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Expatriate voice: The effects of nationality and social status

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Abstract

The expression of voice is valuable for organisations and individuals but most of what we know about voice is drawn from western contexts. This paper focuses on why, how and on what issues expatriates speak up. Examining voice in the multinational context of the United Arab Emirates allows us to develop a more in-depth understanding of national, organisational, and individual factors that influence voice. Interviews with 71 expatriates and 29 host country nationals show that expatriates' social status influences their attitude and behaviour towards voice and that informal structures and social networks in organisations are important in understanding expatriates' voice behaviours. The overlapping categories of expatriates from non-western countries and expatriates in low-status jobs take a wider view of their situation and are as a result less likely to use voice in the workplace.

KEYWORDS
employee voice, expatriates, nationality, status

Practitioner notes

What is currently known?

- Effectiveness of organisations depends on members sharing knowledge and speaking up with suggestions and opinions
- Absence of voice can have serious negative implications for individuals and for organisational performance
- Relevant literature continues to be largely silent about voice in the context of expatriates

What this paper adds?

- It explores expatriates' and nationals' perceptions of the factors influencing expatriates to speak up or remain silent, using 100 interviews
- Expatriates' cultural origin and social status influences their attitude and behaviour towards voice
- Informal structure and social networks in organisations are important in understanding expatriates' voice behaviours

The implications for practitioners

- Organisations will benefit from creating an environment in which expatriates will speak up
- Managers must first design more inclusive work setups which reduce the impact of discrimination.
- Organisations may consider introducing tangible and intangible incentives to encourage expatriates to speak up

1 | INTRODUCTION

Employee voice has become a popular topic in the management literature in recent years, with contributions from a range of disciplines. For example, HRM and IR examine the mechanisms for employees to 'have a say' (Barry & Wilkinson, 2022; Lavelle et al., 2010; Marchington, 2008), and organisational behaviour (OB) considers voice as an 'extra-role upward communication behaviour' (Morrison, 2014) that should improve organisational functioning (Dyne et al., 2003; Sarabi, 2020). There have been relatively few studies in any of these literature of voice in the international environment experienced by expatriates. In this study, we identify the extent to which national-level factors (Chen et al., 2022; Dundon et al., 2022; Morrison, 2023; Peltokorpi & Pudelko, 2021), the organisational environment (Knoll et al., 2021), and the social characteristics of individual expatriates (Fan & Lin, 2022; Salk & Brannen, 2000) impact expatriates' voice and silence.

We conceptualise employee voice broadly as being concerned with the ways and means employees could and do use to have a say about, and influence, their work, and the functioning of their organisation (Morrison, 2023; Wilkinson et al., 2020). Accordingly, voice can cover a range of domains and issues, such as working conditions, policies and procedures and work methods, and can occur through a variety of formal, informal, direct, indirect, individual and collective mechanisms (Dundon et al., 2022; Wilkinson et al., 2020). OB research identifies a number of antecedents influencing the voice behaviour of employees (Morrison, 2023), including latent voice opportunity (Morrison, 2014), personal dispositions (Chamberlin et al., 2017), personal control and motivation (Aryee et al., 2017), gender differences (Taiyi Yan et al., 2022) and self-perceived status (Bienefeld & Grote, 2014). Researchers have also examined contextual factors from an OB perspective: The support of supervisors and co-workers (Subhakaran & Dyaram, 2018), network position (Venkataramani et al., 2016) and hindrances, such as politics and red tape (Xia et al., 2020).

We widen this lens by bringing together national-level factors, organisational context, and individual attributes as voice occurs at and is influenced by national, organisational and individual factors (Wilkinson et al., 2020). While the macro-level consists of the regulatory and cultural framework (Cavusgil et al., 2020), Morrison (2023) argues

that we know little about how these macro-level contextual factors affect voice and silence. The organisational level relates to the voice systems that organisations establish and is where much voice research has taken place (Lavelle et al., 2010). Much of the literature proposes that enhanced voice and silence may be predicted by factors in the work environment (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Madrid et al., 2015). At the individual level, there has been an emphasis on motivators and inhibitors to voice, such as dispositions, attitudes, and beliefs (Morrison, 2014) and network position (Venkataramani et al., 2016). To our knowledge, literature on expatriate voice has not yet explored whether and how national-level factors (e.g., national culture or institutional set up), organisational environment (e.g., job security, managerial and co-worker support) and individual factors (e.g., status, nationality and network position), explain the voice of expatriates. Filling this gap in the literature is even more relevant and important given the fact that increasing global mobility with nearly 300 million people live in a country other than the one they were born in (IOM, 2022) requires a closer look at how voice unfolds among individuals living and working in another environment than their home country. From the global talent management view (Collings et al., 2019) it has been evident that organisations rely on expatriates to fill skills and labour gaps. Yet. although there has been some work on related domains, such as language (Tenzer et al., 2017) or knowledge transfer (Shao & Al Ariss, 2020), expatriate voice has received limited attention so far.

The key contribution of this paper is to advance scholarly discussion on voice by using rich qualitative data to explain expatriate voice. Considering national, organisational, and individual level factors may lead to a more nuanced debate among scholars and practitioners a like.

The article takes the following form. First, we examine the literature on expatriate voice and develop research questions to enhance existing understanding. We outline our methodology, and then present our findings. We discuss the implications, and limitations, of our findings, concluding that, for expatriates, status and nationality have crucial impacts on voice and that as a result the benefits to the subsidiary of expatriates 'bringing in new ideas' are severely restricted. We argue that research on voice generally needs to pay more attention to expatriation and to the factors that have been missing from the theory so far: status and nationality.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: EXPATRIATION AND VOICE

Employee voice has been studied in different ways, over time and across disciplines (Morrison, 2014, 2023). While voice is more than just communication or talking to employers; it reflects intentional communication of ideas or concerns by employees to induce improvements or change to the status quo (Morrison, 2014; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Employee voice has been understood as vital for organisational effectiveness (Morrison, 2011). In this context, silence is more than the mere absence of communication or unintentional failure to speak up (Dyne et al., 2003); it is the deliberate choice to withhold ideas or concerns that have the potential to constructively change the situation (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Morrison, 2014).

Earlier research examined the antecedents of voice, such as individual traits, leadership style and organisational environment (for reviews, see Morrison, 2011, 2014, 2023), while in recent years much of the general management research on voice has taken an OB perspective, focusing on identifying individual-level or relational enablers and inhibitors (such as individual attitudes and perceptions, supervisor behaviour and team climate). It has generally ignored wider organisational or environmental contexts (Barry & Wilkinson, 2022). Moreover, the OB perspective on voice focussed on mainly on individual and psychological, managerial aspects, with little attention to the external environment (Kaufman, 2015). Our study seeks to breaks these silos by providing a more connected perspectives on the macro -, organisational-, and individual level views and experiences of expatriate voice.

We see employee voice as covering the ways and means through which employees attempt to have a say about, and influence, their work, and the functioning of their organisation (Bashshur & Oc, 2015; Morrison, 2014, 2023). To date, scholars have largely argued that factors that increase voice equally decrease silence, and vice versa,

especially with regard to perceived impact and psychological safety (for a review, see Morrison, 2014). Hence, lack of psychological safety can lead to silence (Aguzzoli & Geary, 2014).

