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ORIGINAL PAPER

How Moral Identity Inhibits Employee Silence Behavior: The Roles of Felt Obligation and Corporate Social Responsibility Perception

Aimin Yan[1] · Hao Guo[1,2] · Zhiqing E. Zhou[3] · Julan Xie[1] · Hao Ma[1]

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Abstract

As a common organizational phenomenon, employee silence behavior has various negative implications for organizations, making it critical to understand what factors can reduce employee silence. Drawing upon self-verification theory, this study explores the inhibiting effect of moral identity on silence via felt obligation towards organization. Meanwhile, we also examine the moderating effect of corporate social responsibility perception. We collected three waves of data with a two-month interval from 402 Chinese employees. Results indicated that moral identity positively predicted felt obligation towards organization, which in turn negatively predicted silence behavior. The negative indirect effect of moral identity on silence behavior via felt obligation towards organization was moderated by corporate social responsibility perception. Specifically, this indirect effect was stronger when employees perceived a higher level of corporate social responsibility. By integrating self-verification theory with silence behavior research, our findings provide important insights into the prevention of employee silence behavior in organizations.

Keywords Moral identity · Silence behavior · Felt obligation towards organization · Corporate social responsibility perception · Self-verification theory

Introduction

In today's increasingly turbulent business environment, it is critical for employees to speak up and express their opinions or suggestions so their organizations can achieve competitive advantages (Morrison & Milliken, 2000); yet, employees' reluctance to speak up about work-related concerns remains a pervasive phenomenon in organizations (Wang & Hsieh, 2013). Employee silence, defined as employees' intentional withholding of ideas, information, opinions, or concerns about potential problems or related to improvements in work and organizations (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008), can damage team and organizational performance (Morrison, 2014) and even hinder organizational change (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Meanwhile, silence behavior has been linked with decreased employee creativity that is crucial for organizations' survival and competitiveness (Williams & Perlow, 2003). As such, silence behavior is considered immoral, unethical, and harmful for organizations (He et al., 2019; Wang & Hsieh, 2013) and is often viewed as a passive form of counterproductive work behavior (He et al., 2019). These negative implications of employee silence behavior for organizations highlight the importance of identifying factors that can potentially reduce employee silence.

Previous studies have found that organizational factors such as ethical climate (Wang & Hsieh, 2013) and authentic leadership (Guenter et al., 2017) could inhibit silence behavior; however, few studies have explored potential individual inhibitors of silence. In fact, researchers have called for a bottom-up perspective to explore potential suppressing factors of silence behavior at the individual level (Knoll & Van Dick, 2013b) and to explore how individual factors interact with contextual factors to affect employee silence behavior (Nechanska et al., 2020). Specifically, it has been suggested

Aimin Yan and Hao Guo have contributed equally to this work as joint first authors.

✉ Julan Xie
julia_xie@csu.edu.cn

1 School of Business, Central South University, Changsha 410083, China

2 School of Economics, Management and Law, University of South China, Hengyang 421001, China

3 Baruch College and The Graduate Center, City University of New York, New York, NY 10010, USA

that the inhibiting effect of self and identity on silence behavior should be examined (Morrison, 2014). Moral identity, a cognitive schema of self-concept consisting of moral traits (Aquino & Reed, 2002), can promote employees to have more virtues and strengths which could potentially help employees overcome fear and obedience to break silence when others do not act (Knoll & Van Dick, 2013b; Weaver, 2006). Therefore, moral identity may promote individuals to break silence and the first goal of this study is to empirically examine the potential inhibiting effect of moral identity on silence behavior.

Moreover, the understanding of inhibiting mechanisms for silence remains limited. Previous studies have mostly relied on the prosocial motivation mechanism or the risk-efficacy calculus mechanism to explore the inhibiting process of silence (Morrison, 2014). The prosocial motivation mechanism focuses on employees' desire to make a positive change in organization to break silence, overlooking employees' desire to get a positive outcome for themselves (Liang et al., 2012). Meanwhile, the risk-efficacy calculus mechanism describes an instrumental perspective that prioritizes personal costs over organizational interests before silence breaking (Venkataramani & Tangirala, 2010). However, neither the prosocial motivation mechanism nor the risk-efficacy calculus mechanism alone can capture how employees may break silence for the purpose of pursuing personal and organizational interests simultaneously. Because silence breaking can not only promote organizational development but also bring benefits to employees themselves (Morrison, 2014). Therefore, exploring an integrated framework that can capture both aspects will provide a more holistic view of the inhibiting mechanisms for silence behavior, which is the second goal of the current study.

To achieve these research goals, the current study adopts self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 2011) to examine whether moral identity inhibits silence behavior through felt obligation towards organization. Self-verification theory suggests that people have the fundamental need to verify, support, and confirm their selves and to coordinate self-concept with the perceived views of others (Swann, 1983, 2011). Previous studies have employed this theory to explore the verification processes for competent self (e.g., sense of power, Rong et al., 2016) and relational self (e.g., psychological collectivism, Shao et al., 2011) through corresponding cognition and behaviors in the workplace. Based on self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 2011), we believe that when confronting organizational problems or wrongdoings, employees with high moral identity might break silence to be consistent with their moral selves. Further, felt obligation towards organization, which can benefit the organization (Ogunfowora et al., 2021), might serve as a key cognitive processing mechanism linking moral identity and silence breaking behavior in the moral self-verification process. According to self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 2011), employees with high moral identity may enter and stay in organizations that they consider as moral, which helps verify moral self and stimulate the feeling of obligation towards organization as a consistent cognitive outcome. Self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 2011) suggests this consistency between self and cognition contributes to bringing a sense of coherence and control to employees with high moral identity. Meanwhile, considering the positive effect of felt obligation on moral behaviors established in previous studies (Hannah et al., 2014; Ogunfowora et al., 2021), we expect that as a strategy to keep cognitive consistency with the moral self, felt obligation towards organization fostered by moral identity could further motivate employees to break silence to realize the behavioral consistency with the moral self.

Moreover, according to self-verification theory (David et al., 2021), social environments embedded with morality will strengthen the moral self-verification process. Corporate social responsibility, referred to organizations' discretionary practices oriented towards the well-being and welfare of various stakeholders (Farooq et al., 2017), contains moral components transcending organization's self-interests. It can help employees simultaneously observe whether other stakeholders and themselves are treated by their organizations morally, fairly, and consistently. Thus, corporate social responsibility can be a unique source of information for employees to evaluate their organization's morality (Bauman & Skitka, 2012) and to verify their moral self and identity. Thus, in line with self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 2011), employees with higher moral identity can better confirm their moral self with ethical and moral cues stemming from corporate social responsibility, and experience stronger felt obligation towards organization. Subsequently they might engage in more silence breaking behavior.

