Employee voice and silence in multinational corporations in the mobile telecommunications industry in Nigeria.

Abstract
The purpose of this paper was to explore employee voice and silence in the mobile telecommunication industry in Nigeria. An exploratory qualitative case study methodology was employed in this study. Participant selection was done through a purposeful intensity sampling technique, which resulted in 30 employees from two different multinational organisations and an indigenous organisation taking part in in-depth interviews. Findings revealed the presence of fear of victimization in the Nigerian workplace embellished by the Sub-Saharan culture and the state of the labour market, which resulted in employee silence. This paper contributes to the literature on Employee Relations by concluding that a national culture characterized by high power distance as well as high unemployment rates stifles employee voice and instils silence. However, the implementation of culturally adapted employee voice mechanisms within organisations in the mobile telecommunication industry in Nigeria promotes employee voice and organisational performance, whereas a lack thereof results in organisational failure.

Keywords: Employee voice and silence, labour market, Sub-Saharan culture, Nigeria
Introduction

Employee voice is an HR instrument through which employee(s) can sway the employer in his decision-making process through informal and formal channels for the purpose of cultivating communication, engaging employees and increasing workers’ obligations and performance (Armstrong, 2006; Marchington, 2007; Newcombe, 2012; Donoghue and Siegel, 2005). Voice can thus be perceived as a mechanism for productive cooperation between capital and labour which invariably increases the long term sustainability of a firm and the economic welfare of workers (Wilkinson et al., 2017). Hence, the importance of voice cannot be overemphasized, because the contrary position would be for workers to either exit the company, keep silent about work issues with fellow co-workers or about being dissatisfied about managerial decisions and possible faults in work activities (Donaghey et al., 2011 Wilkinson et al., 2013).

Why employees do or do not speak up when they hold potentially useful information is an important question for ER/IR scholars to try to answer, because if voice is withheld within an organizational context, both performance and employee morale may suffer, hence the consequences may be significant (Morrison, 2014). There is evidence suggesting that voice is in fact stifled in many organizations, and that employees are often very hesitant to engage in voice, particularly when the information could be viewed by the recipient as negative or threatening (Detert et al. 2010; Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison et al., 2015). It is perhaps for the above reason that human resource commentators Kaufman and Taras (2010) argue that representative employee voice can sometimes be disruptive, because of industrial action associated with this kind of voice, resulting in loss of man hours and increased cost of labour. Subsequently making the firm unable to compete in the global marketplace and giving credence to the premise that some form of managerial control over employee voice is necessary (Kaufman and Taras, 2010).

Nevertheless, Morrison (2014) asserts that in order to enhance workplace relationships, it is important for management to understand both the value of having employee voice mechanisms in the workplace as well as identifying factors and conditions that motivate employees to speak up when they have suggestions, information, or opinions. Morrison (2014) further believes that there is an opportunity for research on the effects of macro level contextual factors on employee voice, so that ER/IR scholars can understand variations in voice and silence not just across individuals and work groups, but also across organizations, industries, and parts of the world. Therefore, the present study focuses on employee voice in an unexplored part of the world, Nigeria, and investigates how macro level contextual factors, specifically the Sub-Saharan African culture and the labour market situation affect employee voice across organizations in the telecommunications industry in Nigeria. There is a dearth of literature on employee voice and silence within the Nigerian industrial relations environment,
which makes this paper pertinent and a valuable contribution to understanding employee voice and silence within the context of Sub-Saharan Africa. The purpose of this paper is to increase the understanding of the influence of macro-contextual factors on employee voice and silence in Nigeria as well as to provide insight into effective employee voice mechanisms.

The research questions to be answered are:

1. How do macro level contextual factors, specifically the Sub-Saharan culture and the labour market conditions in Nigeria affect employee voice and silence?
2. What employee voice mechanisms do employees in Nigeria use to challenge managerial behaviour and/or to bring about improvement or change in the workplace?

The first contribution of this paper to the literature on Organisational Behaviour (OB) and Employee Relations (ER)/Industrial Relation (IR) is that it expands the understanding of employee voice and silence contextualized in the Sub-Saharan culture and the external labour market situation in Nigeria, providing guidance to multinational organisations that wish to ensure that voice is not being stifled or ignored.

The second contribution of this paper is that it introduces culturally adapted employee voice mechanisms in the mobile telecommunication industry in Nigeria that enable employees to express themselves, which benefits individual and organizational performance.

**Theoretical framework: antecedents and outcomes of employee voice and silence**

*Employee voice and silence*

Employee voice has emerged as an important concept for ER/IR and organizational behaviour (OB) scholars who are interested in understanding the antecedents of the decision of employees to engage or not engage in voice (Greenberg and Edwards, 2009; Morrison, 2011, 2014). The OB literature follows the following often cited definition of voice: informal and discretionary communication by an employee of ideas, suggestions, concerns, information about problems, or opinions about work-related issues to persons who might be able to take appropriate action, with the intent to bring about improvement or change (Detert and Burris, 2007; Morrison, 2011; Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008b; Van Dyne and LePine, 1998). Though constructive in intent, it is a form of extra role upward communication which challenges and seeks to alter the status quo (Van Dyne et al. 2003). As the definition highlights, the content of the message can vary widely, from ideas on how to do things differently to information about serious or potentially serious problems. The former is referred to as promotive (Liang, Farh and Farh, 2012) or suggestion-focused (Morrison, 2011) voice, whereas the latter is referred to as prohibitive (Liang et al., 2012), remedial (Olson-Buchanan and Boswell, 2008), or problem-focused voice (Morrison, 2011).
The likelihood of voice should be great to the extent that an employee has a strong desire or sense of obligation to help the organization operate more effectively or more appropriately vis-à-vis its employees, customers, or the external community (Morrison, 2011). Rather, it means that the primary intent is to bring about positive change, improvement, or redress, and not to merely complain or get a positive outcome for oneself, but for the organisation as a whole (Morrison, 2014).

Wilkinson and Barry (2016) opine that the OB school of thought narrowly views employee voice from a unitarist perspective, and highlight that management and workers seek voice solely to improve both organizational processes and performance. However, the lacuna in the above view is that it does not consider how power imbalance and unequal employment relationship in the work environment between management and employees create a divergence of interests, which subsequently provides the impetus for workers to seek voice on their own terms (Hyman, 1975; Marchington, 2007). It is this imbalance in work relations that has led to the notion of the 'manufacture of consent' or "sweet heart deals" which underpins management desire to maintain power (Braverman, 1974; Dundon et al., 2004; Hyman, 1975; Marx, 1954). Management seeks to provide employees with the appearance of 'voice' opportunities which in fact do not provide 'real' or 'actual' power to employees as management exercises the right as per what can be included in voice processes, but employees are given the ruse of involvement and a say in corporate issues, therefore employees willingly join in the facade by giving their support to management determined programmes and outcomes (Braverman, 1974; Hyman, 1975).

