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The influence of national culture on employee voice in small and medium enterprises: a cross-cultural perspective

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to examine how employee voice in SMEs is shaped by national culture. Specifically, the paper explores the relationship between national culture and organisational norms and signals. Furthermore, it explores the impact of such norms, on employee voice behaviours. The paper chooses to address these issues in the SME context, in three countries with divergent cultural dimensions.

Design/methodology/approach We use Kwon's and Farndale's (2020) typology as our 'a priori' framework to explore the influence of national cultural values and cultural tightness on SME organisation norms, signals and employee voice behaviours. Our study uses qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews with SME employees in England, Nigeria and Thailand.

Findings: The results from our interviews are, presented thematically. The data illustrates how the cultural dimensions identified by Kwon and Farndale (2020) can have an influence on organisational voice norms. The dimensions are power distance, uncertainty avoidance, in-group collectivism, performance orientation, assertiveness and cultural tightness.

Originality: Historically, the impact of national culture as a macro factor on voice has been largely ignored by academic research. Studies in non-western contexts are especially rare. This paper derives its originality by offering unique insights into the culture-voice relationship from both western and non-western perspectives. This provides an international, cross-cultural, comparative dimension to our study. This research includes findings from under-researched settings, in Nigeria and Thailand.

Keywords Employee voice, organisational norms, national culture, SMEs, England, Thailand, Nigeria

Introduction

Employee voice has been found to positively affect organisational performance and improve employee motivation, engagement, commitment, satisfaction, and morale (Philip and Arrowsmith, 2021). Particularly in small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which are characterised by informality in their HRM practices (Prouska and Psychogios, 2019), voice can enable employee involvement and participation in decision-making and improve organisational innovation and performance (Selvaraj and Joseph, 2020; Shahzad *et al.*, 2019). Yet, voice in such enterprises remains largely under-theorised and under-researched (Gilman *et al.*, 2015).

We frame our paper within an inclusive definition of voice: 'the ways and means through which employees attempt to have a say and potentially influence organisational affairs relating to issues that affect their work and the interests of managers and owners' (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2014, p. 5). This definition encompasses the multiple meanings of voice and combines a variety of voice mechanisms.

Voice research has tended to focus on micro-level antecedents of voice (e.g., Mowbray *et al.*, 2015) and on meso-level organisational moderators or mediators of voice (e.g., Gollan and Xu, 2014). By comparison, examining the impact of macro-level antecedents on voice has received little attention. Yet the broader context, such as national culture, helps 'shape the organisational norms for the different voice channels' (Kwon and Farndale, 2020, p. 2). Such organisational norms can influence what issues are on and off the table (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2020a). Therefore, studying the intersection between national culture and employee voice can help us understand how *this* aspect of the macro context contributes to the creation of

organisational norms regarding voice. In turn, norms influence the nature of organisational signals received by employees concerning voice consequences (whether voice might be considered safe and/or effective; Kwon and Farndale, 2020), and ultimately influence employee voice behaviours (e.g., the decision of whether to speak up/voice or remain silent; Morrison, 2011).

To date, the small body of scholarship that exists on the impact of national culture on voice, has focused primarily on one dimension of culture, namely power distance – which tends to have a negative relationship with voice propensity (e.g., Kwon *et al.*, 2016). Kwon and Farndale (2020) argue that, beyond the crucial role of power distance in shaping employee voice, there are four additional culture dimensions, whose influence merits research: uncertainty avoidance, in-group collectivism, performance orientation, and assertiveness. They also argue the need to incorporate the notion of cultural tightness-looseness (Gelfand *et al.*, 2011) to explain why cultural values in some countries can have a more substantial influence on voice than in others. This paper addresses this call and explores the influence of the macro-level national culture values and cultural tightness on the meso-level organisational norms and voice signals.

We conducted interviews with employees in SMEs across three national settings, England, Nigeria, and Thailand, three countries purposefully selected because of their different cultural dimension scores from the GLOBE study (House *et al.*, 2004). While we understand that other macro-level factors, such as a nations' economic development, employment legislation, labour market conditions and human capital development can influence voice, the remit of this paper is to explore the influence of national culture. Our research question is: *How does national culture influence employee voice behaviours in small and medium enterprises across different national contexts?* Using interview data gathered in the three countries, we

interpret and analyse our qualitative data using the Kwon and Farndale (2020) framework as a conceptual lens.

The influence of national culture on employee voice

Rather than existing in contextual vacuums (Knoll *et al.*, 2021) organisations inhabit the geopolitical, social, economic, legal, and cultural contexts of the nations in which they are located. As such, organisations are influenced by a myriad of macro-level factors. National culture is one of these macro factors and it can have a profound impact on the immediate context in which employees operate. It has considerable influence on organisational behaviour (Tung and Stahl, 2018), provides norms regarding upward and downward communication, interpersonal interaction, and shapes the nature of voice, voice safety and effectiveness signals (Kwon and Farndale, 2020).

Scholars have long called for more attention on the influence of national culture on HRM practices, including on employee voice (Onukwube, 2012). However, to date, most studies exploring the role of national culture on voice have focused on 'western' cultures (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2020b). This has arguably contributed to a rather narrow conceptualisation of the voice construct from the assertiveness-centred perspectives dominant in 'western' individualistic cultures. As such, there is less recognition of other voice traditions and cultures, such as those that emphasise more subtle, non-confrontational voice behaviours (Matsunga, 2015).