Although employee voice has been the subject of much research, there has been a tendency, as in much of the management literature, to study voice in terms of universal best practice (Marchington, 2008), ignoring context. Context needs to be seen as rich and multi-level, ranging from individual attitudes to macro-level turbulence (Budd et al., 2022) and noting institutional gaps such as ineffective unions and an informal labour market, meaning that it may be risky for employees to speak up (Aguzzoli & Geary, 2014). Paternalistic leadership, as an example, can facilitate or hinder employee voice depending on context (Zhang et al., 2015). Although previous research contributes significantly to our understanding of the individual and organisational antecedents of voice in general, increases in workforce diversity raise an ongoing need to explore individual factors that specifically apply to a group of employees with a particular type of diversity (Loi et al., 2014). One such group is expatriates who need to adopt to new institutional and cultural values, management policies and practices (Li et al., 2020).

Global mobility is one of the defining global issues of the early 21st century and, more people were moving from one country to another than at any other point in human history (IOM, 2020). Global mobility trends shape the employment landscape for millions of such individuals. Much of the published literature on expatriation has focussed on the selection, training, and adjustment of western expatriates on international assignments (Haak-Saheem & Brewster, 2017), but research has begun to recognise the diversity and importance of the majority of expatriates who self-initiate (SIEs) (Chen & Shaffer, 2017). Globally mobile individuals can bring a wide range of international knowledge, skills and contacts to an organisation (Kwon & Farndale, 2020; Ng et al., 2019), but only if they are prepared to voice their ideas and suggestions to improve the status quo.

Expatriates are, by definition, working in situations where they might be learning new rules of the game and different sets of customs and practices (Peltokorpi & Xie, 2023), often with little organisational support (Chen & Shaffer, 2017). Voice is important to them as a way of helping them to make sense of their working context. However, they also need to be conscious of the need to work within the existing culture and this might make speaking up more difficult. Despite these contextual peculiarities, literature in expatriate voice has been rather limited. Few studies on expatriate voice explored the challenges expatriates face while living and working in a host country (for an exception see McNulty et., 2018; Sher et al., 2019; Vance & Ensher, 2002).

Building on research assessing the impact of national, organisational, and individual level factors on voice and silence (Morrison, 2023; Wilkinson et al., 2020), we raise the following research questions: (1) How do contextual factors at the national and organisational level influence expatriate to speak up or remain silent? (2) How do individual predictors such as nationality, status, network position and gender explain variances in expatriates' choices to speak up or remain silent?

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND SETTING

We conducted a qualitative study to develop an in-depth understanding of a relatively unexplored area (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). This is appropriate due to the non-linear nature of expatriate voice behaviour. In this study, we used an empirical contextualisation approach (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010) in which the context is of relevance. The importance of context has been emphasised in research on voice (Morrison, 2023), and on expatriates (McNulty & Brewster, 2019).

3.1 | Research site, sample, and data collection

Our main data stems from expatriates living and working in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In the UAE, expatriates form the majority of the total population, far outnumbering locals. According to a recent report (UAE, 2022),

the population of the UAE grew to about 10 million by the end of 2021. Out of this, the number of UAE citizens is around 1 million. This is a unique environment, creating specific challenges in managing work and in relation to how employee voice is understood and expressed within such a diverse and dynamic environment: a rich context in which to study expatriate employee voice. To develop a more comprehensive understanding, we also collected interview data from host country nationals. Here, we were primarily interested in their experiences of and views about expatriate voice behaviour.

Using a purposeful and snowball sampling approach (Patton, 1990), we contacted and interviewed foreign citizens who had moved to the UAE for work. We obtained the contact details of the participants through an Internet search (contacting expatriates and sending interview requests through social network sites) and snowballing (direct and intermediated contacts with expatriates). The 71 expatriates we interviewed were nationals of 47 different countries; 47 of them were male. The participants worked mainly in white-collar jobs in positions that ranged from administrative staff to senior vice president in various industries, such as banking and finance, healthcare, or retail.

For the local sample, we used a purposeful and snowball sampling approach (Patton, 1990) to identify host country national who had working relationship with expatriates. These 29 informants were all working in managerial roles across a wide range of industries, including government, banking and finance, and logistics. While Table 1 represents a wider range of characteristics of expatriates, Table 2 provides information on length of service of nationals. The reason why we included length of service was to demonstrate the experiences of these nationals working with expatriates over many years.

All participants were ensured anonymity.

During the interviews we used open questions to elicit respondents' background and personal experiences. In-depth, semi-structured, interviews enabled us to gain insights into their perspectives and experiences (Corley, 2015) and about their behaviour in relation to the opportunities and risks involved in speaking up. We also asked questions about the content of their voice messages. Interviews lasted between 60—90 min and were recorded, with the consent of the participants. In our interviews with UAE nationals, we were interested in their perceptions of and experiences with expatriates' voice attitudes and behaviour.

3.2 | Data analysis

We developed our theoretical ideas alongside an increasingly detailed analysis of the interview data by using the process of data reduction, display, conclusion drawing, and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the first stage of analysis, we constructed rich descriptions of perspectives and processes (Langley, 1999), identifying key aspects of individual and contextual views of voice in the respondents' organisations for each interview cohort (expatriates and locals), capturing their perceptions of the role of voice, the type of messaging, and the individual and contextual factors shaping their decisions to speak up (or not to do so). We also accounted for their views and their experiences of organisational structures, formal and informal voice processes, and power dynamics. This enabled us to identify and analyse diverse individual views about organisational structures and processes and to better understand the interaction between them and the way they shape expatriate voice.

In the second stage of analysis, we used the QSR NVivo version 12 qualitative software package to interrogate the data to identify the emergence and persistence of themes. Our coding of data and the development and revision of categories was undertaken in an iterative process with the authors reaching agreement on the prevalence and interpretation of central themes and, over time, aggregate dimensions that link to existing theoretical constructs. The research team had repeated discussions on the meaning of the codes and gradually constructed a joint interpretation of the empirical evidence. Our early coding was detailed and based on the terminology of the research participants (Van Maanen, 1979). Data was coded in iterative cycles moving back and forth between the whole interview and the detail relating to voice attitudes, behaviour, systems, types,

TABLE 1 Summary of expatriate interviewees' main characteristics.

Interview ID	Job title	Industry	Nationality	Gender
Case 1	Operation Manager	Manufacturing	Romania	Female
Case 2	Senior Learning and Development Consultant	Consultancy	UK	Female
Case 3	Director, Trade Working Capital Corporate Banking	Financial services	Brazil	Male
Case 4	Talent Acquisition	Retail	UK	Female
Case 5	Event Manager	Consultancy	Germany	Female
Case 6	Founder Managing Director	Food & beverage	Italy	Female
Case 7	Associate Consultant & Counsel	Consultancy	India	Male
Case 8	Director	Education	China	Female
Case 9	Regional Training Manager	Consultancy	Lebanon	Male
Case 10	Self-employed Interior Designer	Consultancy	Russia	Female
Case 11	Architect	Consultancy	India	Female
Case 12	Restaurant Owner	Food & beverage	Taiwan	Female
Case 13	Senior Consultant Manager	Energy	Kazakhstan	Female
Case 14	Senior Consultant	Consultancy	Armenia	Male
Case 15	Consultant	Consultancy	Australia	Male
Case 16	IT Trade Advisor	IT Services	France	Male
Case 17	Project Manager	Energy	Italy	Male
Case 18	Interior Designer	Consultancy	Pakistan	Female
Case 19	Project Manager	Retail	South Korea	Male
Case 20	VP	Financial services	Spain	Male
Case 21	Director	Insurance	Norway	Male
Case 22	Marketing Director	Commercial services	Turkey	Male
Case 23	Interior Designer	Consultancy	UK	Female
Case 24	Managing Director	Energy	Russia	Male
Case 25	Teacher	Education	UK	Female
Case 26	Communication Consultant	Retail	Germany	Male
Case 27	Director	Hospitality	India	Female
Case 28	Marketing Manager	Consultancy	South Africa	Male
Case 29	Business Development Manager	Financial services	Brazil	Male
Case 30	Head of Department	Education	USA	Male
Case 31	Senior Vice President	Financial services	Denmark	Male
Case 32	Assistant Manager	Manufacturing	Jordan	Male
Case 33	Professor	Education	India	Male
Case 34	Sales Representative	Chemical industry	Pakistan	Male
Case 35	HR Manager	Hospitality	Tunisia	Female
Case 36	Accountant	Financial services	India	Male

