

Linking organizational cynicism to prosocial voice and defensive silence through the mediating role of bullying at work

Bullying at
work

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of organizational cynicism on prosocial voice and defensive silence and to verify the mediating role of workplace bullying in these relationships.

Design/methodology/approach – A cross-sectional survey design with a sample of 205 individuals was used in this study.

Findings – The hypotheses were confirmed as organizational cynicism plays a significant and negative influence on prosocial voice and a significant and positive influence on defensive silence. In addition, workplace bullying partially mediates both relationships.

Originality/value – This study contributes to a deeper understanding of organizational cynicism and workplace bullying influences on prosocial voice and defensive silence. It investigates a relationship that, to the best of the authors' knowledge, has not been studied yet. It also contributes to the discussion regarding the close relationship between prosocial voice and defensive silence.

Keywords Organizational cynicism, Bullying, Harassment, Mobbing, Prosocial voice, Defensive silence

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Nowadays, organizations are facing new challenges, such as reconciling the employees' needs and expectations with the organizations' goals, particularly regarding financial

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performance, employee well-being and sustainability. This situation has become increasingly critical following the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergence of macro phenomena such as great resignation, quiet quitting or financial independence, retire earlier (FIRE). Alongside these buzzwords, the new ways of working, such as teleworking, combined with new career types are intensifying these organizational challenges.

In this current social and economic context, organizational cynicism has emerged as a critical phenomenon that needs further analysis. [Yu and Liu \(2023\)](#) studied the relationship between professional isolation, cynicism and task performance of remote workers during COVID-19's lockdowns. The results suggested that organizational cynicism mediates the relationship between professional isolation and task performance. In the same line, [Öztürk et al. \(2023\)](#) published a conceptual paper pointing the main similarities and differences between this post-COVID-19 tendency called "quiet quitting" and some other constructs, one of them is organizational cynicism. Thus, this current awareness of this construct is in line with [Dean et al. \(1998\)](#) approach as the authors stated that change management seems to engender cynicism because individuals may find organizational management incongruent and inconsistent; thus, they create a cynical attitude towards the organization mainly based on the individuals' beliefs that organizations lack integrity, creating negative feelings towards it and behaving accordingly, by engaging on judgemental and critical actions towards the organization (e.g. [Brandes et al., 1999](#); [Dean et al., 1998](#)). This assumption was recently studied by [Sguera et al. \(2022\)](#) who questioned if organizational justice and identification can buffer organizational cynicism in adverse context of organizational change. Although studies regarding organizational cynicism are increasing, several authors (e.g. [Chiaburu et al., 2013](#); [Wanous et al., 2000](#); [Sguera et al., 2022](#)) have been highlighting that more studies are needed to foster a more comprehensive knowledge about organizational cynicism's antecedents, consequents and mediators, mainly in these adverse times ([Sguera et al., 2022](#)).

In this sense, besides understanding the presence of organizational cynicism in work settings, it is also imperative to understand employees' behaviour. Previous studies already established that, when individuals' perceptions of organizational cynicism increase, it seems to also increase employees' negative attitudes and behaviours (e.g. [Brandes et al., 1999](#); [Nemr and Liu, 2021](#); [Sguera et al., 2022](#)). However, studies relating organizational cynicism to employees' voice and silence are scarce.

Based on [Van Dyne et al. \(2003\)](#) proposal, voice is defined as the individuals' deliberate decisions to express opinions about the organization, whereas silence refers to the individual's deliberate decision to withhold opinions. Thus, both constructs focus on the employees' intentional responses to their evaluation of the organizational setting. We will focus our analysis on two distinct perspectives of both constructs, analyzing the defensive motives to withhold ideas – defensive silence – and the employees' effort to, constructively, restore the relationship with the organization – prosocial voice. Adding these different dimensions will allow us to have a broader knowledge of employees' reactions to organizational cynicism. In addition, we also aim to contribute to the discussion regarding the nature of silence and voice, as [Hao and colleagues \(2022\)](#) stated that more studies using both constructs and sharing the same predictor are needed to conclude if those antecedents play the same, or different, roles in predicting silence and voice. Thus, the first goal of the present study is to investigate the influence of organizational cynicism on defensive silence and prosocial voice.

The World Health Organization ([World Health Organization, 2015](#)) attested that bullying at work is a global phenomenon and is a critical stressor that has serious repercussions on employees' mental health and organizational performance. Recent studies have been reinforcing this statement with previous research suggesting that when individuals perceive they are being victims of bullying, they experience psychological, physical, occupational and

family-domain distress such as depression or anxiety, long-term sickness absence, psychosomatic complaints, family conflicts, higher turnover intentions, performance among other outcomes (for a revision, see [Boudrias et al., 2021](#)).