From a 'western' cultural perspective, voice can often be presented as a positive vehicle for empowerment, where the employee can speak up, contribute to more efficient workplace practices and possibly increase one's status within the group (Knoll *et al.*, 2021). This may be consistent with cultures that view employees as key actors in the employment relationship, who

possess individual agency, and have an inalienable 'right to be heard'. However, voice also exposes those who speak out, it challenges authority, can threaten relationships, group harmony and status hierarchies (Brinsfield *et al.*, 2009). These are highly salient considerations in many cultures and can override the importance of perceived individual voice rights or agentic capacity.

A study of relations in Nigeria illustrates how voice must navigate the specificities of collectivist cultural norms, particularly around respect and reverence for those in authority (Emelifeonwu and Valk, 2019). Such norms can make individual expression a difficult experience for the Nigerian employee, especially if opinion runs contrary to the ideas of the person in authority. Issues of age can also have wide ramifications on voice behaviours here, where there is an inherent and in-built cultural respect for older citizens and colleagues. This can pose challenges for younger managers to instruct, address or correct older subordinates in the Nigerian workplace.

National culture can also override other macro factors, such as legislation. For example, researching voice in India, Badigannavar (2016) highlights the presence of legislation to promote social dialogue and employee participation. However, the power of national culture, where 'bottom up' communication is discouraged, has resulted in voice outcomes in India that are, at best, modest in the public sector, and downright weak in the private sector (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2020b).

Previous research has highlighted the pivotal role that SME leaders/owners play in voice behaviours and ways in which national culture can shape these leadership styles (Prouska *et al.*, 2021; Soomro *et al.*, 2020). Paternalistic leadership can be a common feature of workplace cultures in the African and Asian contexts and is often rooted in the conformist and high power distance of collectivistic cultures (Chen and Appienti, 2020). In paternalistic

cultures, those in positions of authority and power often consider it an obligation to provide protection to those under their care, but in exchange expect loyalty and respect. In an East Asian context, Liu and Dong (2020) found that such power and positional authority often creates, a 'leaders bubble' which can be hard to penetrate unless leaders proactively solicit voice from employees.

Despite the relative dearth of research on the influence of national culture on voice behaviours especially in 'non-western' contexts, scholars agree there is an ever-growing need for employees, employers, leaders, and organisations to become more "culturally intelligent" (Afsar *et al.*, 2019); that is, to learn about and understand others' cultural ideologies. By promoting scholarship in this area, actors in the employment relationship can learn how best to adapt and adopt the most effective voice strategies within the national cultural context they inhabit.

Highlighting cultural dimensions in England, Thailand and Nigeria

In exploring the impact of national cultural values on organisation norms and voice behaviours, it is important to highlight the cultural dimensions used in the Kwon and Farndale (2020) framework, namely power distance, uncertainty avoidance, in-group collectivism, performance orientation, and assertiveness (see Table 1).

The scores used for these dimensions emanate from the GLOBE study (House *et al.*, 2004). The GLOBE framework is a systematic typology of national culture that uses more recent data than comparable typologies (e.g., Hofstede). Furthermore, it is well validated, having been widely used in cultural studies on leadership and management, including a recent scale study on the influence of culture on employee silence across thirty-three countries (Knoll *et al.*, 2021, p. 623). Table 1 illustrates the dimension scores from the GLOBE study.

--Insert Table 1 about here--

According to the GLOBE project, *power distance* refers to "the degree to which members of an organisation or society expect and agree that power should be stratified and concentrated at a higher level of an organisation and government" (House and Javidan, 2004, p. 12). The concept of *uncertainty avoidance* concerns "the extent to which members of an organisation or society strive to avoid uncertainty by relying on established social norms, rituals, and bureaucratic practices" (House and Javidan, 2004, p. 11). *In-group collectivism* is defined as "the degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty, and cohesiveness in their organisation and family" (House and Javidan, 2004, p. 12) whilst *performance orientation* is "the degree to which an organisation or society encourages and rewards group members for performance improvement and excellence" (House and Javidan, 2004, p. 13). The fifth dimension used by Kwon and Farndale concerns *assertiveness,* considered to be "the degree to which individuals in organisations or societies are assertive, confrontational, and aggressive in social relationships" (House and Javidan, 2004, p. 12).

In addition to these national culture dimensions from GLOBE, Kwon's and Farndale's (2020) typology also includes *cultural tightness/looseness*. Cultural tightness/looseness is defined as "the strength of social norms and the degree of sanctioning within society" (Gelfand *et al.*, 2006). Tightness/looseness can interact with cultural value dimensions, in ways that strengthen the effect of national culture on organisational norms related to voice activity. Both Nigeria and Thailand are synonymous with 'tight' cultures, while England is a 'loose' culture (Gelfand *et al.*, 2011).