Taken together, this study proposes and examines a moderated mediation model (see Fig. 1) in which moral

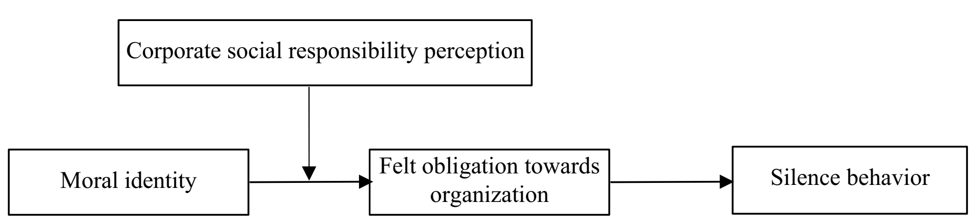

Fig.1 Overview of the hypothesized moderated mediation model

identity is negatively associated with silence behavior through increased felt obligation towards organization, and this mediating effect is stronger when employees perceiving a higher level of corporate social responsibility. Our work makes the following contributions. First, we expand the limited understanding of individual inhibitors of silence behavior by exploring the inhibiting effect of moral identity. Meanwhile, previous studies mainly focused on the verification process of competent self (Rong et al., 2016) and relational self (Shao et al., 2011), this study contributes to expanding the scope of self-verification to moral self. Second, drawing upon self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 2011), this study identifies the meditating role of felt obligation towards organization between moral identity and silence behavior, further advancing our knowledge of the inhibiting mechanism for silence behavior and demonstrates how self-verification mechanism can create win–win situations for the interests of employees and organizations. Third, this study also echoes the call to investigate the interaction effect between personal factors and organizational factors on silence behavior (Nechanska et al., 2020) by examining corporate social responsibility perception as a boundary condition, and also contributing to the understanding of when moral identity is more effective in promoting positive cognitive outcomes (i.e., more felt obligation towards organization) and subsequent behavioral outcomes (i.e., less silence behavior) for moral self-verification.

Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

Self-Verification Theory

The primary tenet of self-verification theory is that people are motivated to confirm and maintain their self-concept, and spontaneously strive for reconciling their self-concept with the perceived views of others (Swann, 1983, 2011). People usually verify the self under a specific context when their self is supported or at stake (Chen et al., 2016; Shao et al., 2011; Xu et al., 2017), and often automatically decide whether and how to verify their self in such contexts (Swann, 1983, 2011). The success of self-verification contributes to retaining integrality and stability, supporting stable social interactions, and gaining personal benefits for individuals (Swann, 1983, 2011).

Self-verification theory provides an integrated theoretical framework to understand the effect and mechanism of moral identity on silence behavior. When confronting organizational problems or wrongdoings, employees might exhibit entirely different behaviors such that someone remains silent while others dare to break silence. We believe self-verification theory could help to explain this phenomenon. Specifically, in this context, keeping silence might challenge the moral self of employees with high moral identity because it is harmful to their organizations and often is viewed as immoral and unethical (He et al., 2019; Wang & Hsieh, 2013). Accordingly, when moral self is at stake, employees with higher moral identity are more likely to initiate the moral self-verification process, experience a sense of obligation, and subsequently exhibit silence breaking behavior. During this process, experiencing felt obligation towards organization is a cognitive reaction to moral self-verification, while exhibiting silence breaking behavior could be viewed as a behavioral reaction.

Specifically, we rely on three self-verification strategies (Swann, 1983, 2011) to develop our hypotheses. First, we will adopt the systematically communicating strategy to develop the hypothesis about the relationship between moral identity and silence behavior. Systematically communicating self-identity to others through behaviors in alignment with one's self-identity is a common strategy for self-verifiers (Rong et al., 2016; Shao et al., 2011). Employees may communicate their moral identity in public through silence breaking behavior which is viewed as moral and is consistent with their moral self. Second, we will employ the selective affiliation strategy, referred to as people verifying self-concept through interaction with the "right" situations (Holtschlag et al., 2019), to explain the mediation effect of felt obligation towards organization. That is, employees with higher moral identity are more likely to enter and stay in moral organizations and develop a stronger obligation for the development of moral organizations. Subsequently, they are more likely to break silence for organizational interests. Lastly, we will explain the moderating effect of corporate social responsibility perception with the selective information processing strategy. This strategy suggests that individuals may notice, process, and respond positively to social information that helps confirm their self-concepts (Chen et al., 2016). That is, moral self-verifiers (i.e., those with high moral identity) are more likely to notice, process, and respond positively to the moral and ethical cues stemming from corporate social responsibility. These moral and ethical cues contribute to moral self-verification and result in more positive cognitive outcomes (i.e., felt obligation towards organization) and behavioral outcomes (i.e., silence breaking behavior).

Moral Identity and Silence Behavior

Moral identity is a self-concept organized around a specific set of moral traits, which represents the degree to which morality is central to an individual's self-concept and reflects the tendency to behave morally in the public (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Meanwhile, moral identity is a typical and key construct of moral self because moral identity involves the internalization of morality into one's self, and influences cognitive self-regulatory capacities (Jennings et al., 2015). In particular, internalization moral identity is considered as the strength to act morally (Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007). Scholars argued that internalization moral identity is a strong and consistent predictor for moral outcomes (Jennings et al., 2015) and can help individuals avoid unethical behaviors by noticing, correcting, and dealing with those unethical behaviors (Aquino & Reed, 2002).

Previous studies found that employees verify collective selves through interpersonal citizenship behavior (Shao et al., 2011) and exhibit voice behavior to verify their sense of power (Rong et al., 2016). Accordingly, this study proposes that employees may verify their moral identity through silence breaking behavior. Silence behavior is a behavioral outcome of employees' conscious and deliberate decisions, which is different from not speaking up when employee have no relevant ideas, suggestions, or opinions (Van Dyne et al., 2003). We believe that moral identity, in particular internalization moral identity, can prevent employee from engaging silence behavior for several reasons. First, based on self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 2011), everyone possesses the fundamental need to verify self-views. Accordingly, when confronting organizational problems or wrongdoings, employees with higher moral identity have the fundamental need to verify their moral selves through certain behavioral strategy. Thus, employees with higher moral identity are motivated to systematically communicate moral self to others by behaving ethically and morally in alignment with their moral traits. They are more likely to regard silence behavior (i.e., intentionally information withholding) as incorrect and immoral (He et al., 2019; Wang & Hsieh, 2013), and regard speaking up their concerns and suggestions as correct, moral, and obligatory for organizational development. In short, employees with higher moral identity might treat silence breaking as a systematically communicating strategy to communicate and verify their moral selves from the behavioral perspective.