Furthermore, Barry and Wilkinson (2016) claim that an important attribute of employee voice from the ER school of thought is that it sees voice as being grounded in the asymmetrical employment relationship that provides a structure of management authority with some limits (Marsden, 1999). It is this lop-sided workplace relationship between management and employees that has sometimes engineered among other reasons employee silence, especially when it involves upward communication of workers’ interests that are in conflict with management or those in authority (Morrison et al., 2015; Van Dyne et al., 2003).

Employee silence refers to workers not speaking up when one has a suggestion, concern, idea, information about a problem, or a divergent point of view that could be useful or relevant to share (Milliken et al., 2003, Morrison et al, 2015, Van Dyne et al., 2003). A climate of silence exists when there is widespread reluctance to speak up about critical issues of concern. Pinder and Harlos (2001) distinguish between two types of employee silence: acquiescent silence and quiescent silence. Employee acquiescence silence is a deep form of silence in which an employee is not actively taking part, or holding back important ideas and has essentially given up hope of improvement and feels completely powerless to speak up (a sense of futility). Perceived powerlessness is viewed as an inhibitor in conceptual treatments
of silence (Morrison and Rothman, 2009). Quiescent silence entails the extent to which it is safe to engage in voice (Ashford et al., 1998; Detert and Burris 2007; Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Pinder and Harlos, 2001). This type of silence results from the conception that voice is often perceived to be risky. An employee may fear that by speaking up in a way that challenges current practices, past decisions or highlights a serious problem, he or she will be viewed as a troublemaker or complainer, lose respect or support from others, receive a negative performance review, get assigned to undesirable projects, by-passed during promotion, or even get fired (Detert and Trevino, 2010; Grant, 2013; Milliken et al., 2003). Power asymmetry may also cause voice to be seen as risky (Morrison and Rothman, 2009). Because supervisors and individuals in more senior positions typically control rewards, resources, and assignments, employees may not want to jeopardize their relationships with them, which may lead them to be particularly reluctant to engage in voice up the hierarchy (Milliken et al. 2003; Pinder and Harlos, 2001). The emotional state of fear (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009), a climate of fear or silence (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Pinder and Harlos, 2001), and organizational hierarchy (Milliken et al., 2003; Pinder and Harlos, 2001) are expected to stifle employee voice in Nigeria.

To date, there are no studies in the Nigerian context that have explored acquiescent and quiescent silence. This paper addresses this research gap by exploring factors such as a climate of fear or silence and power asymmetry in the Nigeria telecommunications industry. In addition, in sync with the ER/IR research approach, this paper explores the nature and type of institutional mechanisms that provide workers with voice, investigating the detail of non-union voice empirically (Dundon and Rollinson, 2011), acknowledging the important influence of institutional context on individual voice behaviour (Dundon et al., 2004; Wilkinson et al., 2004). The next section addresses the range of employee voice mechanisms.

**Employee voice mechanisms**

Employee voice can be delivered directly on an individual basis or collectively through representative structures such as trade unions. Trade unions bargain with management for better working conditions for employees within an organization (Bryson, Gomez and Willman, 2010). Trade union voice is collective and representative in nature, whilst non-unionized voice is individualistic. Non-unionized voice mechanisms include platforms, such as independent workers’ committees or joint consultation committees and/or direct forms, such as task-based involvement, upward problem-solving procedures and workers contributions to consultation groups (CIPD, 2013; Marchington, 2007; Marchington and Sutter, 2008). Employee voice can also be a combination of non-unionised and unionised voice mechanisms in a scenario called a dual-voice regime (Bennett, 2010; Budd et al., 2010; Gomez et al., 2009; Marchington, 2007; Marchington and Sutter, 2008).
Table 1 provides an overview of the manifestation of employee voice, its purpose, employee voice mechanisms and its intended outcomes.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

The first category of voice can be taken as articulation of individual dissatisfaction that aligns well with Hirschman's (2008) view on voice, which encourages individual or groups to seek redress on work-place challenges through a grievance procedure. The second category represents collective expression of voice and anchors to the pluralist institution (Cullinane et al., 2011). The third category is a manifestation of employees' impact on decision-making. The objective is to enhance work organization and productivity through quality circles or working through joint ventures of management and employees. The fourth and last category is seen as a partnership between management and the employee(s) in order to achieve long-term goals. This school of thought fits the partnership model developed by Guest and Peccei (2001) and is unitarist in nature (Cox, Marchington, and Suter, 2009). It also supports the postulation of Purcell (2015) that employee voice in the work environment facilitates synergetic workplace relationship between management and employees, as well as provides a conducive environment for the generation of ground breaking ideas, which will enable organisations to become leaders and global brands in the market-place.

Worthy of mention is that the voice categories mentioned in table 1 are not only peculiar to the United Kingdom, but by proxy of being Nigeria’s colonial master, have influenced how representative, non-unionized and dual voice mechanisms are shaped in Nigeria and other Anglophone countries in West Africa (Dimitris and Boswell, 2008; George, 2011; Okonjo-Iweala and Osafo-Kwako, 2007). The question to be addressed is which type of voice mechanism is most effective for promoting employee voice in the Nigerian context, especially after the advent of globalization and the economic recession of the 1980s that led to the privatization of government-owned companies (Okonjo-Iweala and Osafo-Kwako, 2007). This period also witnessed an increase in the influx of multinational corporations in Nigeria, which coincided with the decline of trade union membership as well as witnessed the ascension and implementation of non-unionized employee voice mechanisms in Nigerian organizations (Okonjo-Iweala and Osafo-Kwako, 2007).

In this paper, we postulate that employee voice in the Nigerian context is firstly an expression of collective organisation where the purpose of voice is to provide a countervailing source of power to management demonstration (Table 1, category 2); and secondly, mutuality and cooperative relations (Table 1, category 4) to achieve long-term viability for organization and its employees. Especially in firms where employees perceive that management is making efforts to strengthen workplace relationships by providing or allowing ‘solutions’/voice
mechanisms that circumvent individualism, fear and victimisation. Joint consultation is a non-
unionised platform that enables managers and employee representative(s) meet frequently
to exchange ideas (Cregan and Brown, 2010; Lansbury and Wailes, 2008). This paper
argues that a culturally adapted joint consultation forum is one of the most effective
employee voice mechanisms in the Nigerian industrial relations environment in the context of
the Sub-Saharan African culture, which the next section addresses.