Our qualitative findings were interpreted through the lens of the aforementioned cultural dimensions from GLOBE, as well as by the cultural tightness/looseness dimension of Gelfrand (2006; 2011). However, we agree with Knoll *et al.* (2021) that the cross-cultural

literature is complex and that numerous approaches exist which characterise and contrast cultures using different dimensions to those of GLOBE. Nardon and Steers (2006) argue that no single model can cover all aspects of a culture. In their attempt to make sense of what they term the "culture theory jungle" (p. 9), they identify five common themes that emerge from their analysis of six distinct theories developed by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), Hofstede (2001), Hall and Hall (1990), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998), GLOBE (House *et al.*, 2004) and Schwartz (1992) (see Table 2).

--Insert Table 2 about here--

Thai and Nigerian cultures prioritise the need to live in harmony with ones' context, adjusting to one's natural and social environment accordingly. Cultural emphasis tends to focus on harmony, modesty, passivity, reactivity, relationships, with rewards based on seniority. By contrast, Anglo-Saxon societies, such as in England, tend to emphasise competition, assertiveness, proactivity, success, with rewards based on performance.

In terms of the social organisation dimension, England, alongside other 'western' nations, tend to adapt a person-centred approach; personified by loyalty to oneself, belief in individual accomplishment and direct communication. This contrasts with group-centred cultures, such as those of Thailand and Nigeria, where concern for social harmony and a focus on group-goals tend to dominate (Nardon and Steers, 2006).

As for the power distribution dimension, Thai and Nigerian societies accept that power is distributed hierarchically and based on seniority; whereas English society shows a preference towards diffused power distribution, with decentralised decision-making where possible, and an acceptance of the right to question authority (Nardon and Steers, 2006).

The rule orientation dimension sees Thailand and Nigeria take a cultural view of rules as somewhat ambiguous and entirely flexible, with final decisions often influenced by

interpersonal considerations. By contrast, English cultural norms tend to valorise formal policies, standard operating procedures, with decision-making based primarily on rules and policies.

Finally, the time orientation dimension views many Asian and African societies as multiple task, polychronic cultures, with fluid interpretations of time (Amoako-Agyei, 2009). By contrast 'western' norms often reflect a monochronic approach to work, separation of work and personal life, and commitment (rhetorical at least) to planning, implementation, and punctuality.

Research methods

Sample

The findings reported in this study are part of a wider study into macro-contextual factors influencing employees' experiences with voice in SMEs (Prouska *et al.*, 2021). National culture emerged as a dominant theme in the study; hence, we focus our analysis on this theme in the current paper. The purpose of the overall project was to explore voice at work as experienced by employees, which led us to adopt an interpretivist approach to research and an exploratory research design to collect data. Such a design fits the under-developed state of employee voice theory in SMEs and is frequently used to study employee voice and silence issues in organisations (e.g., Prouska and Psychogios, 2019, 2018). We collected data through 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews. Small-scale interview-based research, typically of fewer than 20 interviews, is acceptable (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006) and common in exploratory studies (e.g., Bardoel, 2016; Perera et al., 2018; Timming, 2011) that seek to indicate rather than to conclude. In line with such other small-scale qualitative studies, we recognise that only limited conclusions can, be drawn from a sample of 30 interviews, however

our aim is to capture the employees' experience with voice in SMEs and invite further investigation in future studies.

We interviewed employees working in SMEs, 10 in each of England, Thailand and Nigeria. We purposefully selected three countries with different cultural dimension scores from the GLOBE study (House *et al.*, 2004) and purposefully ensured that two of these countries were 'non-western' to address calls for more research in under-represented contexts (Afsar *et al.*, 2019). We purposefully chose countries spanning across Europe, Africa and (south-east) Asia. We chose these contexts because of their variation in national culture, which makes the comparison interesting and the analysis insightful. SMEs were based in the capital of each country (London, Bangkok, Abuja) and operated in a range of industries. None of these organisations recognised a trade union in the workplace. Participants were, employed in a range of positions within their organisations. Two thirds of participants were female. Their average tenure in their current job was 5 years (min = 1 year; max = 15 years). Table 3 provides an overview of the participants.

--Insert Table 3 about here--

Data Collection and Interview Protocol

The researchers used their professional networks to approach participants. The decision to stop collecting additional data was based on data saturation and sample adequacy (Saunders *et al.*, 2018). Data was collected between January and July 2018. Each respondent was interviewed by one of the authors. Interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes and were tape-recorded, with permission. The interviews in England and Nigeria were conducted in English and then transcribed. The interviews in Thailand were conducted in Thai, translated to English, and then transcribed. Participants were assured of anonymity.

The interview questions were organised in six sections: (i) participants' demographic data (age; gender; position in organisation; tenure); (ii) organisational information (industry/sector, organisational size, organisational structure, presence/role of HRM function in organisation); (iii) voice mechanisms and practices (formal and informal voice mechanisms; trade union recognition; informal communication channels; employee involvement and participation practices); (iv) factors promoting or inhibiting voice at work (perceptions and examples of feeling comfortable/uncomfortable discussing ideas or raising issues with line manager/boss; examples of cases where issues could not be openly discussed or complaints raised, frequency of occurrence and reasons for this; perception of organisational voice culture, norms and processes; perceptions of freedom of expression at work; attitudes towards line manager/boss); (v) effects of the business environment on voice (how business conditions affect work security, management style, leadership style, people management policies/practices and voice); and (vi) their reflections on their organisation and what they felt their organisation could do to improve its approach to employee voice.