Thus, understanding if when employees have negative emotions towards the organization, based on their beliefs the organization is incongruent and inconsistent, those beliefs lead to higher perceptions of workplace bullying, and if this bullying perception leads employees to constructively speak up to restore the relationship or defensively withhold ideas to protect themselves, allow us to understand if workplace bullying acts as a explaining mechanism of the relationship between organizational cynicism and prosocial voice and defensive silence. Therefore, our second goal is to investigate the mediating role of bullying in the relationship between organizational cynicism and prosocial voice and defensive silence. To the best of our knowledge, no studies were found to relate those constructs.

Literature review and hypothesis development

Organizational cynicism

Organizational cynicism refers to a negative attitude, beliefs, thoughts, feelings and behaviours towards both the organization itself and/or those who have decision-making power in it ([Naus et al., 2007](#)). This negative attitude is the result of employees' perceptions regarding organization malfeasance, incongruence ([Chiaburu et al., 2013](#)) and lack of fairness, honesty and sincerity ([Brandes et al., 1999](#)). When employees believe that organizational decisions are based on self-interests and hidden agendas, and people are unreliable and inconsistent in their actions, it is less likely that employees accept organizational strategy and decisions and more likely they assume a cynical posture that can be manifested through feelings of contempt, shame, angry, criticisms, sarcastic humour, mocking organizational initiatives publicly, pessimistic predictions, among others (e.g. [Dean et al., 1998](#); [Brandes et al., 1999](#)).

Thus, the established theoretical framework proposes that organizational cynicism comprises three dimensions. The cognitive dimension reflects the employees' beliefs that the organization lacks integrity. The affective dimension refers to the negative feelings employees experience when they perceive these low levels of integrity and high levels of incongruence. Some examples are frustration, disillusionment and distrust towards the organization and its management. The behavioural dimension relates to the employees' judgemental manifestations towards the organization that is aligned with their beliefs (cognitive dimension) and their feelings (affective dimension).

Prosocial voice and defensive silence

The study related to voice started with the work of [Hirschman \(1970\)](#) when the author proposed a set of responses to declining satisfaction. The EVL model comprises leaving the relationship (exit), speaking up (voice) or waiting and doing nothing (loyalty). This third response, loyalty, is the closest to the first approach to silence when the author clearly states that being loyal is to suffer in silence ([Hirschman, 1970](#)). Based on this approach, [Farrell \(1983\)](#) proposed the EVLN model to explain declining job satisfaction in organizations. Exit is the active/destructive response, voice is active/constructive, loyalty is passive/constructive and neglect is the passive/destructive response.

In 2003, [Dyne et al.](#) presented a conceptual proposal that stated that voice and silence are distinct constructs, and the absence of voice does not mean the presence of silence. For the authors, what distinguishes silence and voice is not the presence or absence of speaking up, but the individuals' motivation to withhold versus express ideas, suggestions and opinions about work-related topics ([Dyne et al., 2003](#)). Thus, voice is defined as the individual's

deliberate decision to express information. Employee silence is the individual's deliberate decision to withhold information as this may vary according to the individual's motives (Dyne *et al.*, 2003).

Based on Dyne *et al.* (2003) approach, if the individual is passive and its motives are based on resignation and disengagement, then acquiescent voice and acquiescent silence emerge. If the individuals are active but act based on fear and self-protected motives, then a defensive voice and defensive silence emerge. If individuals are others-orientated and focus on cooperative behaviours, then prosocial voice and prosocial silence will emerge. This perspective has been enhanced by other authors as recently Hao *et al.* (2022) presented a meta-analysis on employee silence and stated that, although both constructs share some antecedents and consequents, meta-analytic results have shown that the correlation between voice and silence is negative and weak (Sherf *et al.*, 2021; Hao *et al.*, 2022). In this study, we started with the assumption that employees are active, and we have studied the self-protection motive through defensive silence and the cooperation motive through prosocial voice.

Prosocial voice has been studied as a positively intended and active behaviour as it has been framed on the organizational citizenship behaviour theory (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003). The authors defined voice as non-required, but conscious, behaviour that underlines the expression of change-oriented information to improve and change rather than purely criticize the situation. In this sense, it aims to benefit other stakeholders. As for the relationship between organizational cynicism and organizational citizenship behaviours, a recent study performed by Nemr and Liu (2021) suggested that organizational cynicism may act as a possible moderator between ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behaviours as the relationship is weaker for employees with high levels of organizational.