Further, employees with higher moral identity could gain personal benefits through silence breaking. According to self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 2011), verifying self-views through consistent conduct helps employees reconcile self-views with perceived views of the others. That is, individuals who define themselves with moral attributes tend to verify who they are by acting morally or in ways considered appropriately by others. Previous study showed silence breaking helped employees be evaluated as responsible citizens (Liang et al., 2012). According to self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 2011), this evaluation is in line with the moral self-concept of employees with higher moral identity and contributes to gain a perception of control and predictability. In addition, previous studies found that moral identity was negatively related to unethical pro-supervisor behaviors (Johnson & Umphress, 2019) and counterproductive work behavior (Yang et al., in press), which has provided indirect empirical support for the inhibiting effect of moral identity on silence. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1 Moral identity is negatively related to silence behavior.

Mediating Effect of Felt Obligation

It has been suggested that the effect of moral identity on moral behaviors can be mediated by many factors (Rua et al., 2017). In this study, we believe felt obligation towards organization can mediate the inhibiting effect of moral identity on silence. Felt obligation towards organization represents a sense of obligation of caring about organizational well-being and to strive for organizational goal achievement (Eisenberger et al., 2001). As a positive attitude in the workplace, felt obligation towards organization can encourage beneficial behaviors for the organization (Morrison, 2014). Felt obligation towards organization can also serve as a driving factor for moral conduct because it will encourage individuals to think about and judge ethical issues through their obligation for the group (Hannah et al., 2014). We employ the selective affiliation strategy to explain the relationship between moral identity and felt obligation towards organization.

Relying on selective affiliation strategy (Swann, 1983, 2011), previous studies argued that individuals with high core-self evaluations would prefer to enter an enterprise that could provide an enriching job consistent with their positive self-view (Holtschlag et al., 2019). Similarly, employees with high moral identity are more likely to enter and stay in an organization that they consider as moral. Because moral identity serves as a self-regulatory mechanism affecting employees' cognitive construction of psychological boundaries that define themselves and their affiliated organization (Reed & Aquino, 2003), it might help employees verify their moral selves to consider their organization as moral and take on the duty and obligation for its development, goals, and interests. Felt obligation towards organization is a cognitive outcome for such moral self-verification by employing selective affiliation strategy.

Further, experiencing felt obligation towards organization might help employees maintain cognitive consistency. Employees with higher moral identity are responsive to the needs and interests of others (Mayer et al., 2012) and less likely to care about their self-interest. Given that felt obligation towards organization helps employees overcome self-interest (Grant & Patil, 2012) and strive for collective interest, employees with higher moral identity are likely to develop stronger felt obligation towards organization to maintain cognitive consistency and internal stability. In contrast, for employees with higher moral identity, a lower level of felt obligation towards organization represents an incongruence between employees' identity and cognition which cause cognitive dissonance and self-condemnation. While previous studies have not directly examined the relationship between moral identity and felt obligation towards organization, there is indirect support for our argument. For example, Van der Werff et al. (2013) found that environmental self-identity promoted obligation-based intrinsic motivation that referred to one's felt obligations to perform a certain behavior. Consequently, we propose as following:

Hypothesis 2 Moral identity is positively related to felt obligation towards organization.

This study further proposes that felt obligation towards organization can drive employees to break silence despite potential interpersonal risks. Specifically, according to self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 2011), individuals strive for the consistency between their cognition and behavior in the self-verification process and their behavioral choice is governed by their sense of responsibility to the collective or group (Folger, 2012). Felt obligation towards organization which reflects a genuine focus on the organization might enable employees' acceptance of potential interpersonal risks to contribute to organizations' broader interests and goals (Ogunfowora et al., 2021). Meanwhile, silence breaking behavior is beneficial for organizational development (Morrison, 2014). Thus, employees who have stronger felt obligation towards organization might be more likely to break silence to promote collective interests rather than remaining silent for self-interest. By doing so, they may achieve a consistency between cognition and behavior. Several empirical studies have preliminarily found a positive association between felt obligation and moral actions (Hannah et al., 2014; Ogunfowora et al., 2021), providing some empirical foundation for the negative link between felt obligation towards organization and silence behavior.

Combining our theoretical development for the link between moral identity and felt obligation towards organization, we further propose that felt obligation towards organization will serve as a key cognitive mechanism linking moral identity and silence behavior in the self-verification process. According to the selective affiliation strategy for self-verification (Swann, 1983, 2011), people tend to selectively join the "right" environments compatible with their self or identity and generate positive attitudes and actions towards the "right" environments to strengthen this selective affiliation and confirm their self or identity. Specific to this study, moral identity motivates employees to join a moral organization and experience an obligation to contribute to the moral organization development as a cognitive outcome for self-verification. Subsequently, owing to the shared organizational interests between felt obligation towards organization and silence breaking, felt obligation towards organization may foster silence breaking behavior to achieve the consistency between cognition and behavior. In short, increased felt obligation towards organization can translate higher moral identity into silence breaking behavior (a moral behavior), and help employees achieve a consistency among the self, cognition, and behavior in the moral self-verification process. Therefore, these theoretical arguments inspire us to suggest the following mediating hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3 Moral identity is negatively related to silence behavior via increased felt obligation towards organization.

Moderating Effect of Corporate Social Responsibility Perception

Consistent with the argument that the social environment is important for individuals to verify and confirm their selves (David et al., 2021), empirical studies based on self-verification theory have found that ethical climates strengthened the positive effect of self-verification striving on work performance via demand–ability fit and vigor (David et al., 2021). Similarly, corporate social responsibility might also shape a moral social environment for employees' moral self-verification because they are organizational practices that go beyond the pursuit of economic profit, take a broader moral responsibility, and contribute to the promotion of social good (Farooq et al., 2017).

