



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



## Organizational culture as social control mechanism

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### Abstract

Beyond sharing values and beliefs, organizational culture can serve as a powerful social control framework. This study aims to examine how cultural norms and expectations impact employee behavior within an organization. The study looked at the concepts of organizational culture, social control, and the influence of organizational culture on employees. This study employs Schein's model of the organization, to better understand the research problem. The model focused on three layers of culture in an organization: artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions, and how these elements influence the behaviors and performances of employees in an organization. A qualitative desk review research method was employed, and relevant materials for the study were sourced from academic databases (Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and Academia) websites and gray literature. Based on the relevant literature reviewed, the study revealed that organizational culture is an important recipe in organizations and a potent mechanism for social control. Furthermore, organizational leaders and managers leverage the power of culture to achieve either beneficial or harmful organizational goals. Based on this review, this study recommends ethical consideration in leveraging the power of culture as a social control framework in organizations.

**Keywords:** Organizational culture; Social control; Schein's Model; Culture; Behavior

### 1 Introduction

There has been a growing interest in examining the influence of organizational culture as a mechanism for social control in organizations. Culture functions as an informal yet powerful tool for regulating employees' behavior and shaping their actions in line with organizational goals (Schein, 2010). Scholarly interest in "organizational culture" has been broad. Culture is mostly viewed from a functional perspective as a means of social control within groups and organizations. Culture can be said to infer a group of people with a common set of values, customs, and beliefs. A shared normative order or culture can influence members' focus of attention, shape interpretations of events, and guide attitudes and behaviors. Social control is exercised by individuals and institutions, ranging from families to peers to the state, religious organizations, schools, and workplaces (Oreilly & Chatman, 1996). Regardless of its source, the goal of social control is to maintain conformity to established norms and rules. Group members typically employ social control in response to anyone they consider deviant, problematic, threatening, or undesirable to ensure conformity.

Schein (2010) stressed that organizational leaders and managers are vital when it comes to creating workplace communication. However, the relationship between leadership and culture is not one-sided. Although organizational leaders are the primary architects of workplace culture, an organizational culture could influence what kind of leadership is possible. Culture in this sense is a potent tool for social control. A social control system is based on shared norms and values that set expectations about appropriate attitudes and behavior for group members. Much research has been done by scholars on Organizational Culture and emphasizes that having a strong culture improves performance (Tsai, 2011). While it has been established that a strong culture is essential for an organization to operate

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at its highest level, one aspect that has received less attention is the role that organizational culture plays as a tool for social control.

Walk into any organization around you today and you will likely see the style of the building, the nature of landscaping and flowers, the dress code of employees, the style of furniture, music, wall pictures and color, etc. These elements contribute to an organization's culture, the shared values, beliefs, and behaviors that shape and define the work environment. However, this culture is not just about creating a happy workforce. This study examines organizational culture as a mechanism for social control in workplaces. This study delved into the concept of organizational culture and social control, and how shared values, norms, and beliefs can influence and even control employees' behaviors.

By bringing this problem framework into empirical exposition, it brings insights into how organizations could promote a cohesive and cooperative workplace, thus enhancing overall productivity and employee satisfaction and highlighting the possible risks associated with rigid and unfavorable cultural values that can hinder creativity and productivity among employees. Furthermore, this study provides a framework for organizational leaders and managers to strategically leverage the power of culture to achieve the desired organizational aims and objectives.

### *Objectives*

- To review the concepts of organizational culture and social control mechanisms.
- To examine the effects of culture on employees within an organization.
- To examine the effects of culture as a social control mechanism.

### **1.1 Research Questions**

Based on the above objectives, this paper is guided by the following questions:

- What do organizational culture and social control mechanisms mean?
- What are the effects of organizational culture on employees within the organization?
- What are the effects of culture as a social control mechanism, in the organizational setting?