The influence of organizational cynicism on prosocial voice has been scarce (Chiaburu *et al.*, 2013). However, Ng and Feldman (2012) published a meta-analysis on employee voice behaviours and studied a set of organizational stressors such as fear of retaliation, affective detachment from organizations, organizational disloyalty or organizational disidentification. The authors stated that, according to resource conservation theory, employees will be less likely to engage in voice behaviour when they perceive their organizational environments are stressful because individuals tend to focus on coping rather than use their energy to improve the environment or to change-oriented ideas (Burriss *et al.*, 2008). Following this approach, the authors confirmed the hypothesis that organizational stressors and strains were negatively related to voice. More recently, a study by Sun *et al.* (2022) addressed the mediating role of cynicism on the relationship between abusive supervision and promotive (prosocial) and prohibitive voice. Regarding the promotive voice, the authors concluded that cynicism is negatively related to promotive voice and mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and promotive voice. On the contrary, the results seem to suggest a non-significant relationship between cynicism and prohibitive voice. These results reinforce the need to continue studying the different dimensions of voice.

Based on the previous assumptions, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. Organizational cynicism negatively influences prosocial voice.

The influence of organizational cynicism on employee silence is already established. In the meta-analysis on the antecedents and outcomes of employee silence (Hao *et al.*, 2022), the authors confirmed the hypothesis that organizational cynicism is positively related to employee silence. Zhang *et al.* (2019) reached the same conclusion as they studied the mediating role of organizational cynicism in the relationship between family support and

employee silence. Even though the authors studied employee silence as a unidimensional construct not specifying the motive underlying the behaviour, they stated that, when employees perceive a cynical and unethical work environment, they tend to withhold suggestions and ideas. As expected, the authors confirmed the positive relationship between organizational cynicism and employee silence. Moreover, [Elhanafy and Ebrahim \(2022\)](#) also found a positive association between organizational cynicism and silence. However, in this particular case, the regression was not established. [Al-Abrow \(2022\)](#) also confirmed the link between organizational cynicism and silence, as the author studied the mediating role of cynicism in the relationship between perceived organisational politics and silence. On the other hand, [Lee et al. \(2023\)](#) studied both constructs; however, the authors defended that acquiescent and defensive silence may endorse organizational cynicism. In fact, the authors propose that organizational politics may lead to both silences, which may boost organizational cynicism, having confirmed their hypothesis.

The previous statements reinforce that, although without consensus (e.g. [Lee et al., 2023](#)) and need to foster more research on the topic (e.g. [Hao et al., 2022](#)), based on previous assumptions (e.g. [Hao et al., 2022](#); [Zhang et al., 2019](#); [Al-Abrow, 2022](#); [Elhanafy and Ebrahim, 2022](#)), research hypothesis can be formulated:

H2. Organizational cynicism positively influences defensive silence.

The mediating effect of bullying in the relationship between organizational cynicism and prosocial voice and defensive silence. Research about bullying at work is relatively recent as it started in the late 1980s in the Nordic countries ([Zapf and Einarsen, 2001](#)). Since then, it has increasing attention, spreading all over the world. Called bullying in English-speaking countries, harassment in French-speaking countries and mobbing in some European countries, mainly those that are Scandinavian and German-speaking countries ([Einarsen et al., 2020](#)). Although there are slight differences in nature, based on [Einarsen and colleagues \(2020\)](#) suggestion, we will use the terms interchangeably. Generally, it refers to “the persistent exposure to interpersonal aggression and mistreatment from colleagues, superiors or subordinates” ([Einarsen et al., 2020](#)).

Thus, bullying is presented in settings where the employee is repeatedly exposed to negative acts from colleagues, superiors or subordinates ([Einarsen et al., 2020](#)). [Zapf and Einarsen \(2001, p. 370\)](#) presented some examples of negative acts such as the “victim being teased, badgered, and insulted”, excluded, isolated, humiliated, intimidated, punished ([Einarsen et al., 2020](#)) or even object of verbal or even physical attacks that can be more, or less, subtle. In addition, to better understand the nature of such a process, [Einarsen et al. \(2020\)](#) introduced three main features. Firstly, its frequency, whereas it is considered bullying when the negative acts occur frequently, for a long period of time and with the same target. If a negative act towards an employee is a single and isolated act, then the victim is facing uncivil behaviour ([Lim and Cortina, 2005](#)). Therefore, bullying occurs when the victim faces such acts on a regular basis, which negatively impacts his well-being and causes harm. The authors suggest that, more than studying the negative act *per se*, it is important to also focus on its frequency, duration and patterning ([Einarsen et al., 2020](#)). Secondly, the authors highlighted the imbalance of power regarding each party as may constrain the victim’s capability to respond or to take any action to end the bullying process ([Einarsen et al., 2020](#)). The nature of the power also changes as it can be formal (e.g. hierarchical position) or informal (e.g. experience, tenure). The persistence of the negative actions towards the victim may increase the sense of powerlessness of the victim. Lastly, the authors also refer to the nature of the bullying experience as it can be subjective or objective. A subjective experience refers to the victims’ perceptions of what happened, and an

objective experience is one validated by others. Although this dual perspective, [Niedl \(1996, p. 19\)](#) argued that the “definitional core of bullying at work rests on the subjective perception made by the victim”. That said, we will follow Niedl’s approach that reinforces bullying in its subjective nature.