Common corporate social responsibility initiatives conducted by organizations include environment protection, charitable donation, and employee assistance and development programs (Rupp et al., 2018). Corporate social responsibility represents organizations' discretionary practices aimed to promote stakeholders' well-being (Farooq et al., 2017). Given the moral and normative treatment to stakeholders, corporate social responsibility contains moral components transcending self-interests (Hansen et al., 2016). Hence, corporate social responsibility could deliver moral, ethical cues to employees, and help them evaluate the moral nature of the organization (Bauman & Skitka, 2012). Corporate social responsibility perception reflects the employees' subjective perception of the extent to which their employer is involved in corporate social responsibility practices (Rupp et al., 2018).

In the self-verification process, individuals may adopt the selective information processing strategy to verify their selves (Chen et al., 2016). Thus, moral self-verifiers (i.e., those with high moral identity) might seek for and process social information that could confirm their moral selves and respond positively to self-confirming information. Because employees tend to possess an ethical need of working for a moral organization (Rupp et al., 2006), moral identity may enhance employees' sensitivity and awareness of moral and ethical cues in the workplace (Wang et al., 2021).

Accordingly, corporate social responsibility initiatives can deliver such moral and ethical cues (Hansen et al., 2016) and provide information for moral self-verifiers to confirm their moral selves.

Specifically, organizations engaging in more corporate social responsibility initiatives are considered as prestigious and respected, which can help their employees experience a sense of prestige and respect from their organizational affiliations (Bauman & Skitka, 2012). Similarly, corporate social responsibility can help employees internalize their membership of a moral organization into their selves (May et al., 2015) and further allow employees to perceive that they are moral and ethical persons. Meanwhile, as we discussed above, felt obligation towards organization can be viewed as a moral cognitive outcome for moral self-verification. Thus, in line with self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 2011), the self-confirming information stemming from corporate social responsibility initiatives will be salient for moral self-verifiers, motivate them to morally ‘identify’ more with their organization (May et al., 2015) and develop stronger obligation for moral organizations' development.

That is, when perceiving a higher level of corporate social responsibility, employees with high moral identity will receive more moral and ethical cues stemming from corporate social responsibility initiatives to satisfy their needs for moral self-verification and confirm their moral selves. As a result, they will experience greater felt obligation towards organization as a cognitive outcome for moral self-verification. In contrast, when perceiving a lower level of corporate social responsibility, employees with high moral identity will only receive limited moral and ethical cues, resulting in limited increase in felt obligation towards organization. Taken together, we believe that corporate social responsibility perception may strengthen the positive impact of moral identity on felt obligation towards organization.

Hypothesis 4 Corporate social responsibility perception moderates the effect of moral identity on felt obligation towards organization, such that this positive relationship is stronger for employees with a higher level of corporate social responsibility perception.

An Integrative Moderated Mediation Model

Considering the mediation and moderation hypotheses stated above, we further propose a first-stage moderated mediation model, in which corporate social responsibility perception moderates the indirect effect of moral identity on silence behavior via felt obligation towards organization. According to self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 2011), moral people tend to interact with moral environment and situational information with greater morality. Corporate social responsibility initiatives can provide unique information for employees to evaluate their organizations' morality (Bauman & Skitka, 2012), and will encourage stronger cognitive and behavioral reactions to moral self-verification. Accordingly, a higher level of corporate social responsibility perception may help employees better confirm their moral identity, resulting in more felt obligation towards organization to maintain cognitive consistency with moral self, and ultimately encouraging employees to break silence to further verify their moral selves from the behavioral perspective. Thus, we hypothesize as following:

Hypothesis 5 Corporate social responsibility perception moderates the indirect effect of moral identity on silence behavior via felt obligation towards organization, such that the negative indirect effect is stronger for employees with a higher level of corporate social responsibility perception.

Method

Participants and Procedure

To mitigate common method variance and following practices in previous studies on moral identity (e.g., Zhou et al., 2018) and felt obligation (e.g., Carnevale et al., 2020), we adopted a three-wave design with an interval of two months. Furthermore, based on recommendations by Podsakoff et al. (2012), we used several procedural controls to alleviate the common method variance. Specifically, we used anchor point number and response format dissimilarity in questionnaires to reduce anchoring effects. In addition, some items were reverse-coded, which could decrease response pattern biases. Lastly, we assured participants that their answers would be anonymous and there were no right or wrong answers to question.

Data were collected from 402 fulltime employees working in Chinese enterprises located in Central and Southern Mainland China. These enterprises were from finance industry, manufacturing industry, mining and smelting industry, pharmaceutical industry, and real estate and logistics industry. Before distributing the study surveys, each participant was assigned with a unique identification number to match the responses across three times. Following practices in previous studies (Daikeler et al., 2020), we made additional efforts to increase the response rate and data quality. Specifically, we distributed paper-and-pencil questionnaires directly in the organizations. With the help of managers, participants were gathered in the conference room to fill out questionnaires on site. Participants were compensated with 10 Chinese Yuan for completing each survey.

At Time 1, we invited 655 employees to provide their demographic information as well as the ratings of moral identity and corporate social responsibility perception. We received valid responses from 560 employees (response rate = 85.50%). Two months later, 560 participants from Time 1 were asked to complete a second survey that assessed their felt obligation towards organization, and 483 respondents (response rate = 86.25%) returned their valid responses. Further, Time 3 survey measuring silence behavior was distributed two months after Time 2 to 483 employees who had provided valid responses in Time 2, and we received 402 valid responses with a response rate of 83.23%.

In the final sample of 402 employees, 178 were female (44.30%). The average of age and position tenure was 35.380 years ($SD = 8.137$) and 4.923 years ($SD = 4.820$), respectively. Among them, 64.20% had a bachelor's degree or above and 48.50% worked in non-managerial positions. Participants were from various industries, with 20 from the finance industry (5.00%), 117 from the manufacturing industry (29.10%), 121 from the mining and smelting industry (30.10%), 100 from the pharmaceutical industry (24.90%), and 44 from the real estate and logistics industry (10.90%). Detailed information can be found in Table 1.

