice, while neglect or retaliation initiates downward spirals of silence that can persist for years. To avoid long-term silence, public agencies should follow a rule that all first instances of voice must be recognised and acted upon. Finally, cultural sensitivity must inform strategies in global public organizations, as norms in collectivist or high-power distance cultures can shape how voice is perceived. Framing voice as an act of loyalty and responsibility to the collective, rather than confrontation, may align better with cultural expectations while still promoting open communication.

The policy implications are equally pressing. Because public organizations operate under conditions of political accountability and citizen trust, suppressing employee voice has far-reaching consequences that extend beyond organizational performance to democratic legitimacy and public service outcomes. COR Theory suggests that policymakers must view voice as a form of resource protection, not merely as a

communication mechanism. Strengthening legal whistleblower protections, embedding voice as a civic responsibility within civil service codes, and providing resource support, such as peer networks or counselling for employees who speak up, are essential steps. Moreover, leaders in public organizations should be evaluated not only based on traditional performance metrics but also based on their ability to create environments where employees feel safe and supported when voicing concerns.

Public organizations should adopt multi-level resource strategies that simultaneously build individual resilience, team-level trust, and organizational-level safeguards. Safe zones for experimentation with voice could be piloted, particularly in high-risk bureaucracies, to demonstrate that voicing ideas will not result in career damage. Voice should also be reframed to emphasise its contribution to public values, thereby linking individual acts of courage to collective outcomes for citizens and communities. Finally, organizations must remain vigilant for signals of resource depletion, such as rising silence, declining morale, or disengagement, and treat these as early warnings that voice-supported resources are failing.

Despite advances in policy and scholarship, critical issues remain unresolved in the practice of speaking within public organizations. Retaliation against whistleblowers continues to be widespread, undermining the credibility of formal protections. Cultural barriers persist, particularly in collectivist settings where voicing concerns is still perceived as disloyalty. Symbolic compliance undermines the effectiveness of reforms, as organizations install reporting systems without enforcement. Resource inequity exacerbates the problem, as lower-level employees, contract workers, and marginalised groups face greater risks of loss and fewer opportunities to gain. Moreover, the rise of digital surveillance has introduced new anxieties, with employees fearing that online expressions of concern may be monitored and punished. These challenges illustrate that fostering voice in the public sector requires not only procedural and policy reform but also deep institutional and cultural transformation. The theoretical and practical insights developed in this study provide a foundation for such transformation, but the path forward will require sustained commitment to reshaping organizational resource dynamics in ways that make voice a rational, rewarding, and protected choice for public servants.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This article has advanced a resource-based understanding of VB in public organizations by drawing on the COR Theory. The analysis demonstrates that employee voice cannot be understood solely as a matter of individual disposition or organizational climate but rather as a continuous process of resource evaluation, investment, and protection. Public servants calculate whether speaking up will conserve, deplete, or expand their resource reservoirs. Because the loss of resources is disproportionately more harmful than the gain of equivalent resources, the decision to remain silent often emerges as a rational choice within bureaucratic and politically exposed contexts. This explains the stubborn persistence of silence in the public sector despite formal reforms designed to encourage openness and accountability. By redefining voice as a resource calculus, COR Theory provides a unifying framework that not only explains variations in employee behaviour but also directs attention to the structural and cultural conditions that influence the perceived costs and benefits of speaking up.

The conceptual framework proposed in this study integrates three interlocking dimensions: personal resources, leadership as a resource passageway, and organizational structures as resource environments. At the individual level, personal resources such as resilience, political skill, psychological safety, and self-

efficacy determine whether an employee perceives voice as a feasible investment. Individuals with abundant personal resources may view voice as an opportunity to accumulate further resources, such as recognition, influence, or reputational capital. Conversely, employees with depleted resources are more likely to interpret voice as an intolerable risk. At the leadership level, managers act as critical passageways for resource transmission. Leaders who respond constructively to voice provide assurance that employees' investments will yield positive returns, whereas punitive or dismissive leaders amplify the risk of loss, thereby perpetuating silence. Finally, at the structural level, public sector organizations operate as resource environments that either amplify or constrain the outcomes of voice. Bureaucratic hierarchies, formal reporting systems, and political oversight often impose conditions of high risk and low return, which tilt the resource calculus toward silence. However, when organizational structures incorporate legal protections, safe reporting channels, and transparent accountability, they shift the balance toward resource gains. The framework thus emphasises that voice-based behaviour in the public sector emerges from the dynamic interplay between these three levels.

The practical implications of this framework are profound. Public organizations must move beyond symbolic reforms and instead redesign systems that materially alter the employee resource calculus. Training programs should focus on building individual resilience and self-efficacy, ensuring that employees feel capable of withstanding the psychological strain of voicing their concerns. Leadership development must prioritise non-retaliatory responses and foster servantly or inclusive leadership practices that frame voice as a valued contribution rather than a threat. At the structural level, robust whistleblower protections, transparent feedback loops, and visible organizational learning from voiced concerns are essential to signal that speaking up is rewarded rather than punished. Moreover, the resource framework calls attention to the necessity of addressing inequities. Employees in lower ranks, temporary contracts, or marginalised positions often face disproportionately higher costs for voicing their concerns and fewer opportunities to benefit. Therefore, public organizations should implement targeted protections for these vulnerable groups, ensuring that the risks of resource loss do not fall unevenly across the workforce.