Employee voice in the Sub-Saharan culture
Culture is the overt and subtle individual / collective manifestation of social behaviour,
customs and ideas geared towards survival in any environment (Barnes, 2007; Goodenough,
1981). Culture is expressed by employees in the workplace either by voicing or keeping
silent over work processes or managerial decisions (Barnes, 2007; Goodenough, 1981;
Purcell, 2015). Notwithstanding, employees are expected to conform to procedural
instructions or fit into organizational culture or ethos introduced from the home country of the
conglomerate corporation or modified to suit the host nation in which the transnational
company has found itself (Armstrong, 2014; Dubkevics and Barbars, 2010; Stiglitz, 2007).
What is imperious however is that each employee comes with its uncharacteristic communal
autograph that influences the manner in which employee voice mechanisms must be
considered and executed (Ademola, 2005; Dubkevics and Barbars, 2010; Waddell et al.,
2013). Conglomerate corporations that want to be worldwide frontrunners in the global
marketplace must therefore acclimatize their stratagems to the cultural characteristics of the
host location in order to extrapolate from their employees their complete collaboration such
that management is able to tap into the abundant ideas and innovations of their employees
Chaney and Martin (2013) and Wallby (2001) affirm that several countries in the world have
both written and accepted sets of communal dogmas, principles and customs and therefore,
Industrial and Employee relations (IR/ER) theory that worked in Europe or America might not
ineludibly work in other parts of the world, such as in Africa. It ought not to come as a
surprise therefore that the social order and culture can have an influence in the way IR/ER
theories are implemented from one culture to another regardless of the point that the
universe is now a global village (Chaney and Martin, 2013; Wallby, 2001). Consequently,
certain individual voice mechanisms such as one to one which typically reflect European and
American social order or showcases societies with lower power distance index might not be
best suited for West Africans if it is the only voice mechanism in the work environment
(Ahiauzu, 1986; Hofstede, 1998; Wallby, 2001). This is because these individualistic voice
mechanisms can potentially pose a challenge to the collectivist cultural attributes of the
Particularly, respect and reverence for those in authority make individual expression a difficult experience for the African employee, especially if opinions run contrary to the ideas of the person in authority (Hofstede, 1998; George, 2011). It is perhaps among other reasons that Africans congregate and express issues collectively, and sometimes this is done according to “age groups” (Ahiauzu, 1986; Hofstede, 1998). This means that it can potentially be difficult for a young manager to instruct, address or correct older subordinates in the African workplace (Ahiauzu, 1986; Hofstede, 1998; Onukwube, 2012). Consequently, a multinational corporation in appointing a manager in Africa must consider age as well as technical abilities (Ademola, 2005; Ahiauzu, 1986; George, 2011). It is therefore important that human resource executives take into cognizance the significance of cultural eccentricities of the societies they find themselves in, especially if such philosophies contrast severely from what they are used to (Chaney and Martin, 2013; Chen and Strarosta, 2004; Purcell, 2015). In addition, the supervisor must make available facilitating environments for workers to express their skills, and to do so, the supervisor must among other dynamics comprehend the socio-cultural configuration of his/her subordinates (Farndale et al., 2011; Chen and Strarosta, 2004). Management must therefore be creative and put in place an enabling environment for a synergy of constructive opinions or ideas to occur in the workplace (Purcell, 2015). Purcell (2105) further maintains that firms that want to be leaders in the global market-place must engage with their workers in a two-way information flow, seeking to disseminate information and in return obtain constructive feedbacks from their workers. This has become even more imperative with the advent of globalization; companies must imbibe strategies that share important information with their employees in order to be at the cutting edge in the marketplace (Boxall and Winterton, 2015; Wilkinson and Fay, 2011).

Hence, multinational corporations in Sub-Sahara Africa must design and implement voice instruments that accommodate peculiar idiosyncrasies of the African employees such that workers are able to express their thoughts and concerns without the pressures of the high power distance syndrome in Nigeria (Ahiauzu, 1986; George, 2011; Hofstede, 1998). If adequate voice mechanisms are not in place, workers may become disenchanted about managerial decisions, and flaws in work activities may subsequently occur. Furthermore, it can lead to employee silence that may undermine business performance (Hirshman, 1970; Pinder and Halos, 2001; Purcell, 2015).

Morrison (2014) argued that very little is known about the effects of national culture. This is contrary to the finding of Botero and Van Dyne et al. (2008) in which they showed that power distance is negatively skewed towards employee voice, especially when it involves upward communication for the rank and file employee in high-power-distance cultures where people...
have very high respect for those in authority (Botero and Van Dyne et al, 2008; Hofstede, 1991).

Embedded in the cultural factor mentioned above is the issue of ethnic nationalism that demands loyalty and comfort of expression amongst people of the same tribe (Ademola, 2005; Nnoli, 1994 and 1995). The significance and presence of ethnic nationalism cannot be over emphasized as it was the major reason for the outbreak of civil war in 1966 in Nigeria, which left in its wake, disunity and mistrust among people of the three major tribes (by number of people) namely Ibo, Yoruba and Hausa (Ubeku, 1984). Against this backdrop, ethnic nationalism in the workplace means that the rank and file employee in a firm will likely engage in employment relationship from a position of reservation and caution especially when dealing with a superior officer of a different tribe, unless otherwise proven over time that the superior officer is not inclined to tribal sentiments that is ubiquitous in Nigeria (Ademola, 2005; Ahiauzu, 1986 and Ubeku, 1984). Consequently, ethnic nationalism could either enhance or impede employee voice depending on the parties involved (Fajana et al., 2011; Nnoli, 1994 and 1995). Another fall out of ethnic nationalism is the ability of the tribal leader or chief to sometimes mediate in disagreements involving management and employees that is if they are both from the same tribe and village (Ahiauzu, 1986). This behavioural pattern can be linked to the collectivist culture identified by Hofstede (1980) as one of his five dimensions of national cultures. Collectivism is tantamount to what Nigerians call “tribalism”, in which ethnic loyalty is demanded among peoples of the same ethnic groupings (Nnoli, 1994 and 1995).

Despite the physical, religious and even culinary differences, the three major tribes share unique cultural attributes, such as respecting their elders or superiors, which form the essence of the Nigerian culture (Ahiauzu, 1986). The ethnic attributes of Nigerians informed some multinational firms to imbibe the combination of unionism, which exhibited traces of the collective nature of Nigerians, and the “efficiency” of non-unionized voice instruments, which combination is called dual voice regime (Perkins and Azolukwam, 2009).

Hence, this paper explores how the national culture of Nigeria, characterized by high power distance and collectivism, affects employee voice in Nigerian. Another factor that influences the implementation of these types of employee voice mechanisms is the labour market situation, which the next section elaborates on.

The influence of labour market conditions on employee voice

Morrison (2014) argued that it could be very valuable to consider how economic or labour market conditions affect voice and silence. She hypothesized that any external factors that increase feelings of job insecurity or reduce one’s job alternatives will make voice seem more risky, and thus strengthen the tendency toward silence. This would imply, for example,
a relationship between more risky forms of voice (e.g., raising problems) and the availability of jobs in a particular industry or region. However, she did not test this hypothesis in field research. Hence, this paper explores how the effect of the labour market situation in Nigeria affects feelings of job insecurity or reduces one’s job alternatives, which subsequently affects employee voice and silence.