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Interview ID	Job title	Industry	Nationality	Gender
Case 37	Store Employee	Retail	Philippines	Male
Case 38	Senior Manager	Financial services	Greece	Male
Case 39	Head of VIP services	Aviation	Poland	Male
Case 40	Graphic Designer	IT Services	Egypt	Male
Case 41	Singer	Entertainment	Turkey	Male
Case 42	Nutritionist	Consultancy	Iran	Male
Case 43	Sales Supervisor	Retail	Algeria	Female
Case 44	IT Support	Education	Nigeria/ UK	Male
Case 45	Training Manager	Financial services	Belgium	Male
Case 46	Assistant Manager	Hospitality	Palestinian	Female
Case 47	Airport Agent	Aviation	Egypt	Male
Case 48	Physician	Healthcare	Lebanon	Male
Case 49	Researcher	Energy	Uzbekistan	Male
Case 50	Executive Assistant	Beauty services	Philippines	Female
Case 51	Fitness Coach	Sport & leisure	Sweden	Female
Case 52	Finance Manager	Financial services	Syria	Male
Case 53	Architect	Consultancy	Sudan	Male
Case 54	Engineer	Construction	Ireland	Male
Case 55	Technician	Healthcare	Nepal	Male
Case 56	Lawyer	Consultancy	German	Male
Case 57	Assistant Professor	Education	Iran	Female
Case 58	Cabin Crew Member	Aviation	Poland	Female
Case 59	Real Estate Agent	Real Estate	Afghanistan	Male
Case 60	Salesperson	Retail	Ethiopia	Female
Case 61	Nurse	Healthcare	Indonesia	Female
Case 62	Manager Real Estate Development	Real estate	Russia	Male
Case 63	Teacher	Education	Austria	
Case 64	Event Manager	Consultancy	Belgium	Male
Case 65	Dentist	Healthcare	UK	Male
Case 66	Teller	Financial services	India	Male
Case 67	Manager	Manufacturing	Bangladesh	Male
Case 68	Vice President	Consultancy	India	Female
Case 69	Manager	Beauty services	Lebanon	Male
Case 70	Driver	Hospitality	Tanzania	Male
Case 71	Procurement Manager	Chemical industry	Syria	Male

TABLE 2 Summary of local interviewees' main characteristics.

Interview case	Job title	Industry	Nationality	Gender
Case 1	Group Chief Financial Officer	Public	UAE	Male
Case 2	Deputy Head of Contracts and Procurement	Healthcare	UAE	Male
Case 3	Chief Operating Officer	Food & beverage	UAE	Male
Case 4	Manager of Section	Banking & finance	UAE	Female
Case 5	Senior Commission Manager	Tourism & hospitality	UAE	Female
Case 6	CEO	Financial services	UAE	Female
Case 7	First Line Sales Manager	Healthcare	UAE	Male
Case 8	Vice President	Insurance	UAE	Male
Case 9	Vice President	Construction	UAE	Female
Case 10	Vice President	Beauty services	UAE	Female
Case 11	Administrative Coordinator	Education	UAE	Female
Case 12	Head of Control	Public	UAE	Male
Case 13	Operations Manager	Healthcare	UAE	Male
Case 14	Project Manager & Vice President.	Financial services	UAE	Male
Case 15	Regional Channel Manager for Middle East	Insurance	UAE	Male
Case 16	Senior Executive Manager	Aviation	UAE	Female
Case 17	Finance Manager	Construction	UAE	Female
Case 18	Assistant Manager	Public	UAE	Female
Case 19	Senior Manager	Financial Services	UAE	Female
Case 20	Supervisor in Logistics	Consultancy	UAE	Male
Case 21	Branch Manager	Financial services	UAE	Female
Case 22	Founder and CEO	Consultancy	UAE	Female
Case 23	Founder and CEO	Sport & leisure	UAE	Female
Case 24	Managing Director	Real estate	UAE	Male
Case 25	Associate Vice President	Financial services	UAE	Male
Case 26	Chief Executive Officer	Energy	UAE	Male
Case 27	Senior Center of Excellence Manager	Healthcare	UAE	Female
Case 28	Section Manager	Healthcare	UAE	Male
Case 29	Bank Manager Assistant	Financial services	UAE	Male

and challenges. We then clustered the codes into thematically related categories (Gioia et al., 2013), comparing and discussing the codes developed by the different researchers until agreement was reached. We also categorised discussion of existing organisational structures and processes that would encourage or hinder expatriate voice, such as the nature of relationship with local co-workers, management style, organisational structures and organisational systems.

We identified early in the process that nationality and status shape individuals' views and experience of voice, while gender had no consistent effect. However, contrary to the expatriates' opinions, local senior managers did not confirm the effects of nationality on voice. While Table 3 presents examples of the analytical codes at the national

TABLE 3 Exemplar data representing analytical codes (national level).

Overarching dimension: Voice content

1. Legal context

A: Difficult to fire locals	'It is a lot more difficult to fire locals. Even if they become more difficult.' (Expatriate Interview ID 34)
B: Keep things to yourself	'My strategy is to work hard and keep quiet' (Expatriate Interview ID 66)
C: Afraid of losing jobs	'People are afraid of losing their jobs, afraid to be visible' (Expatriate Interview ID 14)
D: Equal voice for Gulf nations	'Most gulf nations speak up more than other employees, but everyone has an equal voice.' (Expatriate Interview ID 7)

2. National culture

A: Not speaking in public	'Sometimes you choose to remain silent in order not to run into problems' (Expatriate Interview ID 15)
B: It's polite to agree	'In Arab countries, you don't disagree with your boss. Whatever he says you just agree and hope for better times' (Expatriate Interview ID 40)
C: Very multinational	'Working in Dubai, such a diverse context, the culture differences understanding is vital.' (Expatriate Interview ID 2)
D: Better to remain quiet	'Mainly fear and culture. We are living and working in a society in which the government determines which subject are appropriate in the public. There are a lot of silent stressors out there.' (Expatriate Interview ID 10)

3. Hierarchy of confidence

A: Expatriates more submissive	'I have observed that non-Western colleagues usually agree and don't say much' (Expatriate Interview ID 38); 'We know that disagreeing gets you in more trouble' (Expatriate Interview ID 40)
B: Locals are more powerful	'Usually, the nationals are more powerful. This is their country and therefore they have more rights than others and it is easier for them to find another job' (Expatriate Interview ID 36)
C: Different multinational hierarchies	'In the Gulf, you have a strong social hierarchy. The local employees seem to be always in a more favourable positions than the others' (Expatriate Interview 67)
D: Tops speak up more freely	'The locals are the most influential ones, then the Western top managers' (Expatriate Interview ID 53)