The conclusion also draws attention to critical issues that remain unresolved in the practice of voice in public organizations. Retaliation against employees who raise concerns remains endemic, undermining trust in formal protections. Symbolic compliance continues to weaken reforms, as organizations introduce voice mechanisms without ensuring meaningful enforcement. Cultural barriers persist, particularly in societies with high power distance or collectivist orientations were speaking up is interpreted as disloyalty. The rapid digitalisation of public administration has introduced new dilemmas, with employees increasingly concerned that their online expressions of dissent or criticism will be monitored and sanctioned. These challenges reveal that fostering voice in the public sector requires not only procedural reforms but also cultural transformation. The resource-based perspective underscores that until employees experience consistent patterns of resource protection and gain from voicing concerns, silence will remain the rational choice. Thus, reform efforts must not only create voice channels but also ensure that their outcomes generate tangible and equitable resource returns.

Future research should deepen the application of COR Theory to VB by conducting longitudinal and comparative studies that capture the dynamic nature of resource spirals. Such studies could examine how initial organizational responses to voice shape long-term patterns of engagement, silence, and withdrawal. Qualitative work could explore the lived experiences of public servants navigating resource dilemmas, while cross-national studies could investigate how cultural and institutional contexts moderate the resource

calculus of voice. Methodologically, future research should integrate systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses with in-depth qualitative observations to provide a more holistic understanding of how resources drive or inhibit voice. Moreover, the role of digitalisation and hybrid work arrangements deserves careful attention, as the emergence of virtual communication channels both expands opportunities for voice and heightens anxieties about surveillance.

The conceptual contribution to this article lies in positioning the COR Theory as a unifying framework that reconciles competing perspectives on VB. By framing voice as a resource investment process, it explains why employees choose silence in the face of formal encouragement and why some individuals persist in voicing despite systemic risks. It provides a lens that connects micro-level experiences of fear and courage with macro-level institutional dynamics of accountability and reform. For practice, the framework provides a roadmap for designing interventions that simultaneously strengthen personal resources, reconfigure leadership responses, and transform organizational structures. For policy, it highlights the necessity of legal, cultural, and procedural safeguards to ensure that public servants perceive voice as rational, safe, and rewarding.

This study offers a comprehensive, resource-based account of VB in public organizations. It concludes that silence will remain a pervasive feature of bureaucratic life unless organizations fundamentally alter the resource calculus that employees employ when deciding whether to speak up. By situating voice within COR Theory, the article provides a powerful theoretical lens that not only advances scholarly understanding but also equips practitioners and policymakers with actionable insights. The proposed framework makes clear that fostering voice in the public sector requires sustained investment in individual, leadership, and structural resources, as well as vigilant attention to inequities and cultural contexts. Only through such a multi-level transformation can public organizations shift from a culture of silence to one of constructive voices, thereby enhancing accountability, learning, and ultimately the legitimacy of public service in democratic societies.

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8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

This research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, or commercial conflicts.

9. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Mohamad Nasaruddin Mahdzir: Conceptualization, investigation, project administration, writing original draft, and writing review and editing. Led the development of the research concept and theoretical direction of the study, drafted the Introduction, synthesised the Findings, developed the Conceptual Framework, integrated the theoretical perspectives, coordinated the overall manuscript preparation, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Nor Faridah Ahmad Roslan: Conducted the Literature Review, critically evaluated and synthesised the relevant scholarly evidence, contributed to the development of the theoretical background, and drafted the Recommendations and Conclusion, ensuring that the study's theoretical contributions, practical implications, and future research directions were clearly articulated. She also critically reviewed the manuscript for intellectual content and conceptual consistency.

Rohayu Abdul Ghani: Designed the Methodology, conducted the Thematic Analysis, contributed to the qualitative synthesis and interpretation of the reviewed literature, verified the analytical process, and critically reviewed the manuscript.

Zaleha Yazid: Led the development of the Discussion, interpreted the conceptual and practical implications of the findings, strengthened the theoretical integration and scholarly arguments, and critically reviewed and refined the manuscript prior to submission.

10. DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used **ChatGPT (OpenAI)** to assist with improving the clarity and academic style of the manuscript, refining conceptual explanations, enhancing the organization and coherence of the text, and supporting the development of conceptual figures and framework descriptions. **ATLAS.ti** was used to facilitate the organization, coding, thematic synthesis, and management of qualitative data during the narrative critical review. **Scholarcy** was used to support literature screening, summarization, and the extraction of key concepts from published sources to assist the evidence synthesis process. After using these tools, the authors critically reviewed, verified, and substantially revised all outputs to ensure their accuracy, consistency, and alignment with the original scholarly sources. All interpretations, thematic analyses, theoretical integration, conceptual framework development, and conclusions were undertaken by the authors, who accept full responsibility for the content, originality, and integrity of this publication.

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