The unemployment rate in Nigeria doubled from 12% in 2005 to 23.9% in 2011. Given the high unemployment rates in Nigeria, it is plausible that employees in Nigeria perceive engaging in voice as risky, because doing so may jeopardize their jobs. Hence, this paper explores the way in which the unfavourable state of the Nigerian labour market may lead to the aforementioned acquiescent silence and quiescent silence. In addition, this paper explores which employee voice mechanisms facilitate employee voice in Nigeria in a situation of high unemployment.

Method

An exploratory, qualitative case study research methodology within the interpretivism paradigm was adopted in this paper. This allowed the emergence of context-specific patterns (Piekkari, Welch, and Paavilainen, 2009). Case study research is a strategy that involves the study of a case within a real-life contemporary context through detailed, in-depth data collection (Yin, 2014). In the present study, the descriptive, multiple case study is deemed an appropriate research strategy to (1) inductively explore employee voice in the sub-Saharan context and the labour market situation in Nigeria and (2) to gain more understanding of utilized and effective employee voice mechanisms of Nigerian employees.

Research setting

The present case study involved three organizations in the mobile telecommunication industry in Nigeria (Firsttel, Seatel and Lightstar Plc.). Nigeria is the largest mobile telecommunication market in Africa with over 151 million active subscribers, a market twice as big as that of the United Kingdom (Premium webpage, 2017). The industry has attracted investment from several indigenous and foreign multinational companies (Adomi, 2005; Bick, Luiz, and Townsend, 2011). It generated $9.3 billion in 2012 and $9.8 billion in revenue in 2014 and contributed 1.7% to the gross domestic product in 2014 in Nigeria (Biz Africa Web page; NCC Web page, 2015; Ogunlesi and Busari, 2012). Consequently, the mobile telecommunication industry is a major source of employment and income for Nigerians (Bick et al., 2011).

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1 This was the time period in which data were collected.
2 The names of the organizations are fictional to protect the anonymity of organizations and participants.
Case Study Companies

At the time of this research in 2012, Firsttel was one of the foremost mobile telecommunication companies in Nigeria and Africa, which had over 43 million mobile subscribers in Nigeria, and generated a revenue of well over USD $4 billion. As at 2012, Firsttel had employed 2027 people across Nigeria and operated on the Global System of Mobile communication (GSM) protocol. Worthy of mention is that Firsttel has its global headquarters in the Southern part of Africa (Firsttel website; 2012).

Seatek in 2012 had 20 million mobile subscribers in Nigeria, generated about USD $1.3 billion in revenue and has its global headquarters in Asia. Seatek had employed 673 workers at 2012 and was also operating on the Global System of Mobile communication (GSM) protocol (Seatek website; 2012).

Lightstar in 2012, operated its network on the (Code Division Multiple Access) CDMA protocol, a military technology that allows for a more efficient exchange of voice and data communication, thus enabling more users’ access at any one point in time than on the GSM network (Wisegeek webpage, 2012). Being wholly Nigerian, Lightstar had employed 820 workers across Nigeria, had over 3.2 million subscribers, and had generated a revenue of about USD $250 million as at 2012 (Lightstar website; 2012; Wisegeek webpage, 2012).

Sample and procedure

This research took place in the customer service departments of the three case organizations, because this is where the core business takes place, i.e. the disbursement of mobile telecommunication services. HR personnel of each of the case companies provided access to the employees in their customer service departments, who were seated in an open plan office. Some participants exhibited restraint to partake in the research, thinking that the researcher had been sent by management to solicit information from them, which triggered the fear of possibly losing their job. In order to remove this restraint, a friend of the prime researcher who worked in the case companies had earlier told employees about the researcher (first author). To establish further rapport with the employees, the researcher presented his PhD student identification, after which the employees became more comfortable and were more willingness to participate in the research.

Participant selection took place using a purposeful intensity sampling technique to provide information-rich cases (Creswell, 2013). The researcher randomly chose every third worker who was at their terminal regardless of their sex, rank or length of service. When approached by the researcher and asked if they were keen to be interviewed, some personnel declined and at that juncture, the next available worker sitting at their workstation was approached for an interview. This eventually resulted in the fourth, fifth or sixth seated employee being interviewed. As a result of this selection process and the layout of the workstations in the
open-office, it was not possible for the researcher to differentiate between middle managers and rank and file employees.

Table 2 provides an overview of the number of interviewees in each case study organization categorized by gender and hierarchical level.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Data collection

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews, which allowed probing where information seemed to be leading to deeper or unusual insights (Yin, 2014), took place throughout 2012 querying interviewees on the effect of culture and the labour market situation on the existence and use of employee voice mechanisms. Sample questions were:

“What are the range and scope of employee expression mechanisms in your organization and how does <name organization> use each of these mechanisms to communicate with its employees?”

“Does the external labour market situation affect the way you express yourself?”

“Would you rather express yourself as a group or individually with your superior”?

Data collection continued until repetition of information and confirmation of existing conceptual categories, i.e. “category saturation” (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) occurred. The final sample of 30 interviewees is in accordance with Creswell (2013) who recommends a sample size between 20 and 30 individuals in order to reach a data saturation point. The interviews were tape recorded to accurately extrapolate information from respondents’ answers for data analysis.

Data analysis

The data-analysis involved content analysis of information obtained from the interviews conducted as well as financial statements of all case study companies. Furthermore, analysis of data from government agencies on the labour market situation in Nigeria was also utilised. Gathering and analysing data were conducted concurrently in line with descriptive qualitative approaches, thus adding to the depth and quality of data analysis (Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas, 2013). By so doing, data on the actual behaviour, attitudes or real motives of the people being studied were being sought (Ten Have, 2004). Inductive content analysis was used, because there were no previous studies on the phenomenon of employee voice in the telecommunications industry in Nigeria, and therefore the coded categories are derived directly from the text data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The words or coding categories ‘fear of victimization’, ‘Sub-Saharan culture’ and ‘unemployment’ occurred frequently in the speech
of participants. This frequent occurrence could indicate greater importance for participants with regards to employee voice and silence, but it might also reflect greater willingness or ability (Loffe and Yardley, 2004; Shields and Twycross, 2008) to talk at length about the manifestation of employee voice in a high power distance culture and a labour market characterized by high unemployment. One of the best ways for judging the quality of findings is whether new insights into the studied phenomenon have been provided; if so, the study should have increased the understanding of particular phenomena or informed practical actions (Krippendorff, 2004). The next section presents the new insights gained into the studied phenomenon (employee voice and silence), providing evidence of the quality of findings.

**Findings**

This section presents the findings of research on employee voice in the telecommunications industry in Nigeria, contextualized in the sub-Saharan culture and the labour market situation, and presents the array of voice mechanisms utilized in the three case organisations.

