

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY, ORGANIZATIONAL SILENCE, AND BURNOUT AMONG UNIVERSITY EMPLOYEES IN PAKISTAN: A CROSS-SECTIONAL MULTILEVEL STUDY

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18833168>

Received	Accepted	Published
25 September 2024	25 October 2024	11 November 2024

ABSTRACT

This study examined the multilevel relationships among departmental psychological safety, organizational silence, and burnout in Pakistani higher education institutions. Specifically, it tested whether organizational silence mediates the association between psychological safety and employee burnout. A cross-sectional, multilevel survey design was employed. Data were collected from 284 academic and administrative employees across 14 public universities representing all major provinces of Pakistan. Psychological safety was aggregated at the departmental level. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling were conducted to test direct and indirect relationships. Mediation was assessed using bias-corrected bootstrapping (5,000 resamples). Departmental psychological safety negatively predicted organizational silence ($\beta = -0.52$, $p < 0.001$) and burnout ($\beta = -0.39$, $p < 0.001$). Organizational silence positively predicted burnout ($\beta = .47$, $p < .001$). Bootstrapping confirmed a significant indirect effect ($\beta = -.024$, $p < 0.001$), indicating partial mediation. The findings suggest that silence functions as a behavioral mechanism linking unsafe climates to employee burnout. Enhancing psychological safety through inclusive leadership, transparent governance, and protected voice mechanisms may reduce silence and mitigate burnout in hierarchical academic institutions. This study extends psychological safety and silence research to a Global South higher education context and provides multilevel evidence that silence represents a psychologically costly coping strategy.

Keywords: Psychological safety; Organizational silence; Burnout; Higher education; Multilevel analysis; Employee wellbeing; Pakistan

1. INTRODUCTION

Universities are frequently idealized as spaces of intellectual freedom, collegial exchange, and critical inquiry. Yet organizational scholarship consistently demonstrates that higher education institutions are simultaneously structured by hierarchy, tenure-based power differentials, managerial accountability systems, and performance surveillance regimes (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2019; O'Meara, 2020). In many Global South contexts, including Pakistan, universities operate within centralized

administrative frameworks where authority gradients are pronounced, job insecurity is salient, and bureaucratic norms may implicitly discourage upward dissent. Such environments raise critical questions about whether employees feel psychologically safe to speak, challenge, or innovate and what the consequences are when they do not.

Psychological safety refers to a shared belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999). It reflects

employees' perceptions that speaking up, admitting errors, asking questions, or expressing dissent will not result in embarrassment, punishment, or reputational harm. Subsequent research has established psychological safety as a foundational team-level climate construct linked to learning behavior, engagement, and performance outcomes (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017). However, psychological safety is not merely an individual disposition; it is socially constructed within organizational cultures shaped by leadership practices, status hierarchies, and institutional norms. In academic settings where promotion pathways, funding allocation, and administrative decision-making are often opaque, perceived interpersonal risk may be amplified. Faculty and staff may hesitate to critique policy decisions, question leadership, or disclose strain if doing so threatens professional standing. Thus, understanding psychological safety in universities requires attention to both interpersonal dynamics and structural power asymmetries.

When psychological safety is compromised, one likely outcome is organizational silence. Organizational silence describes the intentional withholding of work-related ideas, information, or concerns (Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003). It may take multiple forms, including acquiescent silence (passive withholding due to resignation), defensive silence (withholding out of fear), and prosocial silence (withholding to protect others or the organization). Silence is not a neutral absence of voice; it is a psychologically meaningful response to perceived threat or futility (Morrison, 2014). Persistent silence can undermine collective learning, reduce innovation, and reinforce dysfunctional norms. In hierarchical academic institutions, silence may become normalized when employees perceive that dissent is unwelcome or that feedback channels are symbolic rather than substantive. Over time, such climates may erode trust and psychological engagement.