Regarding the antecedents of bullying, [Trépanier and colleagues \(2016\)](#) studied some work environmental bullying antecedents on registered nurses. The results suggested that job characteristics (e.g. work overload, poor communication), quality of interpersonal relationships (e.g. group cohesion, sense of community), leadership styles and organizational culture (e.g. justice, tolerance of bullying, reward of bullying) may act as potential predictors.

Previous studies have already analyzed the association between organizational cynicism and bullying, and, although there is evidence that both constructs are associated (e.g. [Bedük et al., 2017](#); [Jaffar et al., 2022](#)), previous studies related to the influence of organizational cynicism on bullying at work are scarce. We found that [Apaydin \(2012\)](#) concluded that this relationship is positive and significant. Recently, [Ayik’s \(2022\)](#) study on teachers suggested that the perception of bullying influences the three dimensions of organizational cynicism. [Jaffar and colleagues \(2022\)](#) also found evidence of the mediator role of bullying. Particularly, the authors suggested that bullying may mediate the relationship between narcissist leadership and organizational cynicism. In addition, [Brandes et al. \(1999\)](#) associated organizational cynicism with a reduced sense of community as this is also identified as a predictor of bullying ([Trépanier et al., 2016](#)). Based on the previous studies, research seems to acknowledge that organizational cynicism and bullying may be associated; however, more studies regarding a deeper understanding of the nature of this relationship are needed.

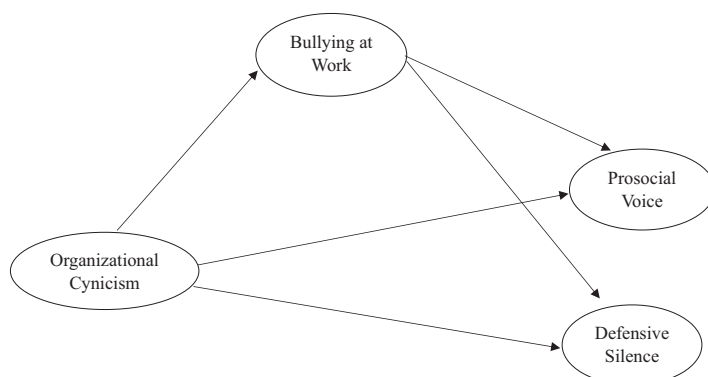
[Knoll and van Dick \(2013\)](#) proposed that employees tend to engage in silence when they perceive unethical issues or violations of workplace behaviour, such as harassment, discrimination and corruption. In the same line, [Pinder and Harlos \(2001\)](#) defined silence as a response against injustice. Bullying could also be seen as an unfair practice against employees. Empirically, this proposition was tested by [Hüsrevsahi \(2015\)](#) who studied teachers and concluded that, when facing mobbing, employees tend to use silence based on self-protection and fear. More recently, other research also suggested this positive relationship. [Rai and Agarwal \(2019\)](#) concluded that workplace bullying is positively related to defensive silence, and the same conclusions were reached by [Liu et al. \(2020\)](#).

Regarding the relationship between bullying and prosocial voice, the literature is scarce, and the results are not consistent. For instance, [Liang \(2021\)](#) found out that the perception of bullying positively relates to prosocial voice. Contrary, [Rai and Agarwal \(2019\)](#) studied the relationship between workplace bullying and EVLN outcomes, mediated by psychological contract violation and moderated by workplace friendship. The authors found out that bullying negatively influences prosocial voice.

Based on the aforementioned perspectives, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H3.* Bullying mediates the relationship between organizational cynicism and prosocial voice.
- H4.* Bullying mediates the relationship between organizational cynicism and defensive silence.

Following the theoretical framework and the hypothesis developed, we present our conceptual research model as follows ([Figure 1](#)).



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 1.
Conceptual research model

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 205 individuals working in Portugal. In total, 54.2% women and 45.8% men, aged between 21 and 65 years ($M = 39.57$, $SD = 11.07$). The majority of the participants possessed higher levels of education, such as 39.8% having a bachelor's degree and 36.8% having a master's degree. Most of the participants work in the private sector (77.7%) and do not have a supervision role (69.7%). The mean tenure was 13.46 years ($SD = 8.85$) varying between 1 and 41 years.