4. Institutional factors

A: Nationality or race are important	'In UAE: People tend to have more says. I mean: the nationality and race of the people is more important here than in London' (Expatriate Interview ID 3)
B: Arabs have more authority	'Depends on the titles of the jobs (ex: B2C business, Filipino are very good at their jobs, general Arabs having more authority, voices), and characteristic' (Expatriate Interview ID 12)
C: Employees are protected by law	'Employees have enough protection by law' (Expatriate Interview ID 7)
D: Respect opinion of your boss	'In our culture, you respect the opinions of your boss' (Expatriate Interview ID 19)

(Continues)

T A B L E 3 (Continued)

5. Organisational voice systems

A: Nationality matters	'Nationality matters, for example, I experienced an Arab manager, (always out of situation but everyone still needed to listen to him)' (Expatriate Interview ID 18)
B: Europeans have bigger voice	'I think nationalities matter, especially in Dubai, Europeans have bigger voice' (Expatriate Interview ID 17)
C: Feedback, engagement	'Sure. It is an important to get their feedback concerning their work' (Case 4; exp); 'Yes. More say means more engagement and participation.' (Expatriate Interview ID 14)
D: Authority and autonomy	'As a marketing manager, I have to make decisions and require a certain level of authority and autonomy to get my job done' (Expatriate Interview ID 28)

6. Informal networks (wasta)

A: Wasta is everywhere	'Wasta is everywhere, and yes in my organisation it exists, for everyone, not just locals, in fact some employees have more wasta than locals if they know upper management.' (Local Interview ID 16)
B: Informal chats online platforms	'We talk among ourselves about our problems but this is informal with our friends at work' (Case 35; exp); 'routine meetings. Informal chatting/social media.' (Local Interview ID 8)
C: Coffee breaks	'Informal, speaking up in front of coffee machine' (Expatriate Interview ID 16); 'A little, maybe a combination of both, sometimes informal is better' (Local Interview ID 6)
D: Opinion doesn't matter	'The experience that your opinion does not matter is a major factor. I realised that your nationality matters more than your education or professional experience' (Local Interview ID 34)

level, Tables 4 and 5 shows a set of examples of our analytical codes at the organisational and individual level respectively.

We assessed the trustworthiness of our findings by reflecting on how we conducted our study and analysed our data (Pratt et al., 2020). We argue that trustworthiness was achieved on the grounds of plausibility, authenticity, and criticality (Pratt, 2008). First, the expatriates accounts are trustworthy because the interviewers treated the interviewees as peers with related experiences, showed interest in understanding their perspectives and experiences, and assured them of confidentiality. Second, as suggested by Silverman (2013), we did not treat the interviewees' perspectives and experiences as potentially 'true' versions of a fixed reality, but rather as realities that reflected their shared constructions of their social world.

4 | FINDINGS

We present our key findings as they emerged from the data analysis. Our findings are organised under the headings of "context of voice at the national level", "organisational context of voice" and the 'individual level attributes influencing voice'. Quotes from our interviews are given in italics.

4.1 | The context of voice at the national level

Employee voice attitudes and behaviours are partially shaped by contextual factors (Morrison, 2023). In the UAE, unions, collective bargaining, and strikes are unlawful and engagement in such activity can result in job loss and

TABLE 4 Exemplar data representing analytical codes (organisational level).

Overarching dimension: Voice content

7. Structure

A: Position affects voice	'I think depends on the structure, who has more say than the others' (Expatriate Interview ID 23)
B: More autonomy, more voice	'The more autonomy your people are the more can an organisation improve' (Expatriate Interview ID 29)
C: HQ has the strongest voice	'The people in the head office have the strongest voice'. (Expatriate Interview ID 35)
D: Voice is hierarchy dependent	'It is hierarchy dependent, but it is not a secret that the locals enjoy more freedom to speak up' (Expatriate Interview ID 39)

8. Management style

A: Very formal	'Management style is very formal with ranks, there is an order to who reports to who, so it is very formal' (Case 19; loc)
B: Listens to employees	'Management are always willing to support the employees and listen to them'. (Local Interview ID 20)
C: Open door policy	'We try to have an open-door policy here, so management is very nice and not restricted' (Local Interview ID 20)
	'The working environment is very open and friendly. Everyone has given the opportunity to come up with ideas or share concerns' (Local Interview ID 65)
D: Guiding	'My management style is more like a supervisor/guiding style (like a mother to her employees)' (Local Interview ID 9)

Overarching dimension: Voice channel

9. Legal channels

A: Governmental programs	'Emiratization is a major threat for many people" (Case 45; exp); "We have a lot of policies when it comes to working, we ask the workers what times they wish to work, so they have a lot of say over their own work' (Local Interview ID 11)
B: MOHRE call centre	'There was an issue that I raised to management, but they ignored it, a few months later our organisation got a big fine from the government' (Local Interview ID 25)
C: Policies	'We have employee voice organisations, like HR, so any employee can submit anything'. (local Interview ID 14)
D: HR policies	'Depends on the subject, if it's daily work-related thing, she definitely has said, but if it's HR policy related, since they don't have HR department in Dubai office, it's harder to have a say on such subject' (Case 30; exp); '...HR training - providing channel for employees to complain online' (Local Interview ID 14)

10. Organisational channels

A: Weekly briefings	'We have weekly meetings, where we get some information' (Case 41; exp); 'We have weekly briefings on the main things going on' (Expatriate Interview ID 62)
B: Various online info	'Relevant information is available online and we have a weekly newsletter' (Expatriate Interview ID 70)
	'...they have online platform, but also the company has magazine for letting people know what's going on' (Expatriate Interview ID 14)

(Continues)

T A B L E 4 (Continued)

C: Meetings online and office	'We have weekly meetings with the heads of the departments. Then the directors meet the GM on a weekly basis' (Expatriate Interview ID 1)
	'Meetings, and casual activities and online platform (can speak up for everything)' (Expatriate Interview ID 13)
D: Using AI	'We have these happiness machines. Every morning we have to tell the machine if we are happy or unhappy' (Expatriate Interview ID 55)

Overarching dimension: Process of voice

11. Internal voice systems

A: Suggestion box	'We have suggestion boxes and machines to measure our happiness' (Expatriate Interview ID 44)
B: Questionnaires	'There is a big emphasise on happiness in Dubai. The actual goal is to make employees happy. We can press the bottom whether we are happy or whatever...' (Expatriate Interview ID 47)
C: Survey feedback	'...Employees have the opportunity to fill out annually a survey' (Expatriate Interview ID 39)
	'There is an annual satisfaction survey and the happiness stuff' (Expatriate Interview ID 47)
D: Intranet	'Three are several opportunities, such as intranet and so on' (Expatriate Interview ID 45)

12. Informal chats

A: Informal comments	'We talk among ourselves about our problems, but this is informal with our friends at work' (Expatriate Interview ID 36)
B: Informal chat with the manager	'Normally, I am very open with my managers, we are always discussing new business strategies and customer'
	'...Satisfaction' (Local Interview ID 27)
C: Informal meeting with CEO	'CEO of this unit sits with us in an open space office. If there is something, we can always go to him' (Expatriate Interview ID 53)
D: Round table discussion	'We have roundtables to discuss these issues' (Expatriate Interview ID 58)

deportation (Haak-Saheem & Festing, 2020). Moreover, while termination of nationals presents greater challenges given the protection of the government, expatriates employment contracts can be terminated with greater ease. Our interviewees were fully aware of the legal consequences and felt that they are exposed to higher risks than national employees in terms of job security:

> It is a lot more challenging to fire locals. Even if they become more difficult. In contrast, as an expatriate you are supposed to have a more submissive attitude towards your boss
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 34).

and:

> It is hierarchy-dependent, but it is not a secret that the locals enjoy more freedom to speak up, However, even locals don't speak up publicly. They use their own networks to ensure their concerns and suggestions are communicates.
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 46)

TABLE 5   Exemplar data representing analytical codes (individual level).