### **1.2 Operational definitions**

#### *1.2.1 Organizational culture*

The concept of organizational culture has been shaped by various disciplines, a cornerstone for understanding workplace dynamics. The term organizational culture could also be referred to as 'corporate culture', 'workplace culture', and 'business culture'. Organizational culture includes the shared beliefs, norms, and practices that define or shape the behaviors of employees within an organization and it not only guides the daily activities of employees but also affects long-term strategic decisions and the goals of an organization (Schein, 2010). Similarly, organizational culture is a set of shared assumptions that guide what happens in organizations by highlighting or identifying the right or appropriate behaviors for different situations (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Schein's (2010) and Ravasi and Schultz's (2006) definitions of organizational culture are similar and centered more on shared cultural elements and how they shape organizational practices. Schrod, (2002) definition of organizational culture focused more on culture, communication, and how it influences organizational practices. Organizational culture influences the way employees or a group of people in an organization interact with their clients and with their stakeholders. It also influences how employees identify with their organization Schrod, (2002). Furthermore, Organizational culture includes the vision of an organization, its values, systems, symbols, language, assumptions, beliefs, and habits (Needle, 2004). Unlike Deal and Kennedy, (2000) definition which focused on culture as the way things are done in an organization, Needle's definition is broad. It also included the overall philosophy of the organization.

#### *1.2.2 Social control mechanism*

Social control is more pronounced in the field of sociology. It refers to the societal and political mechanisms that can be employed to regulate the behavior of individuals or groups in an attempt to gain conformity and compliance within the rules of a given society, group, or organization. This control could either be formal (exercising control through laws or other official regulations) or informal (exercising control through customs, norms, and expectations) (Perera, & Mcleod, 2024). Social control refers to rules and restrictions that shape, supervise, and regulate the behavior of individuals and societies (Drew, 2022). Social control refers to rules, regulations, and sanctions applied to encourage socially acceptable behavior and discourage deviance (Zald, 1978). The definitions provided by Perera and Mcleod (2024), Drew, (2022), and Zald, (1978) are very similar in the sense that they all see social control as a mechanism that can be employed by individuals or organizations to ensure compliance and also noted that social control could either be formal or informal.

Through social control, acceptable behaviors are encouraged among individuals or groups while unacceptable or harmful behaviors are discouraged. What is considered accepted or harmful in organizations is culturally defined. This indicates that culture is a potent mechanism for social control in organizations. Drew (2022) further added that be it a formal or informal type of social control, it can manifest through praising, job promotion, stigmatization, dress code, caste system, taboo, and language, but a few.

Using dress code as a material culture, for instance, dress code refers to the rules, regulations, and restrictions around clothing. In most cases, the dress code includes uniforms, which is used to assert social control over students, and workers. In some countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, individuals are legally required to dress in public places or workplaces following religious tenets (Ramírez, 2014). Informally, for instance, dressing up for a party will follow prevalent social expectations.

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## 2 Literature Review

Consistent with other researchers (Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Rousseau, 1990), we define culture as a system of shared values (that define what is important) and norms that define appropriate attitudes and behaviors for organizational members (how to feel and behave). Culture is vital in determining a person's commitment or intensity of feelings regardless of whether they belong to a cult, religion, or strong cultural organization. Culture as a social control mechanism can determine organization members' levels of emotionality and affection for each other. When a group has not evolved to the point of having shared assumptions, as will sometimes be the case, the new members' interaction with old members will be a more creative process of building a culture. However, once shared assumptions exist, the culture survives by teaching those assumptions to newcomers. In this regard, culture is a mechanism of social control and can be the basis of explicitly manipulating members into perceiving, thinking, and feeling in specific ways (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989; Kunda, 1992, 2006). It has been argued convincingly that control of real, inner, or felt feelings constitutes a large part of the work performed by those in some service professions (Hochschild, 1979, 1983). These authors suggest that 'control of the heart' is a primary objective of organizational socialization and managerial attempts to manipulate organizational culture. A recent descriptive model suggests that at least three factors shape emotional expression, one of which is Organizational norms or display rules.

Organizational norms of various types have been prominently described as essential constraints on employees' expressions of emotion (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987, 1989; Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989). Employees' messages that they choose to keep quiet reveal communication norms that control emotional display (Harris & Cronen, 1979). Some members, for instance, seem to be affected by rules that forbid insults and emotional venting. Such emotional restraints probably help workplace relationships survive. The prevalent suppression of protests and justifications suggests additional normative constraints on emotionally charged messages. According to Hirschman (1970), such emotional restrictions may eventually silence employees' voices and deter discussions of unfair organizational and relational practices. The majority of research to date focuses on how service employees express their emotions to clients (e.g., Sutton & Rafaeli, 1989); ethnographic descriptions of emotional communication behavior suggest that emotional expressions toward clients, supervisors, and peer coworkers are all subject to various organizational controls (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989).