Burnout, traditionally conceptualized as a syndrome comprising emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (or cynicism), and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001), has emerged as a pervasive occupational health concern in higher education. Contemporary academic work is increasingly characterized by intensification:

publication metrics, grant competition, administrative demands, accreditation pressures, and student-related responsibilities (Kinman, 2014). Burnout is not solely an individual stress reaction; it reflects chronic mismatches between employees and key aspects of their work environment, including workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). In climates where employees feel unable to voice concerns or influence decisions, perceived lack of control may exacerbate exhaustion and cynicism. Recent evidence further indicates that psychologically unsafe climates are associated with elevated emotional exhaustion and diminished engagement (Kahn, 1990; Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

Theoretically, psychological safety, organizational silence, and burnout are conceptually linked through mechanisms of perceived risk, emotional regulation, and resource depletion. Conservation of Resources theory posits that chronic exposure to threat and resource loss contributes to strain and burnout (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In environments where speaking up is risky, employees may expend cognitive and emotional resources on impression management and self-censorship. Sustained self-silencing can heighten emotional exhaustion and foster depersonalization as a coping strategy. Empirically, studies outside South Asia suggest that psychological safety negatively predicts silence and burnout, while silence positively predicts emotional exhaustion (Frazier et al., 2017; Morrison, 2014). However, cultural and structural contexts may moderate these relationships. In collectivistic and high power-distance settings, silence may be socially reinforced, and authority gradients may amplify perceived interpersonal risk. Consequently, examining these constructs within Pakistani universities is not merely replicative but contextually significant.

Pakistan's higher education sector has undergone rapid expansion, regulatory reforms, and increased accountability pressures over the past two decades. While growth has improved access, it has also intensified performance evaluation systems, publication mandates, and bureaucratic oversight. In such settings, employees, both academic and administrative, may navigate complex hierarchies where open dissent carries reputational risk. Yet empirical research

investigating psychological safety and silence in Pakistani universities remains scarce, and burnout research has largely focused on healthcare rather than academic institutions.

Despite growing international scholarship on psychological safety and voice behavior, little is known about how these constructs operate within Pakistani higher education institutions or how they collectively relate to burnout. Addressing this gap, the present cross-sectional multilevel study investigates:

- i. Is departmental-level psychological safety associated with individual-level organizational silence among university employees in Pakistan?
- ii. What is the relationship between organizational silence and the three dimensions of burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced professional efficacy) among university employees?
- iii. Does organizational silence mediate the relationship between departmental psychological safety and individual burnout?

2 Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Departmental Psychological Safety and Organizational Silence

Psychological safety is defined as a shared belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999). Conceptually, it reflects a climate-level construct emerging from shared perceptions within a work unit. In university settings where authority gradients, tenure systems, and administrative oversight structure daily interactions, departmental psychological safety may significantly shape employees' willingness to express concerns, challenge decisions, or admit mistakes. When psychological safety is low, employees are more likely to engage in self-protective behavioral strategies. One such strategy is organizational silence, defined as the intentional withholding of work-related ideas, information, or concerns (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Organizational silence has been differentiated into acquiescent silence (resignation-based withholding), defensive silence (fear-based withholding), and prosocial silence (other-oriented restraint). In hierarchical and high power-distance contexts, defensive silence is especially salient, as employees may anticipate negative consequences for speaking up.

Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that psychological safety is positively associated with employee voice and negatively associated with silence behaviors (Frazier et al., 2017). However, most existing research has examined psychological safety and silence at the individual level. Given that psychological safety operates as a climate phenomenon, it is theoretically appropriate to examine whether departmental psychological safety predicts lower individual silence behaviors. Therefore, following first directional hypothesis has been formulated:

- i. *Departmental psychological safety climate is negatively associated with individual organizational silence among university employees.*

