

# PERSONALITY AS A KEY DETERMINANT OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL SILENCE IN IRANIAN STARTUPS

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**Abstract:** Addressing the lack of research and knowledge about organizational silence in the nascent but promising Iranian startup ecosystem, this study examines the relationship between personality factors and organizational silence in Iranian startups. Data were collected using Vakola and Bouradas Organizational Silence Questionnaire and NEO Personality Inventory filled by 532 startup employees in Iran, then analyzed by Pearson and multivariate regression tests. Hypotheses were tested through SPSS. Data analysis demonstrated that personality factors predict 17.0% of the variance of organizational silence, and there is a significant relationship between each personality factor with organizational silence in startups. The strongest and weakest correlations with organizational silence were observed for openness to experiences and conscientiousness, respectively. The study is cross-sectional, so its results cannot be casually inferred; longitudinal studies are needed to obtain more comprehensive information. Access to qualified respondents was challenging because of startup managers' overall conservativeness spirit and tendency to withhold information about their employees. This study has implications for startup managers and decision-makers. Since it has examined a destructive organizational phenomenon in the specific context of startups, this knowledge will help managers recognize and resolve organizational silence. This study has filled the research gap by examining the organizational silence in Iranian startups for the first time and has implications for theoretical development in this novel context; furthermore, it helps startup managers to deal with organizational silence more effectively.

**Keywords:** Organizational silence, organizational voice, personality, startups, knowledge-sharing.

**JEL Classification:** M12, M13, M51, J24, L25.

**APA Style Citation:** Seyedi, S. S., & Darroudi, A. (2023). Personality as a Key Determinant of the Organizational Silence in Iranian Startups. *E&M Economics and Management*, 26(1), 65–77. <https://doi.org/10.15240/tul/001/2023-1-004>

## Introduction

One of the most critical phenomena in modern economics is the potential impact of startups on innovation, economic growth, and employment rates at the regional, national and industrial levels (Sedláček & Sterk, 2017). While startups' collective contributions are critical, the high-risk strategies they pursue lead to startups' high failure rates, up to 90% in some industries (Arora et al., 2018; Cantamessa et al., 2018;

Marmer et al., 2011), so improving organizational performance is vital to these businesses. This study examines one critical organizational phenomenon – organizational silence – in Iranian startups.

Organizational silence, first introduced in 2000 by Morrison and Milliken, is one of the most significant barriers to performance, growth, and innovation in organizations, where employees become silent consciously, refusing to express

ideas, critiques, suggestions, and opinions about organizational operations to influential persons in the organization (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Employees' silence is manifested through avoidance of sharing accumulated tacit knowledge, getting conservative, and depleting intra-organizational communication of appropriate information (Acaray & Akturan, 2015; Pinder & Harlos, 2001), leading to reduced organizational performance and job satisfaction, financial losses, isolation of innovation and restriction of organizational entrepreneurship (Brinsfield, 2013; Detert & Burris, 2007; Gambarotto & Cammozzo, 2010).

Factors impacting organizational silence can be divided into four categories: personality, managerial, organizational, and social (Brinsfield, 2013). At the micro-level, organizational silence is reflected in personality traits. Prior studies have revealed that personality factors are among the significant factors in the formation of employees' silence in organizations (Afkhani Ardakani & Khalili Sadrabad, 2013; Asadi, 2017; Avery, 2003; LePine & van Dyne, 2001; Nikolaou et al., 2008; Zebardast & Naderian Jahromi, 2016). As a crucial number of startups fail (Marmer et al., 2011), preventing the spread of organizational silence among employees and promoting knowledge and opinion-sharing practices can help improve company survival rates and business performance (Laitinen & Senoo, 2019; Oe & Mitsuhashi, 2013; Wang & Noe, 2010).