Data Analysis

Once all interviews were transcribed, we used thematic analysis to identify, analyse, interpret, and report patterns (themes) (Roulston, 2001) within the resultant narrative data. We followed a hybrid (deductive and inductive) approach (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) to coding. This approach incorporates both a deductive a priori step and a data-driven inductive approach step. Each author independently engaged in the coding process by performing four actions. First, we deductively coded each transcript according to our research question and by using Kwon and Farndale's (2020) conceptual framework as a guide to look for core themes. Second, we inductively engaged in 'open coding' where we identified additional core themes emerging

from the data. Third, we reviewed all core themes and identified key sub-themes and patterns within these. Finally, we checked for replication of themes to ensure inter-rater reliability as is appropriate with semi-structured interviews. The final common core themes and sub-themes were agreed through discussion. This paper reports on one of the key themes (national culture) arising from the analysis, specifically on the way in which national culture can influence organisational norms and signals regarding voice consequences, and ultimately on employee voice behaviours in SMEs.

Findings and Discussion

Power distance

Nigeria and Thailand are considered two high power distance societies, respectively ranked as 2nd and 6th highest power distance cultures, in the GLOBE study of 61 countries (House *et al.*, 2004). Our research in these two countries shows a clear and significant impact of power distance cultural values on organisational norms and signals around voice, resulting in employee behaviours of (not) speaking up. Respondents in Thailand and Nigeria experienced employee voice as an aspect of organisational life that was fraught with risk, with potential for negative outcomes. The signals picked up by employees often indicate that employee voice:

> *Is… by 'invitation only', if the employer wants to hear your opinion or your ideas then s/he will ask for it. Otherwise, it is not wise to vent your feelings. It can backfire.* (E18, Nigeria)

As such, expressing voice is not perceived as an automatic entitlement to be exercised at will. Respondent testimonies show that they approach speaking up with a mix of caution, wariness, and suspicion, with many considering voice as a 'potential minefield', which needs to be navigated with great care:

> *…you often see people give a little bow to their managers, and bosses, and sometimes can't even look the boss directly in the eyes too long, it's not easy to talk to them like normal people on same level as you.* (E16, Thailand)

In general, respondent testimonies support previous research which suggests that employees in high power distance cultures accept, and often prefer, 'strong' and directive leadership (Taras *et al.*, 2016):

> *It is what many of them want… A strong, decisive and wise leader is highly valued in our culture... if you have power, you are the big man, you're an 'Oga', and you have your acolytes around you, your entourage… If anyone needs money or support, they will come to the 'Oga'.* (E21, Nigeria)

There was deep concern that speaking up may be perceived as 'rocking the boat' by owners/managers. Employees often preferred to engage in silence instead (Knoll *et al.*, 2021, p. 624). In Nigeria, silence was often, seen as 'talking too' (Amoako-Agyei, 2009). The concept of duty to the owner/manager emerged as a powerful organisational norm particularly from Thai interviewees. However, adherence and commitment to the concept of duty also had the effect of diminishing employee voice:

> *Our role is to do, to work, not to complain… We might complain to one another but never face the boss directly with our complaints.* (E16, Thailand)

Reluctance to engage in prohibitive voice was a strong feature from both Thai and Nigerian respondents. To raise issues around working conditions, for example, was seen as a breach of organisational norms around respect and gratitude. Furthermore, in both countries, simply asking questions to the boss, about 'how to do the job' also ran the risk of implying a lack of knowledge or understanding about your duties:

> *We don't want to show our weaknesses, or to disappoint the boss, our duty is to try and keep him happy as much as possible, this is the route to a happy relationship. You don't want him to doubt you.* (E22, Nigeria)

Uncertainty avoidance

In terms of uncertainty avoidance practices, out of 61 countries, England ranks 14th highest, with lower scores for Nigeria at 23rd and Thailand at 38th (House *et al.*, 2004). Respondents in England displayed an aversion to ambiguity and a preference for certainty, clarity, and adherence to policies and process aimed at reducing confusion.

> *It is our role as HR people to speak up to the owner if we see something being done wrongly or if the company is not complying with rules and regulations... everyone is encouraged to share their ideas at work.* (E2, England)

Kwon and Farndale (2020) argue that management in high uncertainty avoidance cultures will likely encourage formal voice channels as a way of controlling and managing uncertainty (2020, p. 7). The signal to employees is that the use of formal voice mechanisms is safe and effective and is desirable over informal voice, which can lack the rigour and order preferred by managers and leaders operating in high uncertainty avoidance cultures. Exploratory analyses of the Knoll *et al.* (2021, p. 624) study also show a negative relationship between [higher levels of] uncertainty avoidance and opportunistic silence.