Table 1 Participant's demographic information ($N = 402$)

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	224	55.70
Female	178	44.30
Education level		
High school degree and below	52	12.90
College's degree	92	22.90
Bachelor's degree	225	56.00
Master's degree and above	33	8.20
Position		
Non-managerial position	195	48.50
Junior management level	207	51.50
Age (years)		
20—30	128	31.80
30—40	174	43.30
40—50	82	20.40
50—60	18	4.50
Position tenure (years)		
≤5	279	69.40
5—10	81	20.20
10—15	28	7.00
15—20	7	1.70
>20	7	1.70
Industry		
Finance	20	5.00
Manufacturing	117	29.10
Mining and smelting	121	30.10
Pharmaceutical	100	24.90
Real estate and logistics	44	10.90

Measures

Because all measures were originally developed in English, we translated them into Chinese by strictly following the translation and back-translation procedure suggested by Brislin (1986). Specifically, we invited two Ph.D. students in Management to translate all English items into Chinese. Then, one bilingual researcher and three master students translated them back into English. The authors and six translators compared the original English version and translated English version to address any discrepancy and inaccuracy. The Chinese questionnaires were modified and finalized to ensure conceptual equivalence between two languages, as well as to assure that the expression of Chinese version could be easily and correctly understood by the respondents.

Moral Identity (Time 1)

In consistent with prior studies (Rupp et al., 2018), moral identity was assessed by the internalization dimension of the moral identity scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) developed by Aquino and Reed (2002). Participants were asked to imagine how a person with following nine characteristics: *caring, kind, compassionate, generous, helpful, fair, friendly, hardworking, and honest* would to think, feel, and act. After having a clear concept of him or her in mind, participants were required to answer five questions. Example questions included "It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics." Internal consistency reliability coefficient (Cronbach's α) was 0.801, and composite reliability coefficient (McDonald's ω) was 0.802.

Corporate Social Responsibility Perception (Time 1)

A five-item scale (Rupp et al., 2018) was used to measure corporate social responsibility perception (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Sample items included "A program is in place to reduce the amount of energy and materials wasted in our business." The Cronbach's α and McDonald's ω for this scale were 0.757 and 0.762, respectively.

Felt Obligation Towards Organization (Time 2)

We assessed felt obligation towards organization using five items from Eisenberger et al.'s (2001) scale. This scale is a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Sample items included 'I feel a personal obligation to do whatever I can to help the organization achieve its goals.' The α coefficient was 0.858 and its ω coefficient was 0.860.

Silence Behavior (Time 3)

We measured silence behavior using a five-item scale developed by Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008). Participants reported how often they exhibited silence behavior (e.g., "You remained silent when you had information that might have helped prevent an incident in your workgroup") over the past two months (1 = never, 5 = very frequently). This scale's Cronbach's α was 0.880 and McDonald's ω was 0.879.

Control Variables (Time 1)

Prior studies demonstrated females have higher potential than males to break silence (Lam & Xu, 2019). Moreover, it has been found that position (Venkataramani & Tangirala, 2010), age, and tenure were negatively related to silence (Rai & Agarwal, 2018). In addition, there was a positive relationship between education and silence (He et al., 2019). Therefore, in line with these studies, we controlled gender, age, education level, position, and position tenure. Gender was coded as 0 (= male), and 1 (= female). Age and position tenure were measured in years. Education level was coded as 1 (= high school degree and below), 2 (= college degree), 3 (= bachelor's degree), and 4 (= master's degree and above). Position was coded as 1 (= non-managerial position), and 2 (= junior management level). Additionally, previous study proposed that industry may influence employees' silence breaking (Hatipoglu & Inelmen, 2018), such that employees in some industries (e.g., high-tech industry) are more likely to break silence. Thus, we controlled industry in statistical analysis by creating four dummy variables for five industries with the benchmark group of pharmaceutical industry.

Analysis Strategy

Following the procedures developed by Hayes (2012), this study used SPSS27 PROCESS macro to test all hypotheses. Specifically, Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 2, and Hypothesis 3 (mediation effect) were tested using PROCESS Model 4. Hypothesis 4 (moderation effect) and Hypothesis 5 (moderated mediation effect) were tested using PROCESS Model 7. Moreover, Johnson–Neyman analysis was conducted to examine the regions of significance for interaction effect. The proposed indirect effect and moderated mediation effect were tested by calculating bootstrap-based 95% confidence intervals with bias correction (5000 iterations). Besides, the present study dealt with missing values data using multiple imputation by fully conditional specification.

Results

Attrition Analysis

Following Carlson et al.'s (2019) suggestion, we conducted attrition analyses by comparing the means of independent variable and demographic information between the group of attrition sample (who only participated at Time 1, $n = 158$) and the group of retention sample (who participated at all three times, $n = 402$). Results of independent-samples t tests indicated no significant between-group differences in terms of moral identity ($t_{(558)} = 1.128$, $p > 0.05$), age ($t_{(558)} = -0.352$, $p > 0.05$), and position tenure ($t_{(558)} = -1.000$, $p > 0.05$). Results of independent-samples non-parametric tests showed that there was no difference in gender ($Z = -1.357$, $p > 0.05$), education level ($Z = -0.938$, $p > 0.05$), and position ($Z = -1.570$, $p > 0.05$) between two group, except industry ($Z = -2.715$, $p < 0.01$). Taken together, the attrition of respondent may not cause serious non-response bias. We controlled for the effect of industry as part of our analyses.

Validity and Common Method Variance Analyses

We conducted analyses to examine the distinctiveness of focal variables. First, the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results from Table 2 indicated that the fit of four-factor model presented good fit with the data ($\chi^2 = 387.735$, $df = 164$, CFI = 0.935, TLI = 0.924, RMSEA = 0.058), and fitted the data significantly better than alternative models, including the single-factor model combing all four

Table 2 Comparison of measurement models

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
The hypothesized four-factor model (MI, CSRP, FLO, SIL)	387.735	164	2.364	0.935	0.924	0.058
The three-factor model (MI + CSRP, FLO, SIL)	772.731	167	4.627	0.823	0.798	0.095
The two-factor model (MI + CSRP + FLO, SIL)	1316.104	169	7.788	0.664	0.623	0.130
The single-factor model (MI + CSRP + FLO + SIL)	2042.039	170	12.012	0.452	0.388	0.166
Common method factor model (MI, CSRP, FLO, SIL, ULMC)	310.915	144	2.159	0.951	0.936	0.054

MI moral identity, *CSRP* corporate social responsibility perception, *FLO* felt obligation towards organization, *SIL* silence behavior, *ULMC* unmeasured latent method construct studied variables into one factor ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1654.304$, $\Delta df = 6$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, we tested discriminant validity using Heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio of the correlation approach, and results showed that HTMT ratios between focal variables were ranging from 0.191 to 0.461, which were less than the threshold value 0.85 proposed by Henseler et al., (2015). These results indicated a satisfactory discriminant validity.