Speaking of Iran, despite many fluctuations in the past ten years, the startup rate has continuously risen above 10% (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2018). To our best knowledge, no international or domestic research has been dedicated to the impact of personality factors in creating and spreading organizational silence in the Iranian startup context. At the same time, there are few studies on other phenomena, such as knowledge sharing on Iranian startups. Therefore, recruiting a personality-behavioral approach and the five-factor personality model as a comprehensive reference model, this study examines the impact of employee personality factors specifically on organizational silence.

This study aims to answer the research question: how do personality factors affect startup organizational silence? Furthermore, is there a significant relationship between employees' personality factors and organizational silence in startups, and which personality

factors effectively cause organizational silence in startups? With a deeper understanding of the relationship between personality factors and organizational silence, startup managers can design better solutions that support proactive knowledge-sharing and ideas and remove barriers to expressing constructive ideas and opinions.

## 1. Literature Review

To better understand how personality factors affect organizational silence in startups, a comprehensive literature review was conducted on organizational silence, organizational voice, and personality factors, especially in the startup context. As this review will demonstrate, understanding the interrelationships between these factors is essential for any startup seeking to achieve the desired organizational results. However, before addressing the factors influencing organizational silence, the characteristics that differentiate startups from traditional small companies and the current status of startups in the target population (Iran) are discussed.

### 1.1 Startups

Startups are newly-formed or entrepreneurial businesses in the market research and development phase. According to Blank and Dorf (2012), a startup is an organization pursuing a repeatable, scalable, and profitable business model. Given the lack of resources characterizing a startup, the owners and managers must leverage intangible assets such as knowledge and human capital to achieve scalability goals (Centobelli et al., 2017). Laitinen and Senoo (2019) define a startup as a young innovation-driven organization seeking a repeatable and profitable business model by creating innovative products and services that target uncertain global markets.

Aulet and Murray (2013) describe five main differences between small businesses ("SEM entrepreneurship") and startups ("innovation-driven entrepreneurship or IDE") as follows: (1) innovation is at the heart of startups and critical to their survival; (2) startups focus on serving global markets from the outset by relying on a variety of financial resources – including venture capital – while small companies serve local markets with traditional financial support; (3) startup members are not settled necessarily in a single location and may instead be scattered worldwide. Eisenmann et al. (2012)

mentioned startup business model flexibility as another critical difference between startups and small companies.

Due to the high failure rate of startups, many efforts have been made to design different types of predictive and forward-looking models to successfully predict the fate of a startup by identifying the factors leading to success or failure. The results have introduced factors related to the entrepreneur, the sector or industry in which the entrepreneur works, and the strategies adopted in startups (Hormiga et al., 2011). Other studies have found factors such as financial resources (Hill, 2018; Tripathi et al., 2019), market knowledge (De Luca & Atuahene-Gima, 2007), market opportunities (Kuada, 2016), understanding of customer tastes (Kotler & Keller, 2015), business intelligence (Caseiro & Coelho, 2019), innovation (Jiménez-Jimenez et al., 2008), marketing capabilities (Saleh & Alharbi, 2015), technology capabilities (Chen et al., 2009) and networking capabilities (Walter et al., 2006) to be influential in the startup's success.

Given the scarcity of recent studies on organizational silence in startups (Centobelli et al., 2017), more research is needed to understand how the startup context affects organizational silence.

## 1.2 Iranian Startup Ecosystem

The Iranian startup ecosystem is nascent, with a remarkable lack of reliable statistical information. Among the few existing resources, The Iranian ICT Guild Organization (IIG) has presented a statistical report on the current situation of startups, problems, and related issues based on data collected by an online questionnaire. According to the report, more than 68% of the startups participating in the survey were under two years old, and only 39.5% have reached the growth and revenue generation stage. More than 75% of Iranian startups are deprived of government support, and only 11.8% offer their services in the global market.

Notably, 22.5% of the founders of Iranian startups have a second job, and 68.9% of startups do not have investors. 63.4% of these startups have between zero (just a founder) to five full-time employees, and 62.9% have between one and five part-time employees. Participants in the survey attributed the weak spirit of cooperation and teamwork between members (16.1%) and the limitation of the

startup knowledge base (24.5%) together to other factors such as low liquidity, the local model, and domestic constraints as the most critical internal barriers for the growth of startups (Digiato, 2020).