Making suggestions for improvement

    13. Confidence and competence of Western expatriates

A: Europeans are happy to talk	'I felt that Europeans are more encouraged to share their opinions and concerns' (Expatriate Interview ID 1)
B: Western employees make suggestions	'From my perspective, it has a lot to do with job titles and nationality. People from Western countries speak more often than people from other countries' (Expatriate Interview ID 34)
C: French colleagues bring up concerns	'We have French colleagues; he tries sometimes to bring up our concerns' (Expatriate Interview ID 45)
D: German colleagues coming up with suggestions	'I realised that my German colleagues for example, are those ones coming up with suggestions' (Expatriate Interview ID 43)

Overarching dimension: Identifying issues or problems

    14. Arabs and Asian employees' work and personal issues

A: Chinese and Taiwanese	'Sensitive issue - Chinese and Taiwanese independent topics, she's been avoiding such controversial topics.' (Expatriate Interview ID 12)
B: Long work hours	'They would like to talk about the long working hours or the heavy 6 days working week' (Expatriate Interview ID67)
	'Employees have a lot of say when it comes to how their job works and the benefits that come along with that job' (Local Interview ID 20)
C: Delayed payment, unpaid overtime	'There are talks about delaying payments and unpaid overtime. But the people do not discuss these issues with the management' (Expatriate Interview ID 32)
D: Filipinos and Indians	'…as Filipinos, we are not highly regarded. If I would be a white European or local, it would look different.' (Expatriate Interview ID 50)

Overarching dimension: Sharing an opinion

    15. Hierarchical and national differences to access social networks

A: Indian or Philippines employees	'There is not much space for own opinions'. 'I think it depends on nationalities' (Expatriate Interview ID 34);
	'I have seen some people (e.g., Indians) they would never say something reflecting their own opinions.' (Expatriate Interview ID 16)
B: Talked only when working in US	'The manager in my previous experience in the US, the manager used' army style '(very strict)' (Expatriate Interview ID 11)
C: Local colleagues are more updated	'I assume yes. Anyways, there are cliques (Arabs) they may have more information than others" (Case 30; exp); "the local and Europeans are more often vocal' (Case 17; exp); 'As I said, only the locals can afford to talk' (Expatriate Interview ID 46)
D: Not to contradict senior leadership	'In Arab countries, you don't disagree with your boss. Whatever he says you just agree and hope for better times' (Expatriate Interview ID 50)

Overarching dimension: The choice to remain silent

    1. Unresponsiveness

A: Not to have a too big mouth	'I am coming from a background where people have a big mouth… Because, you are not supposed to question things. Sometimes, I want to say something, but my Indian manager hits me under the table to keep quite.' (Case 30; exp)

(Continues)

TABLE 5 (Continued)

B: Fear of losing jobs	'...People are frustrated about somethings but they don't speak up because of fear to lose jobs' (Case 10; exp)
C: Keep away from trouble	'...I feel comfortable to address, the others I don't. For example, I don't want to put myself into trouble by getting involved into politics' (Case 19; exp); 'We know that disagreeing gets you in more trouble' (Case 40; exp)
D: Opinion versus nationality	'I am working with Asians. They have a general problem in speaking up and sharing their opinions' (Case 12; exp)

The notion of elite networks (wasta) came up in a large number of interviews while discussing voice resulting in the assumption employees often do not engage with their immediate supervisor but use wasta to voice to those who have influence. *Wasta* is an Arabic term referring to a broad set of practices in which an individual is expected to extend favours to family, people from their tribe and friends (Alwerthan, 2016).

In most of the cases, the immediate need to hold a job in order to maintain a residence visa was mentioned frequently and seen as dampening voice. The culture of the UAE was also seen as important in terms of shaping expatriates' voice behaviour:

> We are in an Arab country: It is polite and nice to agree. In this culture, people don't differentiate between criticism towards a topic and a person. Usually, a disagreement or a different opinion is understood as an affront against the person
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 51).

However, according to one local manger, the national (Arab) culture of the UAE has little impact on expatriates' voice:

> The UAE is a very multinational country, different opinions are not a problem. Diversification is needed for a company as it makes employees work together, respecting each other's opinion
>
> (Host country national interview ID 2).

Whilst expatriates are conscious of the impact of institutional factors such as the legal framework and cultural environment, UAE nationals regarded these as the norm and did not refer to them as shaping expatriate voice.

In line with wider social structures, interviewees highlighted how social hierarchy, power dynamics, the clear line between local senior managers and expatriates, and status, have more influence than position in participation in organisational voice systems:

> In our case, one of the assistants is a UAE national. Her working hours differ from the rest of the admin staff. I often observe that she never goes to anyone to sort out an issue or to ask a question. She expects everyone to come to her in case she needs something. Even the VPs often go to her office and treat her quite differently than the rest of the employees. She is neither super smart nor very well educated—but she is a local
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 27).

Moreover, wasta and was often mentioned in association with power and social status in organisations:

> If you have wasta, you get mostly what you want. I have observed colleagues jump pay grades if they have wasta. It is not fair, but it is there. We can't deny it
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 35).

Senior local managers agree:

> Wasta is everywhere, and yes it exists in my organization. For everyone, not just locals, in fact some foreign employees have more wasta than locals if they know upper management
>
> (Host country national interview ID 16).

In summary, the national level factors such as the legal framework or cultural values impact expatriates voice in various ways as exemplified in the presented quotes. The social structure, such the hierarchy within and beyond organisational borders, access to elite networks (*wasta*) are powerful antecedents influencing expatriates to speak up or remain silent.

4.2 | The organisational context of voice

The organisations employing our respondents provide a wide range of formal opportunities for voice: Meetings, suggestion boxes, open door policies, and even 'happiness barometers', are intended to encourage feedback from employees. Most of these policies and practices are transferred from Western textbooks and concepts with little to no adjustment to the local context, with the government emphasising on 'happiness and well-being' as one of its measures of success (Government of the United Arab Emirates National Program for Happiness and Wellbeing, 2018). While many of our interviewees reported not seeing any value in using any of these channels, some suggested that some measures in the organisational environment may facilitate individual voice:

> Everyone including the CEO sits an open space office. So, everybody is approachable and available to anyone
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 68).

Although there were opportunities to speak up, many respondents claimed that the management approach was rather discouraging:

> When you turn on your computer, the system asks you whether you are happy. If not, you have the option to explain what makes you unhappy or uncomfortable. I guess everyone pretends to be happy in order not to engage in further critical conversations. No one knows what they do with the content you type into the system. Entertaining idea, but it's completely useless
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 58).

and:

> Suggestion boxes are watched [CCTV monitored] and there is no confidentiality. Any comment in the suggestion box can be traced back to the respective individual. The boxes look nice, but I don't know anyone who makes use of them
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 51).