*Sub-Saharan culture and employee voice, silence and mechanisms*

The participants perceived culture as the most important factor impacting voice. The influence of culture and ethnic nationalism in the Nigerian work environment came to the fore in the interviews. For instance, it was possible for an employee to seek redress by reporting workplace issues involving his or her line manager (if they are from the same village) to the Eze or Igwe (King in the eastern part of Nigeria) if the employee does not feel ‘looked after’ by his or her line manager. The consequence of these ethnic consortiums was that it could either boost or hinder employee voice in the workplace as people could instinctively or intentionally gather along ethnic lines. Evidence of this can be seen in the comment of a participant from Firstell below:

*Tribalism (people congregating along ethnic lines) is a monster and makes you feel more secured if your line manager is from your village. Fortunately for me, my manager even though he is a fair man to every team member, seems to go the extra mile for me.*

Participants within Seatek and Lightstar echoed similar opinions across different hierarchical levels in the companies. They expressed that there is tribalism and that this sometimes makes a difference in employees’ ability to express their opinions. Yet, participants from Seatek mentioned that the organization has done certain things to reduce the effect of tribalism and culture. For instance, in contrast to a superior manager who sits in a closed office to show that he or she is the boss in charge, the open office plan helps to dismantle
the structures of power distance as superior managers sit with their subordinates. Furthermore, a line manager sits at the same table with the employee in an open office in both Firttel and Seatek, and they address each other on first name basis, which non-characteristic of the Nigerian culture, but this encourages employees to express their issues to their line manager. This aligns with the demonstration of mutuality and cooperative relations (see Table 1, 4th row, and 2nd column) as management deliberately create avenues to enhance cordiality between superior officers and their subordinates. This might be a deliberate strategy employed by management for the rank and file employee to view senior officials in the firm as custodians or guardians in the workplace in order to facilitate the articulation of workplace issues upwardly as well as from management to employees. Participants acknowledged that diverse cultural backgrounds of both first line managers and employees accounted for employees’ dislike of voice instruments involving their line managers, such as one-to-one or team briefings directly. This notion is further articulated by a respondent from Firsttel Nigeria who said: 

*The cultural aspect of respecting elders in Nigeria makes it imperative to prefer collective expression that explains the success story behind the village meeting in Firsttel.*

Furthermore, the cultural aspect of respecting elders in Nigeria is perhaps the reason that participants prefer anonymous or collective expression over and above individual voice as this synchronises with partnership under the range of outcome column, row 4 in Table 1. Management and workers perceive each other as partners of progress in the work environment as management takes care of workers by providing voice mechanisms for employees that circumvent individualism, fear and ethnic nationalism as seen in Firsttel and Seatek. Failure to provide collective or anonymous voice mechanisms have led to disillusionment and apathy (Table 1, row 3, column 4) and eventually to poor performance and closure of Lightstar.

Culturally adapted voice systems, such as the ‘village meeting’ also named ‘corporate council meeting’ or ‘joint consultation council’, a non-unionized voice instrument in which elected representatives meet with each other every month to engage with management on a quarterly basis to collectively present workplace issues and also to express innovative ideas were a success. These fall under partnership agreement, joint consultation and work councils (Table 1, row 4, column 3) designed to achieve information flows, but it also gives a false sense of power to employees known as manufacture of consent as management decides which employee issues will be dealt with when management meets with employee representatives as it is the case in Firsttel. However, the village meeting voice mechanism turned out to be successful because Firsttel designed and implemented culturally adapted joint consultation forum modified to the collectivist Sub-Saharan culture to elicit information
from its employees whilst isolating them from core trade union practices that is from the influence of Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC). This mechanism was also successful, because it eliminated fear of victimization. It allowed employees to engage in promotive upward voice, which occurs when employees voluntarily communicate suggestions, concerns and information about problems such as price of food in the canteen or the need to clean the toilet more frequently. However pressing matters that could impact profits and investment, such as the state of wages in Firsttel is not up for negotiation, bringing to bear the notion of ‘manufacture of consent’ or the strategy known as “sweet heart deals” (Braverman, 1974; Dundon et al., 2004). The ‘sweet heart deal’ (see table 1, 6th row, 4th column) here means that prior to the quarterly meetings between the elected representatives and management, they (representatives) are given a time off work by management to tinker on workers’ issues. However, issues related to employee wage increase are not permitted to be discussed during the meetings (also see page 16 for more explanation). This euphoria of voice has led to the success of the village meetings at Firsttel, as employees cooperate with management on voice outcomes, thus bringing long term viability for Firsttel and its employees (see Table 1, 5th row, 2nd column). It is perhaps among other reasons that Firsttel is one of the foremost mobile telecommunication companies in Africa and Nigeria (Bicks et al., 2011).

Other employee voice mechanisms, such as the village square meeting and the Employee engagement forum (EEF) in Seatek, differ in some characteristics from the village meeting within Firsttel. The village square meeting and the employment engagement forum are still very much individualised in their attributes. However, Seatek has put in place a direct bundle methodology which circumvents some individualism in voice expression. Consequently, external survey in Seatek enables employees to remain anonymous whilst expressing their concerns and mitigates against fear. This aligns with the contribution to management decision making process using suggestion schemes and attitude surveys to promote commitment among workers (see Table 1, row 3, column 4). Individualised voice mechanisms, such as village square meeting and the Employee engagement forum (EEF) mean that issues such as wages or the manner in which job appraisal is conducted cannot be discussed during the EEF. To confront management as an individual is a daunting task for the employee, especially with the high unemployment ratio in Nigeria, and of course the cultural challenge of respecting those in authority. These factors make upward communication difficult, thus, management must be creative by putting in place speak-up programmes in the firm.

The village meeting as a voice instrument in Firsttel has contributed to the elimination of employee silence, because of its representative nature where respondents prefer to express their issues anonymously through a collective platform. Employees mentioned that
expression has been easier by the advent of employee council representatives. The anonymous nature of the above mentioned voice mechanism has led to internal unity implicit in the company-based representative nature of the village meeting as a voice instrument and also explains the acceptability of this voice mechanism among employees in Firsttel. The institution of the village meeting serves as a voice instrument where management reminds employees of their indigenous background and also to encourage them to perceive Firsttel as a community similar to their ethnic environment. This relates to identity and commitment in Table 1, row 3, column 4.

It is important to note that the village meeting in the Nigerian context is a nomenclature that taps into the national consciousness and is used by management to describe oneness of a people or organization. Consequently, it may also create a platform for achieving employee cooperation in achieving both effectiveness and efficiency within Firsttel. It is likely that it is because of these reasons that management adopted the village meeting in Firsttel as a voice instrument to maximize employee engagement and minimize pressure or demand for trade union involvement or recognition.