According to the report of the 11th research program for evaluating entrepreneurship indicators in Iran, published by the Office of the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor in Iran (Faculty of Entrepreneurship, University of Tehran), the Total Early-Stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) Index in Iran in 2018 was 10%, ranking Iran 28th out of 52 member countries. Also, the total net entrepreneurial activities in Iran is equal to 16%. In other words, about 16% of Iran's adult population is involved in various entrepreneurial activities (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2018).

According to Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, a startup entrepreneur is an entrepreneur who has done a significant activity to start a new business during the last 42 months, partially or wholly owns a company, and is actively involved in its management. The most significant number of startup entrepreneurs in Iran are young people aged 25–34, who make up 15.18% of the total population. Iran ranks 35th among 52 member countries in the Average Startup Exit and 15th in Fear of Failure Rate. Moreover, the startups' success rate in Iran decreased by about 3% in 2018 compared to the three prior years (9.7% in 2018, 13.3% in 2017, and 12.8% in 2016) (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2018).

## 1.3 Organizational Silence

Employees usually have ideas to improve their organization; some employees express their ideas (organizational voice), but others remain silent and suppress their constructive opinions and knowledge; Morrison and Milliken (2000) call this social phenomenon "organizational silence." Pinder and Harlos (2001) define organizational silence as the refusal of employees to convey behavioral, cognitive, honest, and practical assessments of organizational situations to the decision-making people in the organization. Employees' silence disrupts organizational performance in various ways, providing a hostile climate against the expression of new ideas and knowledge-sharing, and hindering effective organizational change and development by preventing negative feedback (Dimitris & Vakola, 2007; Managheb et al., 2018; Pinder & Harlos, 2001).

The majority of organizational silence studies recruit various models such as the dynamics leading to organizational silence [explaining why and how the silence climate is formed in organizations as a collective phenomenon; Morrison and Milliken (2000)], the effects of organizational silence [focusing on implications and organizational consequences of silence, including the effectiveness of organizational change, decision-making, and error correction processes; Morrison and Milliken (2000)], conceptualizing employee silence [providing a framework for conceptualizing silence based on altruistic, defensive and obedient silence components, via employee motivation; Van Dyne et. al. (2003); the main factors of the silence climate and the results of organizational silence in the employees' job perspectives; Dimitris and Vakola (2007)].

While a review of the theoretical foundations of organizational silence in the startup context reveals a lack of prior research studies on the topic, the limited existing studies examine the impact of knowledge-sharing by startup founders and its relationship to resulting benefits in startups (Centobelli et al., 2017; Oe & Mitsuhashi, 2013). These studies claim that employees are naturally motivated to share their opinions and knowledge with others, but it could not be generalized without a comprehensive analysis of people's motivations. In order to perform such an in-depth analysis, a deeper understanding of the fundamental characteristics influencing the formation of organizational silence is required.

### 1.4 Personality and Organizational Silence

Personality is psychological qualities contributing to distinct and stable patterns of a person's emotion, thought, and behavior (Cervone & Pervin, 2010). Armstrong and Taylor (2014) defined personality as psychological traits that distinctly and consistently influence a person's behavioral characteristics.

Some recent studies on personality have focused on the five-factor model of personality (FFM), classifying personality traits into five dimensions, including neuroticism, extroversion, openness to experiences, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Chan et al., 2015; Hafnidar, 2013). Proponents of the five-factor personality model maintain that these factors are found individually or collectively in almost all personality tools (Norman, 1963).

Neuroticism refers to the tendency to experience adverse effects, such as anger, anxiety, insecurity, and psychological stress, while extroversion measures the quantity and intensity of interpersonal interactions and activity level. Openness to experiences means proactively embracing brand-new experiences, agreeableness refers to the quality of interpersonal interaction in a spectrum from love to conflict, and conscientiousness measures the degree of consistency, organization, and motivation in goal-oriented behaviors (Costa, 1992).