An Unmeasured Latent Method Construct (ULMC) analysis was conducted to assess common method variance (CMV) (Podsakoff et al., 2012). As shown in Table 2, the differences of CFI ($\Delta CFI = 0.016$) and NFI ($\Delta NFI = 0.021$) between the four-factor model and the ULMC model ($CFI = 0.951$, $TLI = 0.936$, and $RMSEA = 0.054$) were below the suggested rule of thumb of 0.05 proposed by previous studies (Bagozzi & Yi, 1990; Gong et al., 2022), which indicated that there was no significant difference in the results. Moreover, although some items' loadings on the method factor were significant, the results revealed that only 13.85% of the total variance was accounted for by the method factor, which was lower than the recommended guideline cutoff of 25% (Williams et al., 1989) or the average level of variance explained by method factor found in other studies (16–32% of the total variance, Bozionelos & Simmering, 2022). Lastly, this study proposed and examined a moderated mediation model that involved an interaction effect. It has been suggested that CMV is less a concern for the interaction effect (Siemsen et al., 2010). Taken together, we believe CMV should not cause serious bias in our findings.

Descriptive Statistics

As seen in Table 3, moral identity was positively associated with felt obligation towards organization ($r = 0.270$, $p < 0.001$). Moral identity ($r = -0.242$, $p < 0.001$) and felt obligation towards organization ($r = -0.408$, $p < 0.001$) were negatively correlated to silence behavior. These evidences provided initial support for Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 2, and Hypothesis 3. In addition, results revealed that gender, age, and position tenure were negatively associated with silence while there was a positive relationship between education and silence. Position was not significantly related to felt obligation towards organization ($r = 0.061$, $p > 0.05$) or silence behavior ($r = -0.058$, $p > 0.05$). Thus, following the suggestions of previous study (Becker et al., 2016), all but position was included in regression analyses as control variables.

Hypotheses Tests

We conducted multicollinearity diagnostics by testing the tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) values between the predictors of each regression model. Results showed that the highest VIF value in our regressions was 1.744, which was far less than the threshold of 10, and the lowest tolerance in our regressions was 0.573, which was far higher than the threshold of 0.10. Taken together, there was no serious potential threat of multicollinearity between predictors.

H1 proposed that moral identity would be negatively associated with silence behavior. As shown in Table 4, moral identity negatively predicted silence behavior ($B = -0.312$, $p < 0.001$, Model 3), supporting H1. H2 suggested that moral identity positively predicted felt obligation towards organization, which was supported ($B = 0.299$, $p < 0.001$, Model 1).

We proposed a mediation model in which felt obligation towards organization mediated the negative effect of moral identity on silence behavior (H3). As seen in Table 4, the regression coefficient of silence behavior on moral identity was -0.312 ($p < 0.001$, Model 3). Felt obligation towards organization negatively predicted silence behavior ($B = -0.404$, $p < 0.001$, Model 4). When considering the effect of felt obligation towards organization, the effect of moral identity on silence behavior decreased to -0.191 ($p < 0.001$, Model 4). Moreover, the indirect effect of moral identity on silence behavior through felt obligation towards organization was -0.121 (*Boot* $SE = 0.027$, 95% CI [-0.179, -0.071]), and indirect effect accounted for 38.78% of the total effect. Taken together, felt obligation towards organization partially mediated the negative effect of moral identity on silence behavior, and H3 was supported.

H4 suggested that corporate social responsibility perception moderates the relationship between moral identity and felt obligation towards organization, this relationship would be stronger under a higher level of corporate social responsibility perception. Results from Model 2 of Table 4 showed that the interaction between moral identity and corporate social responsibility perception significantly predicted felt obligation towards organization ($B = 0.263$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, consistent with previous studies (e.g., Chatzopoulou et al., 2022), we operationalized a higher level of corporate social responsibility perception as one standard deviation above the mean level of corporate social responsibility perception and a lower level of corporate social responsibility perception as one standard deviation below the mean level. Simple slope tests showed that the effect of moral identity on felt obligation towards organization was significant and positive for employees with a higher level of corporate social responsibility perception [$B_{simple} = 0.397$, $SE = 0.070$, 95% CI (0.260, 0.534)], but was not significant for employees with a lower level of corporate social responsibility perception [$B_{simple} = 0.016$, $SE = 0.081$, 95% $CI = (-0.144, 0.176)$]. Figure 2 showed the pattern of this interaction effect. We further conducted Johnson–Neyman technique (Hayes & Mattes, 2009) to probe this interaction effect. Results revealed when the value of corporate social responsibility perception was lower than 3.685, the

Table 3 Means, standard deviations, then correlations of studied variables ($N = 402$)

Studied variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Gender	0.440	0.497												
2. Age	35.380	8.137	− 0.165***											
3. Education	2.590	0.816	0.044	− 0.417***										
4. Position	1.500	0.483	− 0.066	0.156**	0.104*									
5. Position tenure	4.923	4.820	− 0.021	0.525***	− 0.306***	0.037								
6. Industry dummy 1	0.301	0.459	− 0.137**	0.127*	− 0.066	0.084	0.217***							
7. Industry dummy 2	0.291	0.455	− 0.163**	0.131**	− 0.098*	− 0.095	0.076	− 0.420***						
8. Industry dummy 3	0.110	0.313	0.089	− 0.246***	0.047	− 0.169***	− 0.182***	− 0.230***	− 0.225***					
9. Industry dummy 4	0.050	0.218	0.072	− 0.113*	0.086	− 0.130**	− 0.113*	− 0.150**	− 0.147**	− 0.080				
10. Moral identity	4.216	0.540	0.043	− 0.032	0.099*	0.081	− 0.131**	− 0.011	0.034	0.038	− 0.020			
11. Corporate social responsibility perception	5.715	0.724	0.092	− 0.020	− 0.017	− 0.005	− 0.058	− 0.087	− 0.061	0.032	0.009	0.234***		
12. Felt obligation towards organization	5.842	0.601	− 0.044	0.175***	− 0.015	0.061	0.011	− 0.050	0.030	0.026	− 0.050	0.270***	0.282***	
13. Silence behavior	2.074	0.644	− 0.116*	− 0.118*	0.108*	− 0.058	− 0.108*	− 0.017	− 0.033	0.111*	0.081	− 0.242***	− 0.157**	− 0.408***

M Mean, *SD* Standard deviation. We created four dummy variables for five industries

$^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$

relationship between moral identity and felt obligation towards organization was significantly negative. When the value of corporate social responsibility perception was between 3.685 and 5.394, the relationship between moral identity and felt obligation towards organization was not significant. Lastly, when corporate social responsibility perception value was larger than 5.394, the relationship between moral identity and felt obligation towards organization was significantly positive. Taken together, these results supported H4 such that the positive relationship between moral identity and felt obligation towards organization was stronger for employees with a higher level of corporate social responsibility perception.