Given the important role of employee council representatives, the process of electing these representatives in one of the case organisations has been elaborated on below:

In Firsttel, each office location is a separate constituency and it is intended to have at least one representative, either nominated by fellow employees or employees can self-nominate. If nominated representatives exceed the allocated number (decided by management) in a particular division (note several office locations can make up a division) then an election is held (through the computer systems) to determine who the representatives will be. The elected representatives are known as employee council representatives and the number of elected council representatives in each division is dependent on the number of employees they represent; thus, not every division has the same number of representatives. For example, the customer service division of Firsttel in Lagos, Nigeria has seven representatives, representing about 1000 employees. Such is their importance that the elected representatives get time off work and are lodged in a resort to plan their strategies for the meeting with senior management where they deliberate work place issues, giving rise to the concept ‘sweet heart deal’ (see table 1, last row); this may provide the necessary incentive to make the representatives work hard at maintaining this status quo of being a quasi-shop steward. The employee council representatives are not members of a trade union nor are they affiliated with the Nigerian Labor Congress (NLC). The corporate council is a management sanctioned and organized joint consultation council. Elected representatives effectively act as frontline ‘initiators’ to collate issues ‘off the shop floor’ and collectively articulate matters with management within each division. Representatives are more likely to obtain “true” information from fellow employees for
onward movement to management sometimes bypassing the long bureaucratic trail of information networks. The strategy is for representatives, who are rank and file employees, to collect and collate ideas/ issues raised by fellow workers, their constituents, and subsequently raise and discuss these issues during the representative’s monthly meeting. Management does not attend this representative meeting. The monthly meeting is held to identify key employee concerns and formulate the priority for items to be raised with management in preparation for the quarterly meeting of the corporate council or village meeting with management in each division. Some respondents strongly believed that some of the issues raised by the employee council are fed back to the very top echelon of management in Nigeria and then to the global headquarters of Firsttel in Southern part of Africa. This shows the trail of information feedback from the subsidiary in Nigeria to headquarters. It also showcases the journey of employee concerns to the head office and the importance of employee voice to promote beneficial organisational outcomes.

The presence of elected representatives has also helped reduce the power distance between management and employees, which is an important finding, because power distance means that a significant portion of Nigerians will exhibit fear whilst expressing their opinions to a higher authority. Reduced power distance subsequently made employees work hard at seeing ‘their’ company do well in the market-place. This may explain the reason among other factors why Firsttel Nigeria is the foremost company in Nigeria mobile telecommunication industry.

Seatek had implemented a combination of several non-unionized voice instruments to allay deficiencies of utilizing individual or single non-unionized voice mechanism, taking advantage of the strengths of each employee voice mechanism. The organization’s array of non-unionized voice mechanisms included village square meeting, employee engagement forum, the internal survey, external survey (guaranteed anonymity for the employees), breakfast with the CEO, company social website (blogs), team meetings and a one-to-one session, which is the individual meeting held quarterly to access the performance of the employees and also an avenue for the line manager to gain feedback from the employee. It is important to note that although having breakfast with the CEO, one-to-one sessions and others were well received employee voice mechanisms, employees preferred to express themselves, for instance through the external survey, because of its anonymity. Also, several respondents preferred to speak through a third party, either through a trade union or through a staff association to deal with serious workplace matters. The ability of the employees of Firsttel Nigeria and Seatek Nigeria to have a voice through the various voice instruments: village square meeting; employee council; internal survey, external survey (The external survey is called the employee engagement survey conducted by an external body which is different from the internal survey in which employees get a chance to tell management about
the HR team by filling out a survey about their performance); breakfast with the CEO; company social website (blogs); team brief, which is such that the line manager informs employees about new issues from management and also takes feedback or answer questions about new issues in the firm one-to-one session with line manager, which engineered a positive attitude to work and support for management’s objectives, exemplified through the following excerpt:

_The plethora of opportunities to express your misgivings about Seatek Nigeria has made it possible for me to perform. I feel encouraged and valued, because I have avenues for expression._

Another participant had this to say:

_Yes, there are avenues in Seatek to let off steam, particularly during the village meeting and the employment consultation forum as suggestions or opinions are taken seriously by management and this has enabled me to perform better on the job._

By contrast, Lightstar made use of only the one-to-one team meeting as an employee voice mechanism, which was not culturally adapted to suit the idiosyncrasies of the Nigerian people. This may in part explain why Lightstar is no longer a foremost company in the telecommunication industry in Nigeria. In fact, its poor financial performance led to it being delisted from the Nigerian Stock exchange and its eventual closure as a telecommunication firm in Nigeria.

In summary, both management of Firsttel and Seatek have implemented direct voice instruments that will not challenge their managerial prerogative in the work environment. However, while direct voice instruments ordinarily isolates the employee while expressing their work challenges, the representative nature of the village meeting as a direct representative voice instrument in Firsttel appeals to collectivism of the sub-Saharan African employee. This strategy has enabled Firsttel shield its workers from desiring to associate with indirect/ representative voice mechanism championed by the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC). On the other hand, workers in Seatek are exposed to an array of direct voice mechanisms such as village square meetings, team briefings, breakfast with CEO and social blog. However, the external survey voice instrument, though a direct voice instrument, enabled employees become anonymous while expressing their concerns, culminating among other factors in the success story of Seatek, evident in the company’s financial performance.

On the other hand, Lightstar did not allow a trade union (indirect representative voice instrument) or affiliation to NLC, thus, employees found direct voice mechanisms such as
team meeting and one to one in Lightstar impossible. The employees preferred a suggestion box or staff association (direct representative voice instrument) that will speak on their behalf to management without necessarily having affiliation to NLC. They also expressed that management in Lightstar has been very unfriendly, and that management should encourage employees to speak either as a group or individually in order to at least get information from their workers about what is going on in the work place. Employee voice mechanism within Lightstar created a situation where the employees are neither co-managers of relationships nor members of corporate citizenship. The results were employee silence, fear and suboptimal performance of employees to keep their jobs, resulting in poor financial performance of the organization.

The research identified that in Sub-Saharan culture, high power distance and ethnic/tribal attributes stands out as one of the most important factors shaping employee voice. This is because a large portion of Nigerians will exude respect while expressing their opinions to a superior authority. Consequently, the implementation of employee voice in the Nigerian work environment must be fashioned to include the strong ethnic nationalism. Most notably, the direct importation of voice from the developed countries with advanced economies cannot work effectively without culturally adapting the voice mechanisms to fit the traditions, expectations and preferences of the Nigerian people.

**Labour market conditions and employee voice, silence and mechanisms**

All the participants called the high unemployment rates in Nigeria, which doubled from 12% in 2005 to 23.9% in 2011, a monumental factor in defining and expressing employee voice and silence. The labour market climate in Nigeria was of deep concern to participants and to maintain one’s job, expression or criticising management was out of the question. The persisting unemployment rates had resulted in fear of expressing their opinions, potentially leading to job loss. Employees saw the poverty in society and realized how fortunate they were to be having a job; this affected the way in which employees expressed themselves and it had even resulted in employee silence where employees on an individual level would refrain from expressing issues to management. Employees feared that if they spoke against their line managers this could breed ill feelings leading to bad performance appraisals or job loss.