Organizational silence – at the micro-level – manifests itself in the context of personality traits. There is not a general agreement on how and to what extent each of these personality factors affects the behavior of employees, and some believe that the behavior of conscientious and neurotic people is not context-dependent and is always predictable. However, other personality factors (extraversion, openness, and agreeableness) on organizational behavior – including organizational silence – are mainly context-dependent (Judge et al., 2008).

LePine and van Dyne (2001) argue that organizational voice behavior is a basic form of contextual performance. They explored the role of individual differences and found that conscientiousness and extroversion positively correlate with organizational silence, while neuroticism and agreeableness have a negative relationship with organizational silence. Avery (2003) tested the effect of five personality factors and the main dimensions of core self-evaluations (CSE) on organizational voice. Detert and Burris (2007) stated that the rationale for their study on individual differences as correlated with organizational voice is that one person is more likely willing to express ideas than others.

Nikolaou et al. (2008) argued that if there is indeed a relationship between employee voice behavior and contextual performance, it can be expected that employees who possess high levels of conscientiousness and extraversion and low levels of neuroticism demonstrate organizational voice more than others. They also found that employees' organizational voice behavior was mainly observed towards their supervisor rather than senior management.

Studies conducted in Iran on the impact of personality on organizational silence rarely have focused on startups (mainly done in the public sector) while emphasizing the significant

relationships between employee personality and organizational silence. For example, Afkhami Ardakani and Khalili Sadrabad (2013) found that extraversion, openness to experience, and conscientiousness have a significant negative relationship with organizational silence, while there is a significant positive relationship between agreeableness and organizational silence, and no significant relationship was observed between the neuroticism and silence. Zebardast and Naderian Jahromi (2016) also found that agreeableness, neuroticism, and extraversion are good predictors of silence behavior among employees.

Asadi (2017) found a significant positive relationship between neuroticism and agreeableness to organizational silence and a significant negative relationship between extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience factors with organizational silence. Shariati and Afkhami Ardakani (2018) established that (an introverted) personality significantly relates to an employee's silence. Zebardast et al.'s (2017) findings indicate the direct effect of personality on employee silence. Examining the organizational silence of nurses, Jafariani and Rabbani (2020) found that conscientiousness and agreeableness significantly impact the relationship between managerial factors and organizational silence.

## 2. Hypothesis Development

A review of previous studies shows a research gap on how personality factors affect the formation of organizational silence in startups. Therefore, hypotheses targeting this gap will be developed.

### 2.1 Conscientiousness and Organizational Silence

Employees with high levels of conscientiousness possess creativity, ingenuity, imagination, and curiosity to develop new ideas (Furnham & Fudge, 2008). Conscientious people are more likely to share knowledge and opinions because they possess outstanding job skills, enjoy helping others, and act beyond their roles for the sake of the organization (Kargar Shouraki et al., 2016). Barrick and Ryan's (2003) study reveals that conscientiousness has a significant positive relationship with success and desire for career success and job performance.

Avery (2003) found that people with a high level of conscientiousness seek better control

over their jobs, leading to improved organizational voice. Nikolaou et al. (2008) hypothesized that conscientiousness has a significant positive relationship with organizational voice behavior. They argued that conscientious employees are efficient, stable, and hardworking. Hypothesis 1 is therefore developed as follows:

*H1: Conscientiousness has a positive relationship with organizational silence.*

### 2.2 Neuroticism and Organizational Silence

Anxiety in neurotic people can increase their sensitivity to work-related stress factors and reduce their adaptation to unpleasant conditions (Hafnidar, 2013). Neuroticism in group members causes them to deliberately avoid knowledge-sharing to maintain the security of their exclusive knowledge, but members with higher emotional stability tend to trust colleagues and have little fear of sharing their knowledge (Kargar Shouraki et al., 2016). Having negative emotions such as fear, sadness, anger, and guilt forms the basis of the neuroticism scale (nervousness or emotional instability index). People with low scores on the neuroticism scale are calm and gentle and have low self-esteem (Zhao & Seibert, 2006).