Instruments

Organizational cynicism. To assess participants' organizational cynicism, we used the proposal of Brandes *et al.* (1999) adapted by the Portuguese population by Assis and Nascimento (2017). This scale is composed of 14 items, grouped into three factors, that measure cognitive cynicism, which comprises six items (sample item: "I see little similarity between what [the organization] says it will do and what it actually does"), affective cynicism, covered by four items (sample item: "employees exchange complicit 'glances' with co-workers") and behavioural cynicism also containing four items (sample item: "Employees complain about what happens in the organization when they are with friends who do not belong to the organization"). Although the authors propose a tri-dimensional structure, the unidimensional approach is also acceptable. The response format was a Likert scale from 1 to 7, with 1 corresponding to "totally disagree" and 7 corresponding to "totally agree".

Bullying at work. To measure bullying at work, we used the Portuguese version (Araújo *et al.*, 2004; Borges and Ferreira, 2015) of the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R) (Einarsen and Hoel, 2001). The Portuguese version comprises a 22-item scale divided into four dimensions – intimidation comprises eight items (sample item: "Being humiliated or ridiculed in relation to your work"); exclusion includes eight items (sample item: "Being ignored or face hostile reactions when you approach someone"); work quality/overload comprises four items (sample item: "Excessive surveillance/control of your work"); and undervaluing work that contains two items (sample item: "Withdraw or replace key responsibilities their key function responsibilities with unimportant and/or unpleasant"). The items were answered on a five-point rating scale that ranged from almost "never" (1) to "almost always" (5).

Prosocial voice. Prosocial voice was measured using the five-item scale proposed by Nascimento (2010) (sample item: “Whenever I want, I can present ideas to improve the performance of the organization”). The response format was a Likert scale from 1 to 7, with 1 corresponding to “totally disagree” and 7 corresponding to “totally agree”.

Defensive silence. Defensive silence was measured using a five-item scale proposed by Dyne *et al.* (2003) and adapted to the Portuguese population by Sabino and Cesário (2019) (sample item: “I do not speak up and suggest ideas for change, based on fear”). The response format was a Likert scale from 1 to 7, with 1 corresponding to “totally disagree” and 7 corresponding to “totally agree”.

Data collection procedure

We use the convenience sampling method, a non-probabilistic sampling technique. The questionnaire was available from July to September of 2022. We used Qualtrics platform and a link to access the online questionnaire was disseminated on different channels such as social networks (i.e. LinkedIn, Facebook) and email. Concerning common method bias and research transparency, we followed the recommendations by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003). Hence, we informed participants of the required procedures to ensure confidentiality, emphasizing that there were no right or wrong answers. We also presented the survey by instrument, randomly organized the items and used different rating scales. There was no incentive (cash or otherwise) for participating in this research, and informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved.

Data analysis procedure

We organized the data analysis in different steps. Firstly, we used the AMOS 26.0 program to perform a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of each instrument, followed by the proposed measurement model comprising four factors (i.e. organizational cynicism, bullying, prosocial voice and defensive silence). Based on the fit of the model, factor loadings and modification indices, some items were eliminated (Hair *et al.*, 2006). The measurement model was compared with an alternative model – Harman’s single-factor test – as proposed by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003) to analyze any risk of common method bias. To verify the model’s goodness of fit, we followed the recommendations of Hair *et al.* (2006) regarding the goodness of fit indicators ($RMSEA \leq 0.7$; $GFI \geq 0.9$; $CFI \geq 0.9$; $TLI \geq 0.9$ and $\chi^2/df = 2.5$). We then tested the convergent validity considering a composite reliability (CR) greater than 0.70, the average variance extracted (AVE) greater than 0.50 and lower than CR and the Cronbach α greater than 0.7. Next, with the SPSS 26.0 program, we calculated descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and bivariate correlations to have an exploratory idea about the possible significant associations between variables. Lastly, to test the hypotheses, we started by performing linear regressions to analyze the direct effects of organizational cynicism on prosocial voice and defensive silence ($H1$ and $H2$). We then used Model 4 of the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes and Preacher (2013), which uses the bootstrapping method to calculate the mediation effect ($H3$ and $H4$).

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis and fitness of the model

The final model for the organizational cynicism presented a single-factor structure with a good fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.78$, $CFI = 0.99$; $TLI = 0.98$; $GFI = 0.98$, $RMSEA = 0.06$) and comprised five items, which presented five items comprising factor loadings between 0.68 and 0.88. The NAQ-R also presented a single-factor structure and an acceptable fit ($\chi^2/df = 4$, $CFI = 0.97$; $TLI = 0.94$; $GFI = 0.96$, $RMSEA = 0.09$). The final structure is composed of seven