Hence, some preferred to remain silent, as one employee from Firsttel expressed:

*I do keep quiet for fear of losing my job and this is not cowardice, but wisdom dictates I put food on the table for my family even if it is at the expense of expressing oneself in the work place.*
Participants expressed that the external labour market situation in Nigeria meant that there are several other unemployed Nigerians who will joyfully do the job under less favourable working conditions. The high unemployment rates and inherent fear of losing their jobs made it difficult for employees to feel able to speak up, yet voice mechanisms, such as the “village meeting” or “corporate council meeting”, in which elected representative collectively present issues to management, appeared to have provided the benefit of anonymity for the employees in Firsttel. Before the formation of the corporate council, expression in Firsttel was limited to one-to-one sessions and it was about employee performance, but the employee council in this adverse economic situation had made expression possible and getting management to fulfil all employee needs. Some employees stated that if there had been no employee representatives and corporate council meetings they would not express themselves, particularly given the unemployment situation in Nigeria. The following excerpts are illustrative:

The nature of the labour market in Nigeria is such that you need to be careful on how you address issues in the work environment. For instance in my last place of work, you dare not speak against the company or you get sacked. Fortunately, the representatives have enabled some of us express our issues to management and at least get some of these issues solved. (Participant, Firsttel)

The unemployment in Nigeria has made it possible for employers to sack people at will. We are living in fear of losing our jobs so it does affect the way you address even your line manager. You must be careful not to be seen as the enemy or else the exit door will be shown to you. It is frustrating going to work under these conditions but that is Nigeria for you. (Participant, Lightstar)

With the unemployment situation in Nigeria, speaking about pertinent issues during the village meeting is a dangerous game or opening your mouth to speak about embarrassing situations to the CEO is not part of the Nigerian culture of respecting our leaders. (Participant Seatek)

One respondent from Seatek stated:

Expression in Seatek is done currently on an individual basis but for me I will rather someone does it for me. You are hoping someone brave enough will speak your problem at the village meeting or the employee consultation forum and when it does not happen, you keep quiet. I remember vividly what happened in 2011 when about 3000 members of staff were sacked and the Nigerian Labour Congress and the Federal government wanted some explanation from the new owners of Firsttel. So, I will rather have some collective body to take our challenges to management.
Employees of Firsttel and Seatek recollected how the trade union, NLC, helped their colleagues when they were sacked. Given that unemployment in Nigeria is overwhelming and speaking individually to management can be dangerous, they expressed they needed at least a staff association.

However, if appropriate mechanisms are not put in place, employees will not voluntarily express themselves, but simply retreat into silence, thus depriving fellow employees and management from benefitting from either an idea that could benefit colleagues and the employer or make management unaware of a challenge that needs to be addressed. The phenomenon of employee silence in the context of this study was a result of a combination of cultural factors, i.e. high power distance and high unemployment rates and the inadequate application of voice opportunities.

Discussion
The objectives of the study presented in this paper were:

1. To explore the macro-contextual factors that influence employee voice and silence in the mobile telecommunication industry in Nigeria.
2. To identify employee voice mechanisms within multinational corporations in the mobile telecommunication industry in Nigeria, attuned to the Sub-Saharan cultural context and the labour market situation.

This paper contributes to the literature in two ways: first, it provides empirical evidence on employee voice contextualized in the Sub-Saharan culture and the labour market conditions in Nigeria, highlighting the concept of voice with or without fear of retribution or victimization. Second, by showing that employee voice mechanisms adapted to the sub-Saharan culture promoted employee voice and mitigated employee silence in the Nigerian case organisations, which in turn positively affected the financial performance of two of the three organisations.

In response to the first research question, the present study has shown that there is tribalism, which sometimes makes it difficult for employees to express their opinions; the ethnic consortiums in the three case organisations in Nigeria either boosted or hindered employee voice in the workplace as people could instinctively or intentionally gather along ethnic lines. This could boost employee voice when both managers, and rank and file employees are in agreement, bringing to bear the attribute of speaking up program as found in Table 1 (Marchington et al., 2001). On the other hand, when tribal sentiments become an issue, then voice can be impeded and silence is inevitable, which further leads to disillusion and apathy in the firm (see Table 1) (Marchington et al., 2001). It is perhaps for this and other reasons...
that management particularly in Firsttel and Seatek have devised voice mechanisms to guard against tribal sentiments or ethnic nationalism.

In line with research findings by Detert and colleagues (2010), Milliken and colleagues (2003) and Ryan and Oestreicher (1991), the present study found that a considerable number of employees were reluctant and afraid to speak up to their boss or to management about critical issues of concern at work, because of fear of victimization and job loss. Consequently, they remained silent.

The psychological safety that anonymous employee voice mechanism, such as the employee council with its representatives offered individual employees fostered employee voice whereas a hierarchical structure and the emotional state of fear of victimization (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009; Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Milliken et al., 2003; Pinder and Harlos, 2001) and job loss resulted in employee silence.

The research confirmed the existence of two types of employee silence identified by Pinder and Harlos (2001). Firstly, acquiescent silence. The present study showed that several employees were not actively taking part or were holding back on sharing important ideas, in part because of perceived powerlessness (Morrison and Rothman, 2009). Subordinates have lower power status compared to supervisors and because supervisors and individuals in more senior positions typically control rewards, resources, and assignments, employees may not want to jeopardize their relationships with them, which may lead them to be particularly reluctant to engage in voice up the hierarchy (Milliken et al., 2003, Pinder and Harlos, 2001). Thus, in line with the ER perspective, this study has shown that employee voice in the three case organisations was grounded in the asymmetrical employment relationship and the inherent power imbalance that provides a structure of management authority. Secondly, quiescent silence, which entails the extent to which it is safe to engage in voice (Ashford et al., 1998; Detert and Burris, 2007, Morrison and Milliken 2000; Pinder and Harlos, 2001). This type of silence resulted from the conception of participants that voice was perceived to be risky. Several employees feared that by speaking up in a way that challenges current practices or past decisions or that highlights a serious problem, they would be viewed as troublemakers or complainers, lose respect or support from others, receive a negative performance review, would not be considered for promotion, or even get fired, in line with previous research (Detert and Trevino, 2010; Grant, 2013; Milliken et al., 2003). In sum, in response to the second research question, how macro level contextual factors, specifically the Sub-Saharan culture and the labour market conditions in Nigeria affect employee voice and silence, the study has shown that power distance between subordinates and supervisors and people from difference tribes (Sub-Saharan culture) as well as high unemployment rates (labour market conditions) resulted in reluctance among employees to voice out, which resulted in silence.
With regards to effective employee voice mechanisms, Fox (1966), Freeman and Medoff (1984) postulated that trade unions or collective employee voice is the best vehicle for managing the work-place relationship, as they saw unions as the essential vehicle for independent voice and as an alternative to employee exit, in line with the IR perspective on employee voice and by the underpinning of IR in notions of pluralism. However, in the Nigerian industrial relations environment, trade unions are not the best vehicle for employee voice. In response to the second research question, which employee voice mechanisms employees in Nigeria prefer given the national culture characterized by high power distance and the labour market situation, the present research has shown a deviation from the previous norm of trade unions as “the” voice institution (Truss et al., 2014). Kaufman and Taras (2010) argued that non-unionized voice arrangements or the application of direct voice bundles has previously not received much attention in industrial relations research. In sync with the ER employee voice research stream the present research has drawn the attention to non-unionized voice arrangements, such as collective employee representation through consultative committees or councils.