Nikolaou et al. (2008) hypothesized that neuroticism has a significant positive relationship with organizational silence behavior. They argued that neurotics are more likely to have psychological anxiety and unrealistic ideas and can quickly become anxious and feel insecure and emotionally unstable, leading to employee silence in the face of organizational issues. Therefore, these people are likely reluctant to make suggestions that lead to significant organizational improvements or changes. LePine and van Dyne (2001) also demonstrate that neuroticism has a significant and positive relationship with organizational silence. Hypothesis 2 is therefore developed as follows:

*H2: Neuroticism has a positive relationship with organizational silence.*

### 2.3 Agreeableness and Organizational Silence

McCrae et al. (2005) defined agreeableness as a personality trait of trust, love, gentleness, empathy, participation, and humility. Avery (2003) found that agreeable people did not want to create problems or conflict with others; they could not see the downside of their actions. Nikolaou et al. (2008) hypothesized that agreeableness



has a significant positive relationship with organizational silence. They argued that agreeable people could be described as kind-hearted, willing to help, generous, kind, and outspoken, who easily trust others.

Similarly, LePine and Van Dyne's (2001) remarkable finding indicates the dual orientation of agreeableness; it has a significant and negative relationship with organizational voice and a significant and positive relationship with organizational performance. Hypothesis 3 is therefore developed as follows:

*H3: Agreeableness has a positive relationship with organizational silence.*

### 2.4 Extraversion and Organizational Silence

McCrae et al. (2005) described extraversion as characteristics such as sociability, assertiveness, excitability, and a high level of emotional expression. The sense of humor of extroverts helps them talk with other people in a non-threatening way. Extroverts often feel secure and act decisively in the workplace. Avery (2003) found that extroverts likely find opportunities to present themselves and influence others through organizational voice behavior.

Nikolaou et al. (2008) hypothesized that extraversion has a significant positive relationship with organizational voice behavior. They

argued that extroverts are sociable, active, optimistic, affectionate, and talkative. These people always feel safe and behave decisively in the workplace. Similar results have been reported by LePine and Van Dyne (2001). Hypothesis 4 is therefore developed as follows:

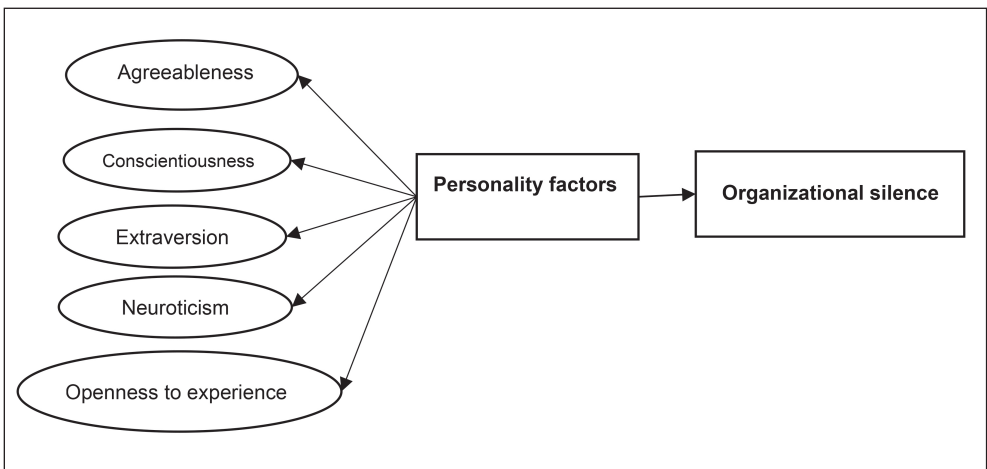
*H4: Extraversion has a positive relationship with organizational silence.*

### 2.5 Openness to Experiences and Organizational Silence

Openness to experiences can create bonds among employees by improving group cohesion. Once group cohesion is formed, members will be more inclined to share knowledge and opinions with others (in order to achieve better job performance) (Hsu, 2018). LePine and van Dyne (2001) found that people with high levels of openness to experiences enjoy new experiences and are willing to learn new things. Such people probably favor new changes more than the current situation. Thus, openness to experience is inversely related to organizational silence.