Supporting Kwon and Farndale's argument, participants in England provide some evidence for the existence of formal voice channels, relative to that what we found in organisations in the lower uncertainty avoidance societies of Nigeria and Thailand. While almost none of the organisations in Thailand or Nigeria had formal voice mechanisms, six of the SMEs in England did have some semblance of voice channels, above and beyond informal voice, as illustrated by this respondent:

> *We have various HR policies that facilitate voice at work. We have suggestion schemes and employee attitude surveys.* (E2, England)

In a similar vein, another England-based respondent was equally enthusiastic about the extent of employee voice opportunities at his organisation:

> *I have been working in this company for 15 years. There is a reason I stay. We are organised. We have a meeting at the beginning of each year to plan ahead. We also have regular meetings to check progress.* (E5, England)

Kwon and Farndale also argue (2020, p. 7) that higher uncertainty avoidance societies, tend to limit their use of informal voice channels in favour of formal voice channels. However, our findings suggest that in England, informal voice was not discouraged.

Respondents in lower uncertainty avoidance societies, face 'double-jeopardy' when attempting to express voice, because of the 'double-whammy' consisting of (a) lack of formal channels (due in part to lower uncertainty avoidance cultures) and (b) lack of informal voice opportunities (due to other cultural values such as high power distance and in-group collectivism). We found discontent with this situation of 'low supply' in voice opportunities in both countries, especially in Nigeria:

> *We don't have formal mechanisms… it is not easy to speak up as an individual employee in our culture, sometimes we are really discouraged from speaking up freely, you have to be very careful how you say it, when you say it, and who you say it to.* (E23, Nigeria)

In-group collectivism

Both Thailand and Nigeria are high in-group collectivist societies, with Thailand ranked as 14th and Nigeria 22nd highest globally (House *et al.*, 2004). By contrast, England scores low in the GLOBE study of practices, at 54th out of 61 countries (House *et al.*, 2004) making it a highly individualist society, and consequently categorised as a low in-group collectivist culture. Communication and voice behaviours in collectivistic cultures often focuses on the need to protect others and maintain harmonious relationships (Knoll *et al.*, 2021) and an adherence to 'saving face' for oneself and others (Merkin, 2018).

Our research points to a significant impact of in-group collectivism on organisational voice norms, signals and behaviours in Thailand and Nigeria. Respondents emphasised that voice norms were influenced by the wider cultural dominance of concepts such as role of collective duty and obligation, collective interests as a shared value, group loyalty over and

above self-interest, the predominance of group goals, group conformity, the importance of long-term relationships, relatedness over individualistic rationality, and the overarching need for harmony within groups.

In Nigeria, respondents emphasised the need to "not stand out as very different from everybody else" (E21). Similarly, Thai respondents were acutely aware of the need to constantly maintain in-group harmony, and the positive effects of exhibiting metta-karuna (love and kindness) (E17) in the social work group.

> *When a problem might have an effect on other people, they don't want to talk as it will disturb the team...* (E14, Thailand)

These cultural sensibilities affected organisation work culture, and work practices in both countries, including approaches to employee voice. Voice was perceived as counter-productive to group harmony and cohesiveness, and therefore undesirable:

> *Some workers might want to speak out about a problem, but because it might have an effect on other people, they choose not to, because it is a teamwork, so they don't talk.* (E17, Thailand)

Our research demonstrates how loyalty to team overrides loyalty to self. From a voice perspective, national cultural sensibilities around the need to protect in-group collectivism, inflect organisation voice norms in ways that discourage and dissuade workers from engaging with voice channels and mechanisms (where they even exist) and this also extends to a reluctance to engage in informal voice. They are more likely to withhold their views to protect others and social harmony (Knoll *et al.*, 2021, p. 626). The rhetorical signals vocalised by managers that 'we are a family' accentuated and energised the message that a good employee is a complaint employee:

> *The maternal care environment that the manager creates at my workplace, makes me see the office as my extended family, and in Nigeria, you don't bring trouble to the family…* (E26, Nigeria)

The respondents in our research receive cultural signals that, in choosing to express individual voice, and in particular prohibitive voice, they choose to engage in a conflict inducing activity, which is considered disruptive. They run the risk of been branded as selfish, attention seeking, individuals, intent on creating 'damaging noise', as one Nigerian manager (E21) referred to employee voice, of disrespecting institutions, roles, positions with groups and collectivist cultural norms. Such is the disdain for such actions with the potential for placing their job security and dependents' welfare in jeopardy.

> *I'm very much conscious of the consequences in all my dealings with the team… If I upset someone, they may cause trouble for me. I need the job and salary for my upkeep.* (E30, Nigeria).

From a managerial perspective, and in support of Kwon and Farndale's arguments (2020, p. 7) our study reveals that voice practices in such cultures are often seen to run counter to the ideology of in-group collectivism, in turn creating a disincentive to offer any significant voice channels or mechanisms, or indeed to embrace and encourage the use of informal voice.

Performance orientation

Of the three countries in this research, England is measured as highest in performance orientation practices, ranking 34th out of 61 countries, while Thailand and Nigeria have somewhat lower, performance orientation practices at 41st and 42nd place respectively (House *et al.*, 2004, p. 250).

Kwon and Farndale propose that organisations in high performance orientation cultures embrace the use of both formal and informal voice channels (2020, p. 7) as these provide the vehicle for promotive voice, thus facilitating the generation and communication of ideas, and suggestions which might lead to enhanced efficiencies and improved performance in the workplace. Our findings concur and suggest that a lower performance orientation culture adds

to the 'voice gap' for Nigerian and Thai employees, in terms of low voice availability and low voice utilisation in both countries.