items ($0.70 \geq$ factor loading ≥ 0.88). The prosocial voice and the defensive silence scale final structure presented four items each with good fit indicators ($\chi^2/df = 0.1$, CFI = 1; TLI = 1; GFI = 1, RMSEA = 0.02 and $\chi^2/df = 0.2$, CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.97; GFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.01, respectively). For the prosocial voice, the factor loadings ranged from 0.76 to 0.91, and for the defensive silence, the four items presented the factor loadings ranging from 0.80 to 0.94. The measurement model (Table 1), with four factors (i.e. organizational cynicism, bullying, prosocial voice and defensive voice), obtained an acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2/df = 2$, CFI = 0.94; TLI = 0.94; GFI = 0.86, RMSEA = 0.07). We compared this model with the single-factor model, Harman's single-factor test, in which all items were loaded on a single latent variable obtained a poor fit ($\chi^2/df = 7.7$, CFI = 0.66; TLI = 0.62; GFI = 0.50, RMSEA = 0.18).

Convergent validity

The convergent validity (Table 2) seems to be achieved in this study as all dimensions presented good values of CR, AVE and Cronbach α . The CR varied between 0.86 and 0.91, the AVE was between 0.68 and 0.80 and the Cronbach α presented values from 0.90 to 0.93.

Observed variable (scale item) ← Latent variables (dimension)	Standardized estimate
OCin3 ← Organizational cynicism	0.807
OCin5 ← Organizational cynicism	0.830
OCin11 ← Organizational cynicism	0.837
OCin9 ← Organizational cynicism	0.884
OCin6 ← Organizational cynicism	0.684
Bully10 ← Bullying	0.872
Bully9 ← Bullying	0.738
Bully5 ← Bullying	0.733
Bully12 ← Bullying	0.834
Bully13 ← Bullying	0.828
Bully17 ← Bullying	0.838
Bully18 ← Bullying	0.713
Voice1 ← Prosocial voice	0.816
Voice2 ← Prosocial voice	0.871
Voice3 ← Prosocial voice	0.913
Voice5 ← Prosocial voice	0.824
DSil1 ← Defensive silence	0.823
DSil2 ← Defensive silence	0.931
DSil3 ← Defensive silence	0.895
DSil5 ← Defensive silence	0.886

Table 1.
Standardized estimates of the measurement model

Source: Authors' own work

Dimensions	M	SD	α	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4
1. Organizational cynicism	3.82	1.45	0.90	0.90	0.65	1			
2. Bullying	1.51	0.76	0.90	0.92	0.63	0.521**	1		
3. Prosocial voice	4.83	1.58	0.90	0.91	0.76	-0.659**	-0.539**	1	
4. Defensive silence	2.78	1.45	0.93	0.93	0.78	0.632**	0.624**	-0.757**	1

Table 2.
Descriptive statistics, convergent validity and bivariate correlations

Note: ** $p < 0.01$

Source: Authors' own work

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations

Concerning the means and standard deviations of the studied variables (Table 2), our results suggested that participants presented a neutral position regarding organizational cynicism ($M = 3.82$; $SD = 1$; considering a seven-point Likert scale) and reported low levels of bullying ($M = 1.51$; $SD = 0.76$; considering a five-point Likert scale). As for the prosocial voice, the participants presented levels above the central point ($M = 4.83$; $SD = 1.58$; considering a seven-point Likert scale) and low levels of defensive silence ($M = 2.78$; $SD = 1.45$; considering a seven-point Likert scale).

Regarding the correlational analysis (Table 2), the relationships among the studied variables were all significant and in the expected direction. That said, our results suggested a positive and significant association between organizational cynicism and bullying ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$) and defensive silence ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$). Bullying is also positively and significantly associated with defensive silence ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$). Prosocial voice is negatively and significantly associated with organizational cynicism and with bullying ($r = -0.65$, $p < 0.01$ and $r = -0.53$, $p < 0.01$, respectively). The association between the prosocial voice and the defensive silence is negative and significant ($r = -0.75$, $p < 0.01$).

Regression analysis with testing hypotheses

Following the correlation analysis, it was possible to have a general idea of the pattern of the relationships among all the studied variables as they are all significantly associated. Before the mediating testing, we established a model where only the direct relationships from organizational cynicism to prosocial voice and defensive silence were included. The results of the linear regressions analysis (Table 3) suggested a significant and negative influence of organizational cynicism on prosocial voice ($\beta = -0.71$, $p < 0.01$, $R^2 = 43,5\%$) and a significant and positive influence of organizational cynicism on defensive silence ($\beta = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$, $R^2 = 40\%$). Thus, $H1$ and $H2$ were confirmed.