H5 suggested that the mediation effect of felt obligation towards organization would be stronger for employees with a higher level of corporate social responsibility perception. Results indicated that the indirect effect of moral identity on silence behavior through felt obligation towards organization was significantly negative for employees with a higher level of corporate social responsibility perception [*indirect effect* = − 0.160, *Boot SE* = 0.036, 95% *CI* (− 0.237, − 0.097)], but not significant for employees with a lower level of corporate social responsibility perception [*indirect effect* = − 0.006, *Boot SE* = 0.031, 95% *CI* (− 0.072, 0.053)]. Moreover, the index of moderated mediation was significant [*index* = -0.106, *Boot SE* = 0.031, 95% *CI* [-0.171, -0.048)]. These results indicated that for employees with a higher level of corporate social responsibility perception, the mediation effect of felt obligation towards organization in the negative relationship between moral identity and silence behavior was stronger, which support H5.

Discussion

Employee silence behavior has gained great research interest from organizational behavior and human resource management scholars (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). However, the investigation of individual inhibitors remains scarce, especially from the self or identity perspective (Knoll & Van Dick, 2013b; Morrison, 2014). Meanwhile, there is limited understanding of the inhibiting mechanism for silence behavior beyond the prosocial motivation mechanism and risk-efficacy calculus mechanism (Morrison, 2014). Based on self-verification theory (Swann, 1983, 2011), the current study explores the inhibiting effect of moral identity on silence behavior. We found that employee moral identity negatively predicted silence behavior and that felt obligation towards organization mediated this negative effect. In addition, the indirect effect was stronger for employees with a higher level of corporate social responsibility perception. Overall, these findings demonstrated that self-verification motives have the potential to inhibit employee silence and help create win–win situations for the interests of organizations and employees.

Theoretical Implications

This study offers several theoretical implications. First, this study demonstrates the potential inhibiting effect of moral identity on silence behavior. While previous studies have found that proactive personality traits such as openness (Bateman & Crant, 1993) and extroversion (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014) might reduce silence behavior, whether identity or self has potential inhibiting effect on silence behavior remains insufficiently explored (Morrison, 2014). The current study finds that moral identity, as a moral self, also has the potential to inhibit silence behavior. In line with previous findings that authenticity can suppress silence behavior (Knoll & Van Dick, 2013a), our study enriches the understanding of identity or self-related inhibitors of silence and answers the call to adopt a bottom-up perspective to explore the suppression of silence behavior at the individual level (Knoll & Van Dick, 2013b). Further, while previous studies have mainly employed self-verification theory to explain how and when employees exhibit corresponding behavior to verify competent self (Rong et al., 2016) and relational self (Shao et al., 2011), our study suggests that employees with high moral identity may also verify their moral self by engaging in silence breaking behavior, expanding the scope of self-verification from competent self and relational self to moral self. This finding also provides empirical support for the systematically communication strategy (Swann, 1983, 2011). Such that people may communicate their self-identity (e.g., moral identity) to others through behaviors (e.g., silence breaking behavior) in alignment with their self-identity.

Second, this study demonstrates that felt obligation towards organization acts as a key cognitive mechanism for the inhibiting effect of moral identity on silence behavior. This finding extends previous studies that have mostly relied on prosocial motivation mechanism or risk-efficacy calculus mechanism to explore the inhibiting mechanism of silence (Morrison, 2014). Neither the prosocial motivation mechanism nor the risk-efficacy calculus mechanism alone can capture how employees may break silence for the purpose of pursuing personal and organizational interests simultaneously. However, it is likely that employees' silence breaking behavior can promote organizational development as well as bring benefits for employees (Morrison, 2014). The current study found that increased felt obligation towards organization, as an outcome of the selective affiliation strategy to verify moral identity, may promote employees to engage in less silence behavior. The success of moral self-verification could achieve a consistency among self, cognition and behavior, which may bring several personal benefits (e.g.,

Table 4 Regression results of hypotheses testing ($N=402$)

Variable	Felt obligation towards organization				Silence behavior			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	B	*SE*	*B*	*SE*	*B*	*SE*	*B*	*SE*
Gender	− 0.047	0.061	− 0.068	0.058	− 0.156*	0.065	− 0.175**	0.060
Age	0.017***	0.005	0.017***	0.004	− 0.003	0.005	0.004	0.005
Education	0.027	0.039	0.034	0.038	0.075	0.042	0.086*	0.039
Position tenure	− 0.005	0.007	− 0.007	0.007	− 0.010	0.008	− 0.012	0.007
Industry dummy 1	− 0.115	0.081	− 0.064	0.078	0.072	0.087	0.026	0.081
Industry dummy 2	− 0.060	0.081	− 0.016	0.078	0.057	0.087	0.033	0.081
Industry dummy 3	0.065	0.106	0.114	0.102	0.272*	0.113	0.298**	0.105
Industry dummy 4	− 0.112	0.140	− 0.073	0.134	0.259	0.150	0.213	0.140
Moral identity	0.299***	0.054	0.206***	0.054	− 0.312***	0.058	− 0.191***	0.056
Felt obligation towards organization							− 0.404***	0.050
CSRP			0.182***	0.040				
Moral identity * CSRP			0.263***	0.074				
R^2	0.121***		0.197***		0.119***		0.244***	