It can be said that open-minded people experience positive and negative emotions more intensely than people with low openness scores; thus, they tend to have more positive attitudes toward learning new things and engage more deeply in learning experiences

Fig. 1: The conceptual framework



Source: LePine and van Dyne (2001)

(Matzler & Mueller, 2011). Furthermore, Avery (2003) finds that such individuals are likely to find innovative and creative ways to improve current practices. Both recent studies hypothesized that openness to experiences positively predicts organizational voice behavior and is inversely related to organizational silence.

Nevertheless, openness to experience has revealed the weakest association with work behavior, job participation, and traditional contextual performance. Avery (2003) and LePine and van Dyne (2001) observed an association between openness and organizational voice behavior but did not sufficiently explain their findings. Openness to experiences includes several diverse elements (Hough & Furnham, 2003), leading to the description of openness as the most erratic and heterogeneous dimension of the five-factor personality model. Hypothesis 5 is therefore developed as follows:

*H5: There is a positive relationship between openness to experiences and organizational silence.*

### 3. Methodology

As shown in Fig. 1, the conceptual framework is based on the relationships presented in the hypotheses and study of LePine and van Dyne (2001). The study's statistical population includes all employees of startups in Iran, for which exact statistics are unavailable. Therefore, the questionnaires were sent to 600 employees, and after removing incomplete questionnaires, 502 were entered into the analysis.

#### 3.1 Measurement

The organizational silence questionnaire is taken from Vakola and Bouradas (2005) and consists of 15 five-point Likert items (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree). The dimensions of this questionnaire were senior management attitude to silence (5 items), supervisor attitude to silence (5 items), and communication opportunities (5 items).

The short form of the Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) was used to measure personality factors. NEO-FFI includes 60 items and is one of the newest questionnaires to assess personality construct based on the factor analysis perspective. The scoring scale for the questions is based on a five-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree). A part of the questionnaire was dedicated to the respondents' demographic variables and the startup's characteristics.

The reliability analysis of both translated questionnaires in a pilot study of 30 people was estimated with Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 for the organizational silence questionnaire and 0.84 for NEO-FFI, indicating the questionnaire's satisfactory reliability. Feedback received from four practitioners and four university professors was used to ensure the validity of both questionnaires and the clarity of the measures, leading to minor modifications to the items based on the pilot study.

#### 3.2 Sampling and Data Collection/ Procedure

The questionnaire was sent to 600 startup employees. Each person was sent a personalized email invitation to complete the online survey. Incomplete questionnaires and unwillingness to answer the questionnaires were considered exit criteria. Five hundred thirty-two respondents participated in the survey, and finally, 502 questionnaires were analyzed, leading to an effective response rate of 85.66% for the study. Participation in the survey was anonymous and based on voluntary and ethical considerations. The characteristics of the respondents are described in Tab. 1.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Values of means, standard deviations, and correlations between constructs and variables are shown in Tab. 2. Extraversion and conscientiousness possess the lowest and the highest means, respectively. A dominant sense of conservativeness was reflected in the answers as well.

#### 4.2 Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

To analyze the hypotheses, one must first ensure that the tested variable's statistical distribution is normal. For this purpose, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used, and the results and decision criteria ( $p$ -value) in this study were 0.607 (above 0.5), indicating that the distribution is normal.

#### 4.3 Pearson Correlation Test

Pearson correlation coefficient is used to test hypotheses 1 to 5. As the Tab. 3 shows, conscientiousness and openness to experience have the weakest and strongest correlation with organizational silence.