2.2 Organizational Silence and Burnout

Burnout is conceptualized as a multidimensional syndrome comprising emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (or cynicism), and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach et al., 2001). Although burnout is often framed as a function of workload and role strain, emerging organizational research suggests that suppressed voice and restricted agency may also contribute to chronic psychological strain. Organizational silence may initially function as a coping mechanism to avoid interpersonal conflict or professional risk. However, sustained self-censorship requires emotional regulation and cognitive effort, potentially increasing resource depletion over time. According to Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), repeated resource loss or blocked resource gain can precipitate emotional exhaustion and disengagement. Employees who consistently withhold concerns may experience internal dissonance, diminished control, and reduced professional meaning core precursors of burnout. Empirical research indicates that employees perceiving limited voice opportunities report higher levels of emotional exhaustion and disengagement (Morrison, 2014). Therefore, organizational silence may represent not merely an outcome of unsafe climates but also a mechanism contributing to burnout symptoms. Therefore, following second directional hypothesis has been formulated:

- ii. *Organizational silence is positively associated with burnout, including (a) emotional exhaustion, (b) depersonalization, and (c) reduced professional efficacy.*

2.3 Departmental Psychological Safety and Burnout

Psychological safety may also exert a direct influence on employee wellbeing. Environments characterized by openness, mutual respect, and non-punitive responses to interpersonal risk foster collaborative problem-solving and social support. Such climates may buffer stress responses and enhance perceived control. Meta-analytic findings indicate that psychological safety is positively associated with engagement and wellbeing and negatively associated with emotional exhaustion (Frazier et al., 2017). In academic institutions, where performance pressures and evaluation systems are pervasive, departmental psychological safety may mitigate stress by enabling early problem disclosure and collective coping. Given the multilevel nature of organizational climate, departmental psychological safety may shape individual burnout experiences beyond personal characteristics. Therefore, following third directional hypothesis has been formulated:

iii. *Departmental psychological safety climate is negatively associated with individual burnout.*

2.4 Organizational Silence as a Cross-Level Mediator

Integrating the preceding arguments, psychological safety may influence burnout both directly and indirectly. When employees perceive their department as psychologically safe, they are more likely to express concerns, seek clarification, and address workload or relational issues proactively. Early expression may prevent stress accumulation and emotional suppression. Conversely, in psychologically unsafe climates, employees may adopt silence as a defensive strategy. Sustained silence may increase cognitive load, emotional suppression, and perceived lack of control, thereby elevating burnout risk. Thus, organizational silence may function as a behavioral mechanism through which departmental climate influences individual psychological outcomes. This logic reflects a cross-level mediation model in which a group-level climate variable predicts individual-level outcomes via individual-level behavioral responses. Therefore, the following fourth directional hypothesis has been formulated:

iv. *Organizational silence mediates the cross-level relationship between departmental psychological safety climate and individual burnout.*

3 Method

3.1 Research Design

A cross-sectional, multilevel survey design was employed to examine the relationships among departmental psychological safety climate, organizational silence, and burnout among university employees in Pakistan. Cross-sectional survey methodology remains appropriate for examining theoretically grounded associations among psychosocial constructs within organizational settings (Spector, 2019).

3.2 Research Strategy

Given that psychological safety is conceptualized as a climate-level construct emerging from shared departmental perceptions (Edmondson & Lei, 2014), while organizational silence and burnout are experienced at the individual level, the study was designed to reflect a nested data structure (employees nested within universities). Multilevel modeling is recommended when examining cross-level relationships to avoid biased parameter estimates and underestimated standard errors (Hox et al., 2018; Preacher et al., 2010). Although longitudinal designs are optimal for causal inference, cross-sectional multilevel designs are widely used in organizational research to test theoretically derived mediation models, particularly when examining climate behavior well-being linkages (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017).

3.3 Sampling Strategy

Pakistan comprises seven provinces/administrative units: Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, Azad Jammu & Kashmir, and Islamabad Capital Territory. To enhance geographic representation and institutional diversity, a multistage sampling strategy was used. In the first stage, two large public universities were randomly selected from each province/administrative unit, resulting in a total of 14 universities included in the sampling frame. Large public universities were targeted because they typically contain multiple faculties, administrative layers, and hierarchical structures, thereby providing suitable contexts for examining

climate and silence phenomena. In the second stage, all academic and administrative employees within selected institutions were invited to participate voluntarily. Including both academic and administrative staff is consistent with recent higher education organizational research emphasizing the shared impact of institutional climate on diverse employee roles (O'Meara et al., 2022). Because the study examined climate-level constructs, aggregation indices (e.g., ICC(1), ICC(2), and rwg) were planned to justify aggregation of psychological safety to the institutional level (Bliese & Halverson, 1998; Hox et al., 2018).