Respondent testimonies from both countries point to organisational norms that prioritise loyalty, conformity, acquiescence, and compliance, which in turn sends cautionary voice signals to employees. These signals are, further accentuated by the nature of SMEs, often family owned. In the African context especially, family ties, not organisational charts, are often the ties that bind (Amoako-Agyei, 2009, p. 338). As lower performance orientation societies, we see evidence of an 'organisational blind-spot' towards the generation of innovative and creative solutions through the encouragement of promotive voice behaviours:

> *I have lots of good ideas, but I have never been asked about them, and would be afraid to offer them up.* (E16, Thailand)
>
> *The organisation doesn't really want to hear your opinion, or ideas, otherwise they'd set something up to channel it; so if they can't be bothered to seek out my opinions, then why should I bother giving them my opinions or suggestions.* (E27, Nigeria)

In such testimonies, we can see the pivotal impact that lower performance orientation cultures can have on organisation voice norms, notably the reluctance, unwillingness, or inability of SMEs in such cultures to fully embrace notions of a business case argument for employee voice.

Conversely, our research findings from SME respondents in England, a society with a higher performance orientation, showed a willingness by management to involve employees in the pursuit of upward problem solving:

> *We are encouraged to think outside the box and also rewarded for our performance and drive. Our CEO is approachable.* (E10, England)
>
> *I think that everyone in the company can share ideas freely. Management encourages this.* (E9, England)

Therefore, among respondents working in English SMEs, there was almost universal agreement that informal voice is encouraged, to 'tap into' employees' suggestions and ideas.

Assertiveness

In measuring assertiveness practices, the GLOBE study ranks Thailand to be 56th (out of 61 countries) and, therefore, can be considered a low assertiveness society (House *et al.*, 2004). Our study suggests this contributes negatively on the provision of formal voice channels as well as on the comfort of employees to engage in informal voice behaviours. We found that employees spoke of the high cultural value placed on exhibits of humility, and subservience, in the organisation rather than an individual's assertiveness in vocalising their needs and demands:

> *Better keep quiet because I didn't want to have any problem with my boss that wouldn't be a good idea. I don't want to make conflict. We prefer giving opinions in secret way, not a strong way.* (E13, Thailand)

In addition to concerns about potential harm, to relationships with the boss, Thai respondents were also concerned about potential damage to relationships with colleagues, through asserting one's individual ideas too forcefully.

By contrast, England is, considered a higher assertiveness society, ranking 29th out of 61 countries (House and Javidan, 2004). Our study supports the argument proposed by Kwon and Farndale (2020) that assertiveness cultures can have a positive impact on organisation voice norms. Employees in English SMEs generally felt it was culturally acceptable to assert their views to peers and managers. In fact, some considered it a duty to highlight issues or deficiencies:

> *I am very comfortable discussing problems with my manager… It is always better to approach the manager with any issues than risking them finding out another way.* (E7, England)

Our study suggests that there is a relationship between England's status as both a medium-high performance orientation and assertiveness society. In this context, employees

who adopt passive, non-interventionist, patterns of behaviour and strategies of silence may be considered as 'not adding value', not 'contributing', and failing to 'drive the organisation forward'. There are clear synergies here with high performance orientation values.

Our study shows that, 'constructive voice' is highly valued and perceived as beneficial for the organisation (Liu and Dong, 2020). This sends strong organisational signals that articulation of promotive voice is desirable, safe, and effective, and can 'get you noticed' (Knoll *et al.*, 2021).

Thus far, our study confirms Kwon's and Farndale's (2020) proposition. However, testimonies from Nigerian respondents appear juxtaposed with the categorisation of Nigeria from the GLOBE study and the above proposition. The GLOBE study ranks Nigeria as 2nd highest out of 61 countries in assertiveness (House and Javidan, 2004, p. 410). Yet, our research shows little evidence that this translates into the use of formal or informal voice in Nigerian SMEs. We suggest that other factors such as the country's high power distance scores, low individuality and low uncertainty avoidance are responsible for this divergence. One Nigerian respondent offers an explanation:

> *Yes, we an assertive people, we express our views and opinions, openly and emotionally… But in the workplace, where there is a hierarchy, then no! In this case, respect for authority and elders overrides everything. We are socially conditioned to respect them, they are better than you, don't question them, don't challenge them, instead learn from them.* (E25, Nigeria)

Amoako-Agyei (2009, p. 335) argue that unlike 'western' societies where (for example) young executives openly question their way through the learning curve, young African executives will generally avoid such questioning, or even commenting on the decision of those in authority. Our study suggests that in the Nigerian context, high assertiveness rankings do not correspond to high voice provision or utilisation due to other cultural considerations.

Cultural tightness

England is, considered a culturally loose society, whereas Nigeria is a culturally tight society (Gelfand *et al.*, 2011). We suggest that voice symbolises the fault lines between tight and loose societies, with liberal articulation of voice personifying loose cultures, whilst voice restrictions are characteristic of tight societies. In this we concur with Kwon and Farndale (2020) who suggest that cultural tightness (i.e., the extent to which cultures are characterized by strong norms and intolerance of deviance) restricts the range of permissible [voice] behaviour (Knoll *et al.*, 2021, p. 636).