CSRP corporate social responsibility perception

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$

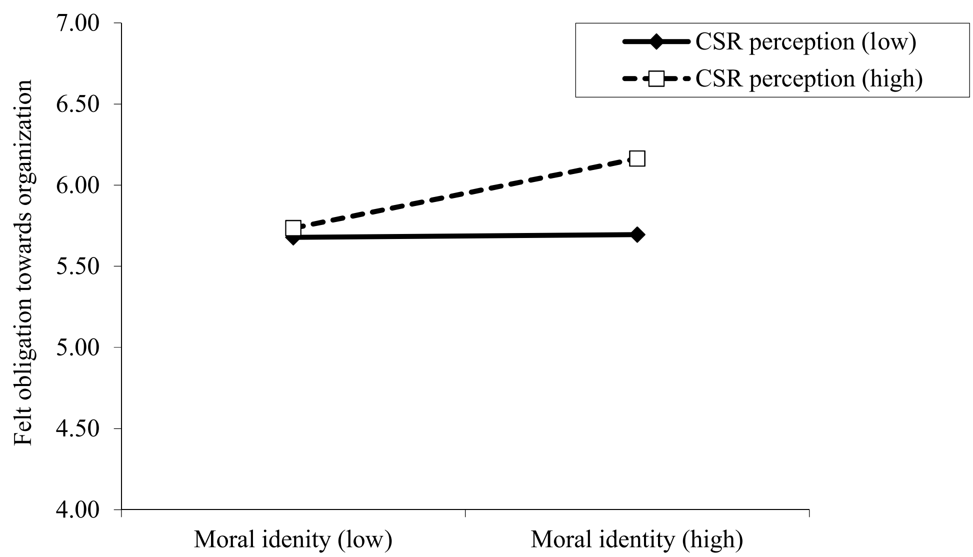

Fig. 2 The moderating effect of corporate social responsibility perception on the relationship between moral identity and felt obligation towards organization *CSR perception* Corporate social responsibility perception

a sense of control, predictability, and coherence, Swann, 1983, 2011). Meanwhile, promoted by moral identity, felt obligation towards organization promotes employees break silence for organizational development. Hence, our findings suggest that self-verification mechanism can be instrumental to understand how people might break silence to pursue both personal benefits and organizational benefits simultaneously.

Third, the current study emphasizes the importance of corporate social responsibility perception as a contextual boundary condition enhancing moral identity's inhibiting effect on silence behavior via felt obligation towards organization. The existing literature of silence behavior has mostly focused on the contextual factors or personal factors alone with limited focus on their interaction effect (Nechanska et al., 2020). Our findings establish the contextual boundary condition of corporate social responsibility perception of the relationship between moral identity and silence behavior via felt obligation towards organization, which echoes the call to investigate the interaction effect between personal factors and organizational factors on silence behavior. Moreover, our findings suggest that corporate social responsibility perception, like ethical climate (David et al., 2021), can provide moral self-confirming information and create a moral social environment for moral self-verification. This finding provides empirical support for the selective information processing strategy for self-verification and helps us understand how contextual cues with morality can strengthen cognitive and behavioral reactions to moral self-verification.

Practical Implications

Inhibiting employees' silence behavior is a shared managerial concern (Morrison, 2014), and our findings can offer several managerial implications. First, the current study establishes that employees' moral identity can be instrumental to inhibit silence behavior. Therefore, enterprises should recognize the value of employees' moral identity in reducing silence behavior and integrate their focus on moral identity in their human resource management practices. For example, they can integrate moral identity into the recruitment, selection, and promotion processes to hire and promote "moral person" (Wang et al., 2021), especially for positions at which silence has more detrimental implications (e.g., high-risk environment). Further, more targeted training programs can be launched to enhance employees' moral identity (Xu & Ma, 2015).

Second, the identification of the mediation role of felt obligation towards organization suggests that in addition to enhancing moral identity, enterprises may inhibit silence behavior by nurturing employees' felt obligation towards organization. Enterprises could use various human resource practices to foster employees' felt obligation towards organization. For instance, designing and launching staff training is a useful tool for developing employees' felt obligation. Moreover, perceived organizational support is other critical source of sense of obligation (Eisenberger et al., 2001). Thus, organizations can promote employees' felt obligation towards organization by providing adequate resources and incentives (e.g., flexible working hour, and employee stock ownership plan, Yu & Frenkel, 2013), which can motivate employees to reciprocate with silence breaking behavior.

Finally, the findings also document that for employees with higher corporate social responsibility perception, their moral identity tends to inhibit silence behavior via increased felt obligation towards organization. These findings further emphasize the importance of creating a socially responsible corporate image. Enterprises might benefit directly from investment and efforts of corporate social responsibility to strengthen employees' corporate social responsibility perception (Farooq et al., 2017). Besides, enterprises are suggested to pay more attention to corporate social responsibility communication mechanisms and inform corporate social responsibility practices to their employees through email, staff meeting, or website (Chatzopoulou et al., 2022). Moreover, voluntary projects can be launched to invite employees to engage in environmental protections and philanthropy donations, which can help employees further internalize the enterprises' ethical values and indirectly enhance their corporate social responsibility perception (Rupp et al., 2018).

Limitations and Future Directions

Our research has several limitations that future research can address. First, while we adopted several procedural controls (e.g., anchor point number dissimilarity, and reverse-coded items), we only collected data from a single source that can still raise concerns of common method variance (CMV). Thus, we suggest future research to use multi-source (e.g., other rating of silence behavior) and multi-method (e.g., experimental design) designs to further alleviate CMV. Meanwhile, the use of a time-lagged design cannot infer the longitudinal mediation effect (O'Laughlin et al., 2018) or indicate causality about the relationship among the focal variables. Hence, future research can employ a longitudinal design to investigate the longitudinal mediation effect or experimental designs to provide more convincing support to causality.

Second, based on self-verification theory, we proposed and tested the inhibiting effect of moral identity on silence behavior. However, previous studies suggested that a reciprocal relationship between moral identity and moral action might exist (Weaver, 2006), and we recommend future research use panel design to explore a potential reciprocal relationship between moral identity and silence behavior within an appropriate theoretical framework.

Third, this study was conducted in the Chinese context with a high power distance culture (Hofstede, 1993), which may undermine the generalizability of our findings. Individuals in high power distance cultures are less likely to question and challenge authority, and more likely to withhold their own ideas and concerns (Duan et al., 2018). More research is encouraged to be conducted in a different culture or culturally diverse settings. Meanwhile, given that participants were limited in five industries, it should be important for future research to extend our findings to other industries and the increase of industry diversity of participants helps improve the replicability and generalizability of findings.

Conclusion

Drawing upon the self-verification theory, the current study demonstrates that employees with high moral identity tend to experience stronger felt obligation towards organization, which in turn can prevent employee from engaging in silence behavior. Meanwhile, this indirect effect is stronger for employees with a higher level of corporate social responsibility perception. By uncovering the effect of moral identity on silence behavior and the underlying mechanism within the self-verification framework, this study demonstrates the important role of moral identity in inhibiting silence behavior in the workplace.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All research procedures involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the research committee at the corresponding author's institution and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all participants quoted in the study.

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