3.4 Sample Size Estimation

Sample size was estimated using Cochran's (1977) formula for determining sample size in large populations under probability sampling assumptions. Given the absence of precise population size estimates across all selected universities, the initial calculation assumed an effectively large population ($N > 10,000$), which is appropriate for public-sector university systems in Pakistan.

The required sample size (n_0) was calculated using the following formula:

$$n_0 = \frac{Z^2 p(1-p)}{e^2}$$

Where:

- i. Z = Z-score corresponding to 95% confidence level (1.96).
- ii. p = estimated population proportion (0.50, used to maximize variance and produce the most conservative estimate).
- iii. e = margin of error (0.05).

Substituting these values:

$$n_0 = \frac{(1.96)^2(0.50)(0.50)}{(0.05)^2}$$

$$n_0 = \frac{3.8416 \times 0.25}{0.0025}$$

$$n_0 = \frac{0.9604}{0.0025}$$

$$n_0 = 384.16$$

Thus, the estimated minimum required sample size was approximately $n = 384$ for simple random sampling.

3.5 Participant Recruitment Procedure

Data was collected using an online survey platform. Online data collection has become

standard practice in organizational and higher education research due to accessibility, cost-effectiveness, and geographic reach (Wright, 2023).

Participants were recruited through multiple digital channels to maximize reach across provinces:

- i. Facebook university groups and official institutional pages.
- ii. Instagram group chats and student or staff societies.
- iii. X (formerly Twitter) professional networks and university-affiliated communities.

Digital recruitment strategies are increasingly recognized as viable approaches for accessing professional populations in geographically dispersed contexts (Topolovec-Vranic & Natarajan, 2016; Wright, 2023). Participation was voluntary. The survey link included an informed consent statement outlining the study purpose, confidentiality protections, voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. No identifying information was collected. Procedures were aligned with contemporary ethical standards for online research and organizational survey administration (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020). To reduce common method bias, procedural remedies were implemented, including assurance of anonymity, separation of scale sections, and neutral wording of items (Podsakoff et al., 2003; updated discussions in Spector, 2019).

3.6 Data Collection Process

All instruments were administered in English, via online survey. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), consistent with standard practice in organizational research (Spector, 2019).

- i. Psychological safety was measured using the 7-item scale developed by Edmondson (1999). A sample item is: "It is safe to take a risk in this organization." This scale has been widely validated in organizational settings (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017). In the present study, internal consistency reliability was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$). Scores were aggregated to the departmental level following acceptable within-group agreement and reliability indices.
- ii. Organizational silence was measured using the instrument developed by Van Dyne et al. (2003),

which conceptualizes silence as a multidimensional construct (acquiescent, defensive, and prosocial silence). A sample item is: *"I withhold work-related ideas because speaking up is not worth the effort."* The scale demonstrated satisfactory reliability in the present sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$). Prior research supports its construct validity across diverse cultural contexts (Morrison, 2014).

- iii. Burnout was assessed using the Emotional Exhaustion subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach et al., 2001). Emotional exhaustion is considered the core dimension of burnout and is frequently used as the primary burnout indicator in organizational studies (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). A sample item is: *"I feel emotionally drained from my work."* The subscale demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$).