Senior local managers are often aware of this mistrust:

> We try to encourage employees to speak to third party about problems to ensure anonymity. Sometimes they think managers will like them less if they speak
>
> (Host country national interview ID 28).

Further, the language barrier was mentioned by a number of expatriate participants. Although, English is spoken everywhere, communication can be sometimes constrained by the inability to speak the local language (Arabic), as exemplified in the following statement:

> As most of the board members are UAE nationals, it is difficult to engage in conversations as a non-Arabic speaking expatriate. Although the common language is English, they often have side conversations in Arabic … I don't know what they talk about. Possibly it is relevant to me and my job…
>
> (Expatriate Interviews ID 31).

Given these views, respondents explained that informal chats or friendships at work would provide better opportunities to speak up than the formal conversations with superiors:

> Our employees are always speaking with us. But sometimes they will make informal comments
>
> (Host country national interview ID 8).

Similar to the findings at the national level, social hierarchies are crucial in organisations, as well. Suggestions or ideas from employees from less prestigious countries such as the Philippines or Ethiopia are seen to be unimportant:

> No, as Filipinos, we are not highly regarded. If I were a white European or a local it would be different
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 50).

While analysing the data, we developed a better understanding of how nationality influences respondents' use of organisational voice systems.

Thus, white expatriates from Western countries generally occupy managerial or specialist positions (Haak-Saheem, 2016, 2020) in which they feel more entitled to speak up. Organisational voice systems are often designed and implemented by Western managers and fit Western-based cultural values. Some Western managers, in contrast to Asian and Arab expatriates, appeared more confident about speaking up:

> I am in the fortunate situation of having many options to be able to voice my opinions and concerns. I think this is one of the reasons why I have been hired
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 45)

One Western entrepreneur explained the non-engagement of Arab and Asian employees in open communication processes:

> My problem with some employees, for example from India or the Philippines, is that they don't say much and always agree. Sometimes, I feel I want to shake them to wake them up. I learnt from early childhood to have an opinion and defend my personal views
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 6)

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In addition to the social networks and hierarchies, workload and performance expectations influence voice attitudes and behaviours. Many expatriates highlighted the heavy workload and the need to meet management expectations as a barrier to coming up with suggestions for improvement:

> I am employed and paid for the job. It is already stressful enough. Why should I create more work for myself? Seriously, at work, I need to focus on my job. After work, I am still busy with the job. There is neither space nor time to think about how to do the job differently or better
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 49).

Many of the local senior managers, however, thought that expatriate employees are constantly unhappy with what they get and quick to complain:

> No matter how big the salary, or how much time off you give them, they will still complain
>
> (Host country national interview ID 29).

Overall, the organisational climate and sense of job security is seen to have a positive impact on expatriates' voice. Contrary, the social hierarchy and status present challenges to voice. Informal conversations based on trust may, of course, lead to increased voice for expatriates. However, our data indicates that organisations have not yet fully understood how to create a working environment in which employees can speak up without any fear. Instead, they invested in formal channels such as the happiness barometers—with limited or no positive effect. Although we interviewed male and female expatriates, we found no differences in voice related to gender.

4.3 | Individual level attributes influencing voice

Interviews with local senior managers reflected their experiences with expatriate voice behaviour. Again, the data also reveals a connection between nationalities and voice attitudes and behaviour. We present the different type of voice as they emerged from our analysis.

Most of the participants felt restrained about making suggestions, though expatriates from Western countries, in managerial roles, feel more comfortable than their colleagues from Arab or Asian countries. However, senior local managers expressed their concerns that expatriate employees often did not advance ideas and suggestions. Expatriates from all countries noted that a Western background facilitated proactive voice behaviour, while Arab and Asian expatriates appear to find it less comfortable to express their ideas:

> I noted for example that my colleagues from the UK and Belgium are a lot more excited about making suggestions than colleagues from Pakistan or Egypt
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 40)

Another respondent put it in this way:

> Given my vast experience in the USA, my manager is keen to listen to me. To be honest, the company did not hire me to fill up office space. I have been recruited because I am valuable to the business. This is why I am here
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 30).

Proactive voice behaviour is also common among Gulf country nationals:

> Usually, Gulf nationals speak up more than other employees, but everyone has an equal voice
>
> (Host country national interview ID 7).

An Indian expatriate said:

> I have learned to be patient with my current situation. It is not in my head to change it. This is the responsibility of management
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 66)

UAE national managers understood that some employees feared losing their jobs, discouraged by their own cultural background—or were personally just shy.

Respondents generally associated suggestion-focused voice behaviour with Western expatriates and management responsibilities, perhaps reflecting an assumption of Western expatriates as more competent and confident.

Furthermore, most of the Arab and Asian respondents, in particular, associated voice with raising complaints, with issues such as increasing living costs or heavy workloads:

> Long hours getting to and from accommodation or access to different schools for children are bothersome for expatriates with families. They would like to bring up these issues but know the company policies
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 13)

and:

> There are talks about delaying payments and unpaid overtime. But people do not discuss these issues with the management
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 32).

Local senior managers were aware of these problems but expatriates rarely if ever engage in conversations in which they bring up problems or concerns. Some expatriates claim that good management practices in the UAE makes problem-focused voice obsolete:

> I am very happy with the management. Everything is well-managed. I wouldn't know what to complain about. The company's CSR focused approach allow employees to speak up
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 7).

A sentiment shared by the local senior managers:

> For my employees I think we have done a good job to address their concerns and needs
>
> (Host country national interview ID 25).

Participants generally prefer to accept minor problems and mute their voice. And, if the problem is of a more fundamental nature, they would prefer to leave things alone rather than speak up:

> Most often, the issues are marginal. If there is a bigger problem, you're better off looking for another job
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 19).

Another respondent stated:

> It depends on a company's culture. In my … new job, … I need to re-think before telling my manager about it, because I wouldn't want to be seen as 'un-reasonable' and demanding
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 18).

A few expatriates—mainly Western expatriates—referred to situations in which they would speak up for the benefit of change and improvement of the organisation:

> We should talk about working hours, accommodation and how working conditions could be improved, but instead my colleagues just worry. As an example, to make clear what I mean: Some of us had the chance to attend a board meeting. An employee provided suggestions to the management about changing to a better school for the expatriate children
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 13).

The issue of change is seen differently by local senior managers:

> There are big changes in our organization, but employees don't like change, because they have been working in their position for a long time, and the change is intimidating
>
> (Host country national interview ID 24).

Respondents also highlighted the importance of being connected to powerful social networks as a means of addressing a work or personal concern:

> Due to the Emiratization efforts of the government, one of our senior managers had to leave, to make the position vacant for a UAE national. Because he was European and a friend of the CEO, he was sent to a prestigious business school in the USA to get additional certification before leaving the company. Such a thing would never happen to normal people: Which employer pays for the education of a foreign employee before leaving?
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 71)

A local senior manager confirmed:

> Here, for example it is easier to solve your problems or get a new job if you know the right people. This is how it works
>
> (Host country national interview ID 29).

But some local senior managers expressed reservations about such examples of *wasta*:

> In this organization, it is a family business, but I have not used wasta because my father is against wasta
>
> (Host country national interview ID 13).

The role of *wasta* was also mentioned in connection to information asymmetries between local employees and expatriates. Throughout the interviews, participants reported that local employees were better informed because of language advantages and access to powerful social networks (*wasta*). These social networks were better channels

to improve things than the formal organisational voice structures. Expatriates felt ill-equipped to comment on issues related to daily work matters. Furthermore:

> I feel that many employees do not care. They are happy to have a job and keep quiet, because it's the best way not to stand out
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 17).