We then tested if the bullying mediated the relationship between organizational cynicism and the prosocial voice (Table 4). The results showed that the indirect effects are significant ($\beta = -0.13$,

Table 3.
Regression analysis
(testing $H1$ and $H2$)

Research hypotheses	Standardized beta	p	R -squared	Conclusion
$H1$: Organizational cynicism negatively influences prosocial voice	-0.71	0.000	0.435	Accepted
$H2$: Organizational cynicism positively influences defensive silence	0.63	0.001	0.400	Accepted

Source: Authors' own work

Table 4.
Mediation analysis
(testing $H3$ and $H4$)

Research hypotheses	Indirect effect				Direct effect				Conclusion
	Beta	SE	LLCI	ULCI	Beta	SE	LLCI	ULCI	
$H3$: Bullying mediates the relationship between organizational cynicism and prosocial voice	-0.13	0.03	-0.21	-0.06	-0.56	0.06	-0.69	-0.43	Accepted
$H4$: Bullying mediates the relationship between organizational cynicism and defensive silence	0.21	0.03	0.14	0.27	0.42	0.05	0.30	0.53	Accepted

Source: Authors' own work

SE = 0.03, CI: -0.21 to -0.06), confirming the mediating role of bullying. After the introduction of the mediator, the direct effect ($\beta = -0.56$, SE = 0.06, CI: -0.69 to -0.43) is still significant, but lower, suggesting a partial mediation and confirming *H3*. Regarding the defensive silence (Table 4), the results also showed significant indirect effects ($\beta = 0.21$, SE = 0.03, CI: 0.14 to 0.27) and, after the introduction of the mediator variable, the direct effect is still significant but lower ($\beta = 0.42$, SE = 0.05, CI: 0.30 to 0.53), indicating the partial mediation of bullying in the relationship between organizational cynicism and defensive voice. These results suggest the confirmation of *H4*.

Discussion

In this study, we aimed to analyze the relationship between organizational cynicism and prosocial voice and defensive silence, to in-depth the understanding of organizational cynicism's consequences and to contribute to the knowledge regarding the relationship between prosocial voice and defensive silence. Secondly, we aim to attest if bullying could be an explaining mechanism in the relationship between organizational cynicism and prosocial voice and defensive silence.

The confirmation of *H1* allows us to suggest that, when individuals perceive their organization as inconsistent and incongruent, being cynical, they tend to decrease their prosocial voice behaviours. Our results are in line with the assumption that organizational cynicism tends to be characterized as a negative perception towards the organization, which leads to a decrease in organizational citizenship behaviours (e.g. Van Dyne and LePine, 1998; Ng and Feldman, 2012) that comprise sharing of information and suggestions that will add value to the organization – prosocial voice. The results are also in line with Sun *et al.* (2022) results, which also confirmed the negative link between cynicism and promotive (prosocial) voice. In this line, our results suggest that, facing organizational cynicism, employees tend to believe that sharing work-related concerns is worthless (e.g. Wanous *et al.*, 2000; Sun *et al.*, 2022).

Our *H2* was also confirmed, suggesting that organizational cynicism positively influences the emergence of defensive silence behaviours as, when individuals assume cynical beliefs and behaviours, they tend to protect themselves by withholding information that could be helpful to the organization. This result is in line with previous studies that already established this relationship (e.g. Hao *et al.*, 2022; Zhang *et al.*, 2019; Al-Abrow, 2022; Elhanafy and Ebrahim, 2022). However, in line with Lee *et al.* (2023) study, the present research did not aim to study if defensive silence may influence the perception of organizational silence. Further studies needed to better understand how the relationship between both constructs are manifested in the organizational setting.

In addition, our study also contributed to the discussion on the links between prosocial voice and defensive silence. Contrary to Sherf *et al.* (2021), but in line with previous research (e.g. Sabino *et al.*, 2019; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003), our results suggest that voice and silence, although treated as distinct, assume similar (though opposite) relationships with other constructs such as organizational cynicism and bullying. A particular note regarding the correlation between prosocial voice and defensive silence, as is negative and medium high like the one found in Sabino *et al.* (2019) research and more recently, Sabino *et al.* (2024), also found a similar result. All these studies have been made in Portugal, presenting the same national and cultural background. However, in other cultural contexts, results have shown different patterns. For instance, in the authors' meta-analysis, the results may suggest a low correlation between voice and silence (Sherf *et al.*, 2021). Based on these results, more research on the close relationship between the different dimensions of voice and silence is need (e.g. Sherf *et al.*, 2021; Hao *et al.*, 2022).