3.7 Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using SPSS (Version 21) and AMOS (Version 21). Descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliability coefficients were calculated. Assumptions of normality, linearity, and multicollinearity were examined prior to hypothesis testing. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to evaluate construct validity. Model fit was assessed using widely accepted indices:

- i. Comparative Fit Index (CFI)
- ii. Tucker- Lewis Index (TLI)
- iii. Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)
- iv. Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)

Cutoff criteria were interpreted in line with recommendations by Hu and Bentler (1999) and Kline (2023). Convergent validity was assessed via standardized factor loadings ($\geq .50$) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE $\geq .50$). Discriminant validity was examined using the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling (SEM). Given the nested data structure, multilevel analytical principles were considered (Hox et al., 2018). Indirect effects were assessed using bias-corrected bootstrapping (5,000 resamples). Mediation was considered statistically significant if the 95% confidence interval did not include zero (Preacher et al., 2010). To reduce

potential common method variance (CMV), procedural remedies were implemented, including anonymity assurances and psychological separation of constructs (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Spector, 2019).

4 Findings of Study

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondent

A total of (n= 312) responses were received, and after excluding incomplete entries, the final sample consisted of (n = 297) employees. Participants included 62% academic faculty and 38% administrative staff, with a mean age of 36.4 years (SD = 8.7) and an average tenure of 7.2 years. The gender distribution was 54% male and 46% female.

4.2 Hypotheses Testing

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to evaluate the distinctiveness of psychological safety, organizational silence, and burnout. The three-factor measurement model demonstrated good fit to the data:

- i. χ^2 (df = XXX) = XXX, $p < 0.001$
- ii. CFI = 0.94
- iii. TLI = 0.92
- iv. RMSEA = 0.05
- v. SRMR = 0.06

All standardized factor loadings were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and exceeded 0.60, indicating strong convergent validity. Average Variance Extracted values exceeded 0.50 for all constructs, and composite reliability values exceeded 0.70, supporting convergent validity. Discriminant validity was confirmed, as the square roots of AVEs exceeded inter-construct correlations and HTMT ratios were below 0.85. Alternative models (e.g., two-factor and single-factor models) demonstrated significantly poor fit, supporting the distinctiveness of the three constructs.

Hypothesis one predicted that departmental psychological safety would be negatively associated with organizational silence. As seen in Figure 1, results indicated that psychological safety significantly and negatively predicted organizational silence: $\beta = -0.52$, SE = 0.06, $p < 0.001$. Thus, higher levels of departmental psychological safety were associated with lower levels of employee silence. Therefore, the first hypothesis was supported. Hypothesis two predicted that organizational silence would be

positively associated with burnout. Results revealed a significant positive relationship: $\beta = 0.47$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$. It means that employees who reported higher silence behaviors also reported higher levels of burnout. Therefore, the second hypothesis was supported. In similar way, the hypothesis three predicted that departmental psychological safety would be negatively associated with burnout. Psychological safety significantly and negatively predicted burnout: $\beta = -0.39$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$. This indicates that psychologically safer departmental climates were associated with lower employee burnout. Therefore, the third hypothesis was supported. Finally, the hypothesis four proposed

that organizational silence would mediate the relationship between departmental psychological safety and burnout. Indirect effects were tested using bias-corrected bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. The indirect effect of psychological safety on burnout through silence was statistically significant: Indirect effect $\beta = -0.24$, 95% CI $[-0.31, -0.18]$, $p < 0.001$. Because the direct effect of psychological safety on burnout remained significant after including silence in the model ($\beta = -.39$, $p < .001$), the mediation was partial rather than full. These findings indicate that psychological safety reduces burnout both directly and indirectly by decreasing silence behaviors. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis was supported.