**Tab. 1: Sample description (n = 502)**

		Number of employees	
		(n)	(%)
Age	<30	223	44.4
	31–40	160	31.9
	41–50	85	16.9
	50<	34	6.8
Education	Bachelor	121	24.1
	Master	306	61.0
	PhD	75	14.9
Startup size (employee number)	1–5	157	31.3
	5–10	281	56.0
	10–15	39	7.8
	15<	25	4.9
Experience in startup sector (yrs)	<3	183	36.5
	3–5	195	38.8
	5<	124	24.7
Gender	Male	317	63.1
	Female	185	36.9

Source: own

**Tab. 2: Means and standard deviations of constructs (n = 502)**

Construct	Mean	Standard deviation	The largest number	The smallest number
Organizational silence	3.27	0.457	4.50	1.80
Personality factors	1.19	0.575	4.40	1.80
Neuroticism	2.00	0.996	4.60	1.60
Extraversion	1.80	0.891	4.60	1.40
Openness to experience	1.97	0.899	4.25	1.75
Agreeableness	1.81	0.902	5.00	1.20
Conscientiousness	2.18	0.955	4.00	1.30

Source: own

#### 4.4 Regression Analysis

The regression analysis results between organizational silence and personality factors are shown in Tab. 4. The results demonstrate that the correlation coefficient of organizational silence on the personality factors equals 0.499 and explains the variance of organizational silence by 0.17.

#### 5. Discussion

This study aims to investigate the role of personality factors based on the five-factor model on organizational silence among employees of Iranian startups. The regression analysis results reveal a significant relationship between the five-factor model of personality and organizational silence factors. In the following, the



**Tab. 3:** Correlation coefficient between personality factors and organizational silence ( $n = 502$ )

Personality factor	Correlation coefficient ( $P$ )	Significance level (Sig.)
Conscientiousness	0.07	0.010
Neuroticism	0.23	0.061
Agreeableness	0.31	0.001
Extraversion	0.29	0.001
Openness to experience	0.46	0.001

Source: own

**Tab. 4:** Indices and statistics of regression analysis of organizational silence based on personality factors

Estimation error	Adjusted $R^2$ coefficient	Square of the correlation coefficient ( $R^2$ )	Standard correlation coefficient ( $R$ )
2.967	0.159	0.170	0.251

Source: own

results of testing the hypotheses are analyzed separately.

### 5.1 Conscientiousness and Organizational Silence

This study reveals that conscientiousness has a significant positive relationship with organizational silence that is consistent with previous research (Afkhami Ardakani & Khalili Sadrabad, 2013; Nikolaou et al., 2008; Zebardast & Naderian Jahromi, 2016), which found a positive and significant relationship between organizational voice and conscientiousness. Expressing views and suggestions for improving the business outcomes for the organization is the most vital issue for conscientious employees, leading to suppressing organizational silence. However, it should be noted that the weakest correlation between personality factors and organizational silence was observed for the conscientious factor, making it the weakest predictor of organizational silence in the present study.

### 5.2 Neuroticism and Organizational Silence

The results revealed that neuroticism has a positive relationship with organizational silence, consistent with previous findings (Asadi, 2017; Chan et al., 2015; Zebardast & Naderian Jahromi, 2016) that neurotics are emotionally unstable and lack self-confidence, therefore,

prefer silence when they need to comment. Previous studies have shown that neurotic people are more likely to experience emotions such as fear and failure, leading to ineffective adaptive strategies such as emotion-centered adjustment and interpersonal solitude, personal blame, passivity, and indecision (Lee-Bagglely et al., 2005). A considerable fraction of respondents (36.5%) are still "newcomers" to startups, and neurotic respondents may belong mainly to this group and feel insecure in the workplace and try to be conservative.