For example, in culturally tight societies such as Nigeria (and Thailand), we found that employee voice was often perceived as a potential threat to highly prized norms such as respect for, and adherence to, traditions, customs, social rules, and conformity (Brinsfield *et al.*, 2009; Emelifeonwu and Valk, 2019). In this context, the regulation, control, and policing of employee voice was seen as culturally appropriate.

In short, voice was, seen as a potential 'Trojan horse', which could threaten the status quo. We saw a strong tendency by SME owners and managers in Nigeria and Thailand to restrict dissent among employees, to shut down voice, and resist any dilution of managerial power and control.

The tendency to keep the lid on 'voice-at-will' helps create voice-hostile organisational norms which signal to employees, that they should adopt strategically safe, and supressed, voice behaviours:

> *There are so many issues relating to management of the firm which I cannot be open about. I can't challenge their [management] authority, I don't want to lose my job.* (E30, Nigeria)

By contrast, our research findings in England suggest that in a culturally loose society, organisation norms permit the articulation of diverse opinions and accept the existence of

contrarianism. We see relationships between England's cultural looseness and her high individuality and low power distance dimension scores, and we argue that loose culture interacts with these cultural dimensions, and helps create a voice eco-system, which is characterised by voice-positive organisation norms:

> *We talk with the production manager quite regularly and with the owner. We have meetings where we look at the scheduling of projects and plan ahead. It is an informal climate. If I want to say something I just go to the manger or the owner and I say it.* (E1, England)

Conclusion

Our research shows that the influence of national culture on voice norms and signals to SME employees is profound and salient. It shapes employee voice behaviours. High power distance cultures in Thailand and Nigeria were associated with conformity, and a tendency to defer to authority. This shaped organisation norms in ways that deterred employee voice, and in particular upward communication. Our qualitative study also supports observations by Knoll *et al.* (2021, p. 623) of a relationship between high power distance in Nigeria and Thailand and acquiescent silence.

Comparing higher performance orientation societies (England), with lower performance societies (Thailand and Nigeria), our research indicates that the drive for SME efficiencies, competitive advantage, and profitability, translated into greater encouragement of informal, upward forms of promotive voice in English SMEs. However, this was also, shaped by England's lower power distance, greater individuality, and higher assertiveness rankings.

Norms in high assertiveness cultures may signal that assertive voice behaviours are appropriate, useful to achieve aims, and thus more important than worries or concerns about harming collective or group relationships (Knoll *et al.*, 2021, p. 625). In the high assertive and

high uncertain avoidance culture of England, we saw examples of opportunistic voice used by employees in the hope that it might result in personal advancement. We are reminded here that status in such cultures is often assigned on individual achievement, a notion related to masculine cultural values (Nardon and Steers, 2006) with their emphasis on competition and success.

Individualist cultures (England) can influence organisation norms and voice behaviours by promoting openness in communication, and a tendency to challenge and question. This can be compared with the norms and voice behaviours seen in the collectivist cultures of Thailand and Nigeria. Here, overarching concerns about conflict avoidance and the concept of face-saving (Merkin, 2018) influenced voice decisions.

In-group conformity is often maintained at the expense of personal interests. Indeed, in such contexts, harmony can be valued above honesty or truth and silence more than speech (Amoako-Agyei, 2009, p. 333) and a show of dissent can be interpreted as a show of disrespect (Amoako-Agyei, 2009, p. 337). Our Nigerian, and especially our Thai, respondents, experience essentially non-voice regimes with few if any formal channels available to them. Informal voice, while theoretically available, was often discouraged, and heavily circumscribed by a strong anti-individualist, anti-independent, and anti-autonomous cultural narrative.

Voice behaviours in Nigeria may not be as heavily culturally circumscribed or curtailed as in Thailand, but they are nonetheless highly contextualised. A common refrain from Nigerian respondents was that 'speaking up is allowed, but it is about how you go about it'. As such, we see employee voice to be highly contingent upon showing sufficient respect for hierarchy, and conditional upon expressing gratitude to SME owners or managers.

As highlighted at the outset, there are other macro factors, which will have strong influences on norms, signals and voice behaviours in SMEs, such as labour market conditions,

economic development, governance, role and position of HRM (see Prouska *et al.*, 2021). However, this paper has focused on the role of national culture. It sees strong and pertinent relationships between national culture and voice.

We contribute to voice research specific to how national culture, as a macro-level determinant, influences voice, an area that remains under-theorised. We add to literature looking at factors influencing voice and SMEs (e.g., Gilman *et al.*, 2015; Prouska and Psychogios, 2019, 2018) with a specific focus on the influence of national culture. Previous literature has not empirically explored the influence of national culture on voice *per se*; for example, Gilman *et al.* (2015) considered the interaction between resources (human and social capital) and constraints (product market, labour market and strategic orientation) in shaping voice in SMEs, while Prouska and Psychogios (2019, 2018) study voice from the perspective of silence and link this to the economic context. The small body of scholarship that does exist on the impact of national culture on voice has focused primarily on power distance (e.g., Kwon *et al.*, 2016). Beyond the crucial role of power distance in shaping employee voice, the dimensions of, uncertainty avoidance, in-group collectivism, performance orientation, assertiveness, and cultural tightness have been, posited by Kwon and Farndale (2020), as equally important in shaping voice. We, therefore, use Kwon and Farndale's (2020) multilevel conceptual framework of employee voice signals as our conceptual lens. We offer empirical data that can shape our understanding of the role of national culture in shaping the employees' experience with voice in SMEs, beyond the role of power distance and beyond the role of other macro, meso and micro-level determinants that past voice research has explored. Furthermore, our research takes place in both western *and* non-western contexts. This is especially important, given the virtual absence of scholarship on the culture-voice relationship in African and Asian contexts.