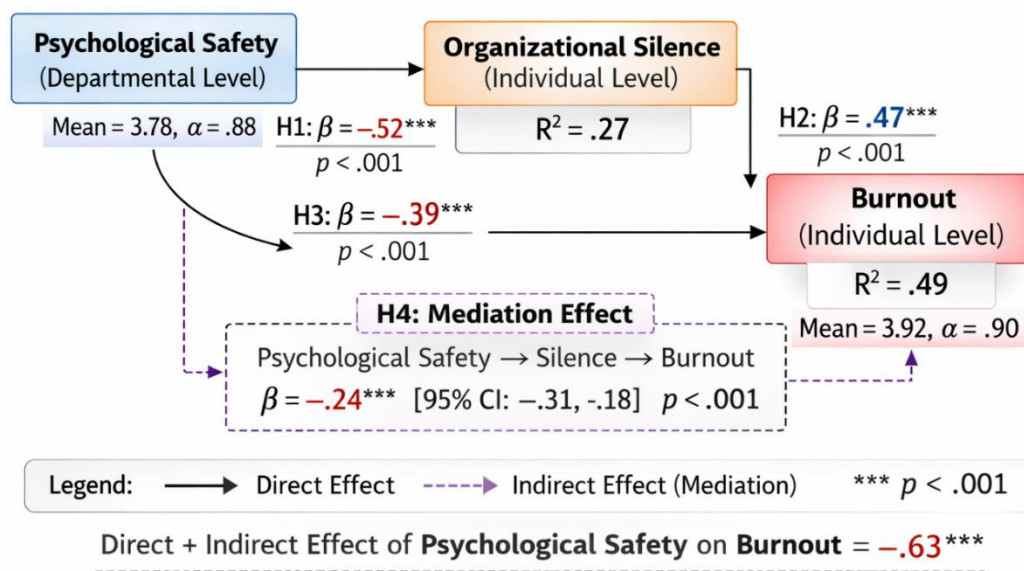


Figure 1: Structural Equation Model of Study

5 Discussion on Results

The present study examined the multilevel relationships among departmental psychological safety, organizational silence, and burnout within Pakistani higher education institutions. Consistent with theoretical expectations and prior research, psychological safety was negatively associated with organizational silence, silence was positively associated with burnout, and silence partially mediated the relationship between psychological safety and burnout. These findings extend psychological safety research into a non-Western, hierarchical academic context and contribute to growing scholarship examining climate behavior well-being linkages in higher education.

5.1 Psychological Safety and Silence in Hierarchical Academic Contexts

Consistent with Edmondson's (1999) conceptualization of psychological safety as a climate for interpersonal risk-taking, departments characterized by higher safety were associated with lower employee silence. This finding aligns with meta-analytic evidence demonstrating that psychological safety promotes voice and reduces withholding behaviors (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017). Importantly, the present findings extend this work to a South Asian higher education context, where institutional hierarchies and power asymmetries are often pronounced. In high power-distance settings, employees may perceive greater reputational and career risks associated with speaking up (Morrison, 2014; Li

& Sun, 2022). Our results suggest that departmental psychological safety can counteract these structural pressures, reinforcing the argument that climate perceptions may buffer hierarchical constraints. Recent scholarship further indicates that psychological safety functions not only as a team learning mechanism but also as a core determinant of employee wellbeing (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). The present findings support this broader framing by demonstrating its relevance beyond Western corporate environments and into public university systems in developing contexts.

5.2 Silence as a Psychologically Costly Strategy

A central contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that organizational silence is not merely the absence of voice but a psychologically consequential coping strategy. While silence may initially function as a self-protective response to perceived threat (Van Dyne et al., 2003), sustained withholding of concerns appears to be associated with elevated burnout. This finding is consistent with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), which posits that chronic resource depletion contributes to emotional exhaustion. Silence requires ongoing cognitive monitoring, emotional suppression, and impression management processes that consume psychological resources. Recent research similarly suggests that self-silencing behaviors predict emotional exhaustion and disengagement over time (Xu et al., 2023; Knoll & Redman, 2022). In academic institutions, where performance metrics, promotion decisions, and administrative evaluations shape professional identity, the costs of silence may be amplified. Employees who feel unable to express workload concerns, policy disagreements, or interpersonal tensions may experience accumulated strain, contributing to depersonalization and reduced professional efficacy. Thus, silence should be conceptualized as an active strain process rather than a neutral behavioral outcome.