To deal with this issue the local senior managers commented that:

> Whenever I hire a new worker, I pair that worker with the most experienced worker I have, so they can show the new worker that they can speak with us and be confident
>
> (Host country national interview ID 9).

Generally, expatriates' problem-focused voice is mainly influenced by ethnicity, citizenship, culture, organisational dynamics and social hierarchies.

Expatriates suggest limited access to information, social hierarchies, status, and overarching public opinion, as the main reasons not to engage in opinion-focused voice. Frequently, respondents referred to social grouping and exclusion while explaining the reasons to engage or not engage in opinion-focused voice behaviour. For example:

> In general, I have an opinion, but I am somehow an outsider. I am here to work and contribute to the success of my employer. No one here cares about my opinions
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 28).

Expatriates associated better information availability and better accessibility with local employees:

> Local colleagues can read the national newspapers and get more updated news and insider information from their relatives and friends. As an expatriate, you are always a step behind them
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 44).

Some local senior managers stressed the importance of listening to employees:

> We try to give employees freedom to speak their minds, because talking is better than not talking
>
> (Host country national interview ID 28)

and

> For now, things are getting better, each month we get back performance reviews and we are seeing an increase in employee willingness to communicate their positive and negative opinions
>
> (Host country national interview ID 27).

Despite this, some respondents emphasised the importance of supporting senior management opinions rather than having any independent thoughts, and noted how the local culture rewarded that:

> Colleagues who know how to avoid difficult conversations or know how to do the masca polis [sweet talk] get promoted and get better paid
>
> (Interview ID 59).

Senior local managers who communicate with their superiors tend to do so informally:

> Maybe I take managers out to dinner, and we talk about ideas and work
>
> (Host country national interview ID 9).

In general, the culture in the working environment encourages agreement with superiors' opinions, such agreement being seen as being embedded in Arabic culture. Many expatriates use voice as a tool for praising management and leadership:

> The entire system is so unfair. The biggest idiot gets all the reward, because he is an expert in kissing asses
>
> (Interview ID 71).

Once again, participants highlighted the impact of nationality and access to critical social networks as important factors influencing opinion-focused voice, but also noted the limitations of that:

> Western expatriates are expected to have an opinion, but even in their case their opinion should not contradict the opinions of the senior leadership
>
> (Interview ID 49)

Many organisations in the UAE offer both formal and informal channels to encourage expatriates to speak up, but in practice they do not. Based on our data, we identified four main reasons for the muting of voice. First, most expatriates were fearful of losing their jobs. Not only do expatriates using voice put their job at risk, but they also put at hazard their chance of staying in a country where, at whatever level they are in the hierarchy, they can earn, almost tax-free, much more than they could at home. The potential for loss of job and the associated residence visa plays a critical role in the likelihood of speaking up:

> Most people come to the UAE to work and save some money. You can't compromise on your future by having a too big mouth. If I lose this job, I am not sure what would happen to me and my family
>
> (Interview ID 47)

and:

> People fear to lose their jobs. Additionally, I noticed that people are not really interested. Probably this is the best way to deal with the situation. You just do your job and keep yourself out of any trouble
>
> (Interview ID 31).

Local senior managers understood this:

> When working they are making money for their families, so when it comes to problems, they won't tell us because they are worried about being fired
>
> (Host country national interview ID 9).

Second, as noted above, nationality and social status influence the decision of the expatriate about whether to speak up. Whilst there is an expectation that Western expatriates would provide their views and opinions, Asian and Arab expatriates' voice were seen to be less relevant. Western expatriates often (though not always) occupy

managerial positions and are therefore in more favourable situations and, perhaps, even expected to speak up, in a suggestion-focused sense at least, to improve the long-term position of the organisation. Non-Western expatriates, usually, though not in every case, in lower status positions, chose to remain silent:

> The experience that your opinion does not matter is a major factor. I realised that your nationality matters more than your education or professional experience
>
> (Interview ID 33).

However, the local senior executives expressed concerns about employees' refusal to share their issues or views, because this could create greater challenges in the long run:

> On one issue, there were two employees whose air conditioning was not working in their accommodation—instead of coming forward to us about it (we supply the accommodation), they didn't tell us and looked for different living space; this was a problem for us
>
> (Host country national interview ID 8).

Third, using formal channels to speak up may clash with individual cultural values. Respondents from Asian and Arab countries consider speaking up as impolite and disrespectful. In the UAE, locals are in a privileged position and there is a stronger reliance on *wasta* than on formal voice systems:

> There are cultural and language barriers …. Most of the expatriates are not able to read and write Arabic, the official language of this country. Many documents are available in Arabic only
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 13).

Even expatriates in senior managerial or key positions often decide not to speak up if their opinion or ideas clash with the prevailing opinion of the senior leadership:

> We are living in an environment in which people are used to following the mainstream. It is rather unusual to have a personal opinion
>
> (Expatriate Interview ID 24).

Finally, negative experiences with the existing management practices have left many expatriates assuming that their voice does not matter. Their experiences show that *wasta* is more effective than formal voice mechanisms, meaning that local employees enjoy greater access to those with power, whatever their position in the formal hierarchy. Expatriates' social status and local ties determine the extent to which they can access those informal networks. So local employees are able to voice concerns or make suggestions, largely because of their ethnicity and citizenship, whereas expatriates, even high-status ones, often find themselves deliberately withholding challenging information from those in power.

Although previous evidence suggests that men and women might differ in their voice (Harlos, 2010), our evidence did not indicate any such effect and perhaps this was masked by other factors such as nationality.

5 | DISCUSSION

The extant voice literature, like most management literature, is dominated by Western, indeed mostly US, assumptions about organisations and how they operate. And while this literature has been criticised for its unitarism (Nechanska et al., 2020), that is not to say there is no awareness of barriers to voice (Johnstone & Ackers, 2015).

There is a growing acceptance of the need to connect speaking up, the act of voice, with the context of that voice (Hickland et al., 2020; Morrison, 2023). As Morrison (2023, p. 96) notes, progress in understanding how macro-level contextual factors effect voice and silence was minimal.

We have robust evidence from the OB literature linking voice to psychological safety, sense-making and individual traits (Edmondson, 1999; Nechanska et al., 2020). That literature also examines how managers can be more receptive to voice (Kaufman, 2015). At the same time, the HRM literature helps us understand the institutional contexts for voice (Kwon & Farndale, 2020). Thus, we see a growing literature around culture and voice, examining specific cultures or countries for example, how voice in China is shaped by the collectivist culture (Chen et al., 2022) or how cultural values predict employee voice in South Korea and the USA (Park & Nawakitphaitoon, 2018. Expatriates, however, have to operate in a country and culture not their own, so our setting offers opportunities to extend our knowledge of voice in an environment where the interplay of a variable such as positional power is mixed with a range of other factors such as social hierarchy, status, nationality and *wasta*. It also allows to bring together a more connected and dynamic perspective into the voice literature.

Our discussion answers our research questions, indicating how national and organisational level factors interact with the individual level characteristics to impact voice. At the national level, the fact that the UAE is an Arab state, albeit on occasion moderated by the international nature of its population, provides the backdrop to the phenomenon we are investigating.