### 5.3 Agreeableness and Organizational Silence

The results revealed that agreeableness has a positive relationship with organizational silence. Agreeable persons are more inclined to organizational silence. This finding is consistent with previous literature (e.g., Afkhami Ardakani & Khalili Sadrabad, 2013; Asadi, 2017; Chan et al., 2015; Danaeifard et al., 2012), demonstrating that agreeable people are compassionate towards others and try to adapt to any situation. As a result, it can be inferred that passive people prefer silence when they need to comment. Agreeable people are very prone to passive behaviors, and their primary motivation for silence behavior is mainly withdrawal and submission; they act based on submission and satisfaction with everything.

### 5.4 Extraversion and Organizational Silence

This study demonstrates a positive relationship between extraversion and organizational silence behavior, in line with the findings of Nikolaou et al. (2008), which did not confirm that extraversion has a positive relationship with organizational voice. From a personality perspective, extraversion is a socially-based personality dimension strongly correlated with contextual performance rankings from the observer's point of view. Extroverted respondents reclining organizational silence could result from fear of losing their exclusive knowledge and jobs. Another reason could be the reluctance of Iranian startup managers to use open-door policies, causing members to think that managers seldom consider their suggestions and therefore feel reluctant to come up with ideas about the company.

### 5.5 Openness to Experiences and Organizational Silence

The finding revealed a positive relationship between openness to experiences and organizational silence, consistent with previous findings demonstrating that people with high scores in this personality factor are imaginative and flexible in thinking. They have a remarkable capacity for ambiguity and venture, facilitating the tolerance of difficult psychological conditions such as organizational silence (Alarcon et al., 2009). Furthermore, the strongest correlation between openness to experiences with organizational silence behavior shows that the more receptive and flexible people are to new experiences, the more significant the likelihood of organizational silence caused by them.

## 6. Conclusions

In pursuit of examining organizational silence from the behavioral science perspective, this study demonstrated that exploring individual differences can help understand employees' organizational silence behavior. The findings demonstrated that the combined effect of the big five factors (conscientiousness, neuroticism, agreeableness, extraversion, and openness to experiences) might predict the organizational silence behavior among startup employees.

This study has made three significant theoretical contributions: First, it was argued that startups should not be treated like small companies. Second, it contributes to the literature

focused on the impact of personality factors on the formation of organizational silence. Thirdly, this is the first quantitative research on organizational silence in the Iranian startup context, which can pave the way for further studies in this field.

The results have three main limitations: first, there are many aspects in which startups differ from small companies, so there is a need to develop new statistical tools that better reflect the characteristics of startups. Second, since this is a cross-sectional correlation study, its results cannot be inferred. So, longitudinal studies are required to achieve more generalizable findings. Third, access to qualified respondents was challenging because of Iranian startup managers' overall conservativeness to withhold information about their employees.

Future researchers should investigate how startups share ideas, knowledge, and opinions daily. New statistical tools may reflect the specific nuances of startup environments, leading to a better understanding of startups' evolution and the processes of forming and coping with organizational silence in these innovation-driven businesses.

The results emphasize the importance of personality factors as a predictor of organizational silence in startups. Indifference to some personality traits, such as neuroticism, causes people with anger, insecurity, depression, and anxiety to enter the workplace, resulting in isolation between individuals, personal blame, passivity, and indecision. They might deliberately avoid sharing knowledge to maintain their exclusive knowledge's security.

On the other hand, given the scarcity of resources characteristic of a startup, these businesses must rely on their intangible assets, such as knowledge and human capital, to achieve their scalability goals (Nonaka, 1994). Since individuals cannot be forced to share knowledge and express opinions, it must be ensured that members of the organization contribute by expressing their opinions and ideas.

Organizations, especially startups, need compassionate and creative employees who do not hesitate to share their knowledge and opinions for organizational growth to survive in a dynamic environment stuffed with social, cultural, economic, and even political challenges. Our study advocates that personality traits should be considered when hiring or promoting employees; furthermore, startup

managers should promote organizational voice by creating a welcoming culture and organizing good training courses. Moreover, managers are advised to utilize individuals' capabilities in decision-making and establishing policies, guidelines, and strategic objectives.

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