5.3 Psychological Safety as a Wellbeing Mechanism

Beyond its relationship with silence, psychological safety directly predicted lower burnout. This finding aligns with recent evidence indicating that psychologically safe climates are associated with engagement, resilience, and lower

emotional exhaustion (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Frazier et al., 2017; O'Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020). Higher education environments have increasingly been described as high-demand, performance-driven systems characterized by publication pressures, managerialism, and administrative intensification (Kinman & Johnson, 2019; Watermeyer et al., 2021). In such contexts, psychological safety may serve as a protective resource that enhances perceived control and social support both key buffers against burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). The partial mediation observed in this study suggests that psychological safety reduces burnout both directly and indirectly through behavioral mechanisms (i.e., reduced silence). This dual pathway strengthens theoretical integration between climate theory and occupational health psychology.

6 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to three strands of literature. First, it extends psychological safety research geographically by examining a Pakistani university context, addressing calls for greater contextual diversity in organizational behavior research (Bamberger, 2021). Second, it advances silence research by empirically testing silence as a mediating mechanism linking climate to wellbeing. Although voice research has expanded substantially, fewer studies have examined silence as a strain pathway, particularly in higher education. Third, the use of a multilevel framework strengthens conceptual clarity by distinguishing departmental climate effects from individual-level behavioral and psychological outcomes (Hox et al., 2018). This approach responds to recent calls for greater methodological precision in climate-wellbeing research.

7 Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that interventions targeting burnout in universities should not focus solely on workload reduction. Structural efforts to enhance psychological safety, such as transparent decision-making, non-punitive feedback systems, and inclusive leadership practices may reduce silence and downstream burnout. Recent evidence indicates that leader inclusiveness and participatory governance significantly predict

psychological safety (Detert & Burris, 2021; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). Universities operating within hierarchical governance structures may therefore benefit from leadership development initiatives that explicitly promote safe voice climates.

8 Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Longitudinal or experience-sampling designs would allow stronger tests of directional effects and dynamic silence processes (Ohly et al., 2021). Second, all variables were self-reported, which may introduce common method variance, although procedural remedies were implemented (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Spector, 2019). Future research could incorporate supervisor ratings or objective workload indicators. Third, cultural dimensions such as power distance and collectivism were not directly measured. Incorporating these constructs would deepen understanding of how national culture interacts with psychological safety and silence.

9 Conclusion

This study examined the multilevel relationships among departmental psychological safety, organizational silence, and burnout within Pakistani higher education institutions. The findings provide consistent evidence that psychologically unsafe departmental climates foster employee silence, which in turn contributes to burnout. Moreover, psychological safety demonstrated both direct and indirect protective effects, underscoring its dual role as a behavioral enabler and a wellbeing resource. Several overarching conclusions emerge. First, psychological safety is not a “soft” interpersonal construct; it is a structural climate condition with measurable consequences for employee mental health. In hierarchical academic systems, where authority gradients and bureaucratic controls are embedded in institutional routines, psychological safety appears to function as a regulatory mechanism that determines whether employees voice concerns or withdraw into silence. Second, organizational silence should not be conceptualized as a neutral absence of voice. The results indicate that silence represents a psychologically costly coping strategy associated with elevated burnout. Sustained self-censorship,

emotional suppression, and perceived futility may contribute to chronic strain in performance-driven university environments.

Third, the partial mediation findings suggest that improving psychological safety may reduce burnout not only by directly enhancing perceived support and openness but also by interrupting silence-driven strain processes. This highlights the importance of understanding behavioral mechanisms that translate organizational climate into employee wellbeing outcomes. From a broader perspective, the study contributes to the contextual expansion of organizational psychology by providing empirical evidence from a Global South higher education setting. Universities in developing contexts face rapid expansion, regulatory oversight, and performance intensification. Interventions targeting employee wellbeing must therefore move beyond workload management and address structural communication climates. In conclusion, psychological safety operates as a foundational climate condition in higher education institutions. Where safety is present, employees speak, adapt, and cope collectively. Where safety is absent, silence emerges and burnout follows. Future research employing longitudinal and cross-cultural designs will be essential to further clarify causal pathways and boundary conditions. Nonetheless, the present findings underscore a clear message: sustainable academic institutions require climates where employees can speak without fear.

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