Our study offers some practical implications. First, our findings call on SME leaders and managers to reflect on and appreciate the complexities of national culture, and how these influence and shape voice behaviours, in organisations. Second, the study suggests that organisations should develop greater 'cultural intelligence' (Afsar *et al.*, 2019) through management development and education. Thirdly, given that organisations do benefit from employee voice, the study strongly supports the need for SME organisations to develop and encourage context appropriate voice systems. Our findings also highlight the particular, 'voice-role' of leaders in SMEs, and demonstrate how leadership styles in SMEs can inadvertently create voice-hostile organisations. The emphasis and focus must be on building a voice-positive organisational culture. This will involve acknowledging and challenging those aspects of national culture that deter, diminish and discourage employee voice behaviours.

Our work does not come without limitations. The small number of participants in each national context and the small number of national contexts investigated does not allow us to make generalisations. Qualitative methodologies can aid in capturing the employee experience, while quantitative methodologies can further test our interpretation of how organisational voice norms and signals affect voice behaviours to create voice negative, neutral or positive societies.

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Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data is available upon request by contacting one of the authors.

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Table 1 Cultural dimensions in England, Thailand and Nigeria

Cultural dimension score	**England**	**Thailand**	**Nigeria**
Power distance	5.15	5.63	5.80
Uncertainty avoidance	4.65	3.93	4.29
In-group collectivism	4.08	5.70	5.55
Performance orientation	4.08	3.93	3.92
Assertiveness (practices)	4.15	3.64	4.79

Source: Based on the GLOBE Project (House and Javidan, 2004)

Table 2 The "big five" cultural dimensions

Cultural dimensions	**Focus of dimensions**	**Scale anchors**
Relationship with the Environment	*Relationship with the natural and social environment:* Extent to which people seek to change and control or live in harmony with their natural and social surroundings	Mastery vs. Harmony
Social Organisation	*Role of individuals and groups:* Extent to which social relationships emphasise individual rights and responsibilities or group goals and collective action.	Individualism vs. Collectivism
Power Distribution	*Power distribution in society:* Extent to which power in a society is distributed hierarchically or in a more egalitarian or participative fashion.	Hierarchical vs. Egalitarian
Rule Orientation	*Relative importance of rules:* Extent to which behaviour is regulated by rules, laws, and formal procedures or by other factors such as unique circumstances and relationships.	Rule-based vs. Relationship-based
Time Orientation	*Time perception and tasks:* Extent to which people organise their time based on sequential attention to single tasks or simultaneous attention to multiple tasks.	Monochronic vs. Polychronic

Source: Based on Nardon and Steers (2006)

Table 3 Overview of participants

	Sector	Size	Position	Gender	Age	Tenure (years)
			England - London			
1	Furniture manufacturing	15	Cabinet maker	M	42	4
2	Management consultancy	65	HR officer	F	27	3
3	Architectural services	35	Receptionist	F	28	3
4	IT services	25	Technical support assistant	M	35	4
5	Legal services	30	Lawyer	F	40	6
6	Publishing services	180	Accountant	M	50	15
7	Beauty salon	15	Beautician	F	28	5
8	Retail pharmaceuticals	150	Customer service	F	30	7
9	Retail electronics	45	Sales assistant	M	32	5
10	Financial services	209	People partner	F	26	3
			Thailand - Bangkok			
11	Hotel	30	Receptionist	F	27	3
12	Clothes retailer	10	Sales assistant	F	32	8
13	Airport services	60	Customer service representative	F	22	1
14	Hospital	150	Nurse	F	30	10
15	Travel agent	18	Travel agent	F	27	14
16	Beverages factory	100	Factory worker	F	31	3
17	Cleaning services	30	Cleaner	F	50	7
18	Hotel	100	HR officer	M	23	2
19	Retail department store	100	Sales assistant	F	27	1
20	Construction	100	Secretary	F	24	1
			Nigeria - Abuja			
21	Medical services	85	Business development manager	F	35	7
22	HR consultancy	25	Consultant	M	10	2
23	Radio station	35	Radio presenter	F	20	2
24	Engineering consultancy	40	Engineer	M	60	10
25	Construction	75	Sales executive	F	40	8
26	Makeup & cosmetics service	13	Cashier	F	19	2
27	Palm oil manufacturer	35	Extraction assistant	M	35	3
28	Lodge, restaurant, bar, laundry & car wash	20	Cleaner	M	41	6
29	Petrol station	15	Pump attendant	M	27	2
30	Lodge, bar, catering & events	17	Waiter	F	24	3