Therefore, the second contribution to the literature is that this study has revealed the unique, culturally adapted non-unionized voice arrangements, reducing the power distance between management and employees and enabling Nigerian employees to express workplace issues and ideas. Most notably, the employee voice mechanism ‘the village meeting’ gave participants a sense of control or influence, which aligns with ‘significant influence over management’ as an outcome of voice in Table 1 (Marchington et al., 2001).

Furthermore, requests coming from nominated employee representatives were more influential, and more warmly welcomed, than a series of many isolated, intermittent requests coming from an assortment of individuals, resonating findings from O’Sullivan (2013). The rationale is that employees feel more protected from threats, e.g. job loss, when they collaborate together (i.e. the “safety in numbers” concept) (O’Sullivan, 2013) exemplified through the collective expression of the employees’ voice that can potentially help to minimize the fear of victimization. Overall, culturally adapted non-unionized voice arrangements resulted in Loyalty, Identity and commitment and a sense of significant influence over management, (see outcomes of voice in table 1). However, the manufacture of consent that Braverman (1974) postulated, is evident as employees in Firsttel feel that they have some measure of power. Information obtained from participants during the interviews indicated that they were comfortable with the state of industrial relations in Firsttel. The participants also acknowledged that wage issues that can impact profit were not up for discussion when employee representatives meet with management in their quarterly meetings, bringing to bear the issue of management’s desire to control voice programs and outcomes.
This study has provided evidence that groups and organizations perform better when employees share their ideas and concerns (Detert et al., 2013; MacKenzie et al., 2011, Nemeth et al., 2001). Hence, in line with the IR perspective, voice has value, in that it can contribute to organizational effectiveness as became evident in Firsttel and Seatek (improved performance) which aligns with partnership agreement and viability for both organisations and employees (see table 1). By contrast, performance suffers when there is a high level of silence (Perlow and Williams, 2003), evident in the case of Lightstar (decreased performance) and eventual closure as a business in Nigeria in 2014 (TeleGeography website, 2018). Employees' inability to express their concerns could prevent management from benefiting from employee opinions that will enable them to address issues, such as possible flaws in work activities and managerial decision (Detert et al., 2010; Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008; Wilkinson and Fay, 2011). This study has shown that employee silence can lead to organisational failure such that an organisation loses its competitive position in the market (Lightstar).

In line with the IR perspective, voice is a means of expression of human dignity, which extends into influencing the psychological and economic well-being of employees. This was evident among the participants. The findings of individual outcomes of employee voice versus silence revealed that the labour market situation in Nigeria was challenging for the well-being of the respondents and exacted a high psychological price on individuals, generating feelings of disillusionment and apathy in Lightstar. On the other hand, generating identity among employees in Firsttel and Seatek as the workers felt that they were co-partners with management, which subsequently created commitment and increased performance in Firsttel and Seatek (see Table 1).

In sum, this study has shown that employee voice and silence are situated beyond the organizational boundary and are embedded within the historic, political, cultural and labour market contexts in Nigeria.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The first limitation is that the purposive sample of employees from three organizations in the mobile telecommunications industry only permits theoretical and analytic generalization. Therefore, we can only generalize to theory and not to a broader population (Eisenhardt, 1989), such as employees in other industries and geographies. However, qualitative studies are typically less focused on generalizing (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and our intention was not to generalize, but to provide reflective insight into social reality that Nigerian employees experienced in expressing their voice in their organizations. However, even though the research took place in Nigeria, it is expected that similar results would be expected in countries with similar cultures in the sub-Saharan region, such as Ghana or Sierra Leone.
where similar culturally adapted employee voice mechanisms would result in positive individual and organisational outcomes. Further research could aim at conducting comparative analyses on how employee views/perceptions about actual voice practices compared with how managers view/perceive the voice practices and mechanisms that they have adopted. Insights from such research would help organizations to implement the most effective employee voice mechanisms. Notwithstanding that the present research revealed several individual outcomes of employee voice versus silence, future research is needed to gain more understanding on when speaking up is likely to harm versus enhance an employee’s image, relationships with co-workers, and career success to acquire more insight into individual outcomes of employee voice versus silence. Lastly, our research calls for future research into what Sullivan and Baruch (2009) call the “cross-culture generalizability” of research. The findings indicate that a holistic view, one that incorporates the socio-cultural and economic context in which employee voice unfolds would be suitable to studying employee voice in other emerging markets such as Ghana or Sierra Leone

*Implications for practice*

The present study leads to a number of recommendations to global organizations in Nigeria to facilitate employee voice. First, managers can encourage and enable more upward input by fostering higher levels of identification with the organisation in order to strengthen employees’ drive to make a positive difference, consult with employees and convey sincere receptivity to their input, and nurture a workplace climate that places value on open communication. Simultaneously, the implementation of coherent HRM policies and systems needs to take place to make people feel psychologically safe to express their opinions and thoughts. This means that active efforts need to be taken to ensure that employee silence is not reinforced by negative leadership behaviours, a climate of fear or a work environment that causes employees to feel disengaged or powerless. Second, at an operational level, organizing “Employee Voice Meetings” at various locations of multinational organisations across the country and globe offers opportunities for networking and expressing employee voice in order to jointly (employees, their managers and senior leaders) find solutions for organizational problems and to explore ideas for new product and service offerings. These employee voice mechanisms offer the organization the opportunity to utilize their valuable human resources as powerful sources for innovation, hence strengthening the organizations’ competitive advantage in the volatile global market.
Conclusion
This paper has shed light on the macro-contextual factors that hold employees back and make them reluctant or unwilling to speak their minds, i.e. the Sub-Saharan culture, characterized by respect for those in higher status positions and the labour market situation that instils the fear of job loss among employees should they voice out. This paper has also shown that implementing employee voice mechanisms that motivate and foster voice, most importantly, the corporate council and village meeting, enable employees in the Nigerian telecommunication industry to engage in informal upward promotive and prohibitive voice, leading to beneficial individual and organisational outcomes.

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