Regarding the last hypothesis, which aimed to verify the mediating role of bullying, our results showed that for both consequences, prosocial voice and defensive silence, bullying is

a partial mediator. In this sense, individuals tend to engage in prosocial voice and defensive silence when they assume a cynical attitude towards the organization and through their perception of bullying. Results suggest that, when organizational cynicism arises, individuals feel less protected, and that could lead them to increase bullying perceptions. Consequently, if they feel they are being bullied, they tend to protect themselves through defensive silence, and they will engage less in prosocial voice behaviours. Although no previous studies regarding the mediating role of bullying on the relationship between organizational cynicism and other outcomes such as prosocial voice and defensive silence were found, the results are in line with the sense that, when engaging on organizational cynicism, employees tend to engage to a reduced sense of community, which is a predictor of bullying (e.g. Brandes *et al.*, 1999; Trépanier *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, the significant relationship between bullying and defensive silence is in line with previous studies like the ones developed by (2015), Rai and Agarwal (2019) and Liu *et al.* (2020). The relationship between bullying and prosocial voice is scarce, and the results are not consistent. In this line, our results clearly denote a significant relationship but, contrary to Liang (2021), our results suggested a negative relationship. This significant and negative relationship is in line with Rai and Agarwal's (2019) work but needs further analysis to sustain this conclusion.

Conclusions

This study suggests the close relationship between organizational cynicism and defensive silence and prosocial voice, as when employees perceive organizational cynicism, they may tend to engage defensive silence and minimize prosocial voice. Another conclusion is that the perception of bullying at work is also an explaining mechanism of these relationships. In fact, our results suggest that bullying at work assumes a partial mediating role in these relationships. Considering our results, theoretical and managerial implications should be taken into account. Lastly, no studies are present without limitations as some will be discussed, followed by some suggestions for future investigations.

Theoretical and managerial implications

Theoretical implications are clear as no previous studies were found to investigate the mediating role of bullying in the relationship between organizational cynicism and prosocial voice and defensive silence. With our results, we contribute to the literature by suggesting that all these constructs are connected to and how, in particular, the significant effects of organizational cynicism and bullying on the employees' decisions to constructively express opinions or defensively withhold suggestions that could improve the organization. Because no previous studies were found connecting all these constructs, we actively contribute with a clear vision of potential relationships between all constructs. Additionally, with this study, we also contribute with more studies that relate both prosocial voice and defensive silence. In this sense, we answer Hao *et al.* (2022) call for action on performing research that comprises both silence and voice to better understand how they react under the same antecedents. Additionally, because this study was performed in Portugal, we contribute to the national understanding of silence and voice, continuing the work that has been done regarding this construct in this country (e.g. Pacheco *et al.*, 2015; Sabino *et al.*, 2019; Sabino and Cesário, 2019; Knoll *et al.*, 2021; Sabino *et al.*, 2024).

From the managerial point of view, the results highlight the negative impacts of organizational cynicism and bullying as they tend to decrease prosocial voices and boost defensive silences. Managers should create organizational politics to minimize organizational cynicism and bullying, and consequently minimize the emergence of those communication behaviours from the employees. For organizational cynicism, the focus on

transparency and a clear and objective internal communication is fundamental, and it should be accompanied by human resources management practices aligned with the organizational strategy and mission. For bullying, the investment in a psychologically safe organizational environment and the creation of organizational politics and procedures to protect the victims, such as external whistleblowing channels, could also minimize the presence of these phenomena.

All these practices and procedures are in line with the organizations' responsibility for sustainable development as it is defined as a "strategy of social development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Sitko, 2023, p. 4). Sustainability has been developed drawn upon the triple bottom line (TBL), which emphasizes that, besides economic value, organizations need to also consider social and environmental dimensions to be sustainable (Elkington, 1997). Our work clearly contributes to the social dimension of sustainability as it aims to improve beneficial and fair organizational practices directed to the employees (Elkington, 1997). To do it, organizations need to understand these perverse phenomena such as organizational cynicism to act accordingly and to promote social sustainability. This statement is in line with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 "Decent Work and Economic Growth", which means to "promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all".

Limitations and further research paths

This study presents some limitations that should be considered in further studies. Firstly, we used cross-sectional data; therefore, causality cannot be established; thus, future research could use longitudinal data. Secondly, we used self-reported data, which could raise common method bias concerns. Nonetheless, because all constructs refer to the employees' personal experiences and perceptions, the self-reported measures appeared to be acceptable for the main research goals. Moreover, the methodological and statistical recommendations proposed by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003) were followed. Thirdly, the data was collected only in one country, Portugal, as some cultural characteristics could influence our results. As Pinder and Harlos (2001) acknowledged, socio-cultural silence is a variable to consider as they highlight the need to consider the cultural expectations regarding the use of silence (and voice). To overcome these constraints, more cross-cultural studies should be done to understand the specificities of this relationship in different cultural settings. Lastly, the present research only considered one dimension of voice (the prosocial voice) and one dimension of silence (the defensive silence) when previous literature (e.g. Van Dyne *et al.*, 2003) noted the multidimensionality of both variables. Therefore, future research should consider adding the missing dimensions to in-depth the understanding of how the perception of organizational cynicism influences all three dimensions of voice and silence and if the bullying mediates these relationships.

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