Some of our respondents noted how public opinion in the country framed notions of voice, highlighting restricted access to media and social media. Indeed, this plays an important role for expatriates who contemplate speaking up (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009). This is in clear contrast to locals who are seen as less constrained by social structures and are therefore more disposed, within the limits of what is seen as 'polite', to speak up to those in authority. This is a rather different picture to that provided in the existing voice literature, where it is assumed, people want to speak up but are afraid of the consequences (Morrison, 2011). Moreover, while the extant voice literature considers hierarchical power as a major barrier to voice (Islam & Zyphur, 2005; Pfrombeck et al., 2022), in the UAE the workforce dynamics are additionally complex. Factors include concern for job security, national difference between expatriates, and expatriate and local divides. From the perspectives of nationals, connections to important and powerful members of the organisations are essential to speaking up.

Specific to this case, a critical theme was the role of *wasta*, related to power and status and not previously explored in terms of voice. We found that local employees have better access to social networks, which were the preferred route to voice. *Wasta* and its association with favour and obligation significantly impacts the process of voice, with a request or suggestion infused with notions of obligation. So *wasta* opens new doors but at the same time places the voice exchange in a different social dynamic. It offers an interesting comparison with *guanxi* which has been more extensively researched (Hutchings & Weir, 2006) and the many unofficial but powerful networks operating in the west. We note particularly that the factors we have identified seem to over-ride gender.

At the organisational level, we find that formal voice channels, although mentioned, were less significant in the minds of our interviewees than discussions about voice systems in organisations usually acknowledge (Marchington, 2008). We expected to find more evidence of use of formal voice channels, such as suggestion schemes, but it would appear that they were not used and indeed are often treated with some suspicion. Within the HRM literature informal voice has been the subject of more interest in recent years (Marchington & Suter, 2013; Mowbray, 2018), with arguments being made that informal settings following lines of accountability and authority may work better. Our research enables us to contribute the idea that organisational hierarchies can be blurred or even replaced by social hierarchies.

At the individual level, suggestion-focused voice was limited: Expatriate interviewees felt that making suggestions for improvements to the work unit or organisation was either unwanted or a discourteous intrusion on management. In so far as this voice activity took place it was limited to Western expatriates who, usually, had management responsibilities.

Using voice to address issues or problems at the workplace was seen by our participants as related to their own problems and personal dissatisfaction rather than being concerned with issues that may be harming the organisation (Morrison, 2011) and was associated with complaining, which was seen as being outside the spirit of their work culture. Our contribution here is to reinforce the importance of understanding national culture: In this case covering both home and host cultures.

As our data shows, respondents talked of the need to support senior management opinions rather than put forward their voice was only seen as being welcomed if it supported the management line. Airing different opinions was seen as unreasonable by some, with a sense that the rules of the game, especially for expatriates, involved following orders. In other words, there was evidence of self-disciplining going on. Overall, our contribution here is to present a much more constrained set of voice expectations than is seen elsewhere in the literature (Wilkinson & Fay, 2011).

Our results indicate expatriate voice is influenced by several factors. Most importantly, expatriates' status influences their attitude towards voice, but status does not necessarily equate in any simple way with hierarchal level. In territories such as the UAE, status is intimately connected with nationality and cultural and professional background—if you know these for any expatriate you can often predict their status within their organisation. In such cases, where status and national background have such a close relationship, the effect is multiplied: Low status Asians do not think about speaking up.

While the extant voice literature considers hierarchical power as a major barrier to voice (Pfrombeck et al., 2022), we argue that the informal structure of an organisation is equally important in understanding expatriates' voice. The position of an individual in the larger informal structure of the organisation is based on social status (Pearce, 2011) and reflects individual differences in power within the organisation. Most extant research has looked at culture through the lens of power distance, but other cultural dimensions may also have a significant influence on shaping employee perceptions (Kwon & Farndale, 2020).

Our study addresses these issues, by exploring national and organisational factors shaping voice of expatriates. Some expatriates may decide just to wait for the end of their contract rather than speak up (Hirschman, 1970). However, for most expatriates, the end of their contract may be years away and many expatriates, particularly in the wealthy Gulf states, renew or seek to renew their contracts.

To date, there is no clear evidence in previous research of the effect of gender differences on the likelihood of speaking up (Morrison, 2011), but the indications are that whilst women may have better communication with their peers (Anderson & Martin, 1995), their tendency to speak up to superiors is less than that of men (Detert & Burris, 2007; Eibl et al., 2020; Yan et al., 2022), although the effects are mitigated by role models and supportive leaders. However, we can suggest that, at least in the case of expatriates in the UAE, the effect of gender is simply 'swamped' by the impact of context, nationality, and culture. Local women are as likely as local men to use voice, Western women expatriates think and act much like Western men expatriates, and Pacific origin and Arab women act similarly to Pacific origin and Arab men.

Expatriate voice could have a significant effect on the value that businesses can generate from employing internationally mobile staff. However, unless such employees are prepared to contribute their knowledge and ideas, the possibilities of knowledge exchange are reduced.

5.1 | Limitations and implications for research

Our sample is from one host country, albeit one with an extensive mix and proportion of expatriates. Research in different institutional and cultural environments, both among the high-status, privileged expatriates mainly discussed in the IHRM literature, and low status expatriates, might find people more or less likely to speak up. It will be important for future research to study more varied samples of employees in different contexts.

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Our findings provide insightful evidence in the role of informal social network (*wasta*) in the context of voice. Future research may benefit from more focus on the role on *wasta* in the wider Arab Gulf countries.

We focussed on perceptions by expatriates of the factors influencing them to speak up through either formal or informal organisational channels, based on their views and experiences. Our goal was to contribute to research that has been done on employee voice in organisations, by exploring the question of the suggestion-, problem- and opinion-driven voice that expatriates may use. A critical next step is to examine more closely the type of organisational and institutional context that fosters expatriate voice. And we believe it is important to develop a better understanding of the organisational consequences of feeling unable to speak up. Our analysis revealed a significant impact of language on expatriates' voice, and future research may also benefit from empirical research on the role of language and phonetics on voice.

5.2 | Implications for practice

The decision not to engage in voice behaviour can result in negative consequences for individuals and for organisations. Silence about important issues can compromise an organisation's ability to identify errors or generate positive innovation. Organisations will benefit from creating an environment in which expatriates will speak up (Shao & Al Ariss, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2018). If managers want expatriates to speak up, they must first design more inclusive work setups which reduce the impact of discrimination.

If speaking up is encouraged and expatriates who spoke up received some tangible or intangible incentives, voice and silence might be different. Our research shows that it is important for employers to develop further understanding of the types of voice expatriates use, or are reluctant to use, and to understand how the demographic variations within their expatriate community may impact that and to adopt different strategies for different communities.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

This paper extends existing work on voice to expatriates, in environments where they form a significant proportion of the workforce. We have argued that voice must be understood in context as a practice embedded in the norms of organisation and society. So, voice is not simply a communicative choice undertaken by individual expatriates, but a decision shaped by norms of practice and embedded in macro-level institutional and social expectations in the host countries as much as in organisational and individual approaches. The diversity of employees working within our chosen context gave us the opportunity to understand how voice is envisaged, and internal pathways are navigated, by expatriates with different characteristics collating status, contract, nationality and access to elite networks (*wasta*). By examining these factors, we are able to provide an alternative view to the predominantly Anglo-American, western body of evidence on employee voice that currently exists and to extend it to expatriates and to a diverse group of nationalities and status levels.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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