Welch and Welch (2006) discuss the efficiency of corporate culture as a control mechanism in the context of multinational organizations. Finding a practical balance between centralized strategic direction and control and local responsiveness has been a challenge for the multinational company. Doing so will help to prevent confusion and dysfunctional behavior within the organization. Through a process of socialization, members learn how to act accordingly. The 'group' controls by rewarding acceptable behavior and punishing deviant behavior, that is normative control. This shaping process underlies definitions such as that by Hofstede (1991, p. 5): culture is "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group of people from another." Proponents of corporate culture as an informal control mechanism regard culture as a management tool that can be manipulated (that is, shaped, altered, or even radically changed) through the actions of top management. The number of practitioners who use this strategy is significant. It is common to hear corporate leaders describe a change in corporate culture as "necessary" or "appropriate" in light of recent developments when responding to questions from financial journalists and others. For example, the incoming Chief Executive Officer of the US multinational Tyco International was quoted as saying: "We are committed to changing the culture of the company. Where we cannot change the culture, we will change people" (The Australian, 2003, p. 28). Such public statements support the idea that corporate culture is a management tool, particularly when CEOs and other top executives, including subsidiary managers, use media statements to highlight the need for cultural change.

The national culture impacts a firm's ability to transfer competencies and standardize processes and work practices. The struggles of transferring corporate culture across national boundaries are highlighted by the U.S. retailer Walmart's attempts to instill the "Wal-Mart Way" in its German employees. German staff members avoided the morning cheering session by hiding in the restrooms (The Economist, 2001). This was a sign of larger issues with transferring Wal-Mart procedures.

In this sense, social control aims to change people's attitudes, values, and actions to achieve desired organizational outcomes like respect, safety, and customer service. However, social control can also increase unfavorable outcomes if members fail to pay attention to strategically relevant norms and values or if internalization is so complete that members cannot even consider different approaches. Either way, rather than being based on legitimate or formal authority, social control is based on informational and normative influence (e.g., Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). The paradox is that strong social control systems often result in positive feelings of solidarity and a greater sense of autonomy among people rather than the psychological reactance described earlier. It may be accompanied by more positive attitudes and freely chosen behaviors because the internalization of some organizational values, like helping others and contributing to society, can lead to a perception of intrinsic value (that is, something that the person believes in rather than something that is imposed-externally and subject to extrinsic justification). Thus, the power of organizational culture—to increase commitment among members—may lie in the power of social control. To the extent that norms emerge in all groups (Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1991), it is also true that social control systems operate in all organizations. The key issues are whether these norms are strongly held, whether they strengthen commitment and whether they are compatible with environmental demands, enhancing organizational performance and allowing for adaptation to changing conditions.

## 2.1 Theoretical Framework

This paper is guided by Schein's Model of Organizational Culture. Although frameworks such as Institutional Theory and Cultural Dimension Theory, etc. Schein's Model of Organizational Culture focuses on the various layers of culture in an organization such as artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions, and how these elements influence the behaviors and performances of organizational employees. Sridharan (2022) noted that Schein's Model of Organizational Culture provides a framework for understanding the layers and how they interact, helping leaders and managers navigate and shape organizational culture. Schein's Model of Organizational Culture consists of three levels which include first, artifacts and behavior secondly, espoused values, and lastly, the basic underlying assumptions. Each of these levels represents visibility and depth within an organization, impacting how employees perceive and interact with culture. In light of this paper, the artifacts and behavior layer are the most visible aspects of organizational culture, they include the physical nature of the workplace environment, dress code, symbols, rituals, and observable behavior exhibited by employees. For instance, the dress code could either reflect the formality or informality of an organization (Geraghty, 2023).

Both individual, group and collective behaviors reflect the norms and expectations within an organization. These behaviors could include the communication patterns, decision-making processes, and problem-solving approaches of the organization. By understanding this layer, individuals, leaders, and managers could understand the values that can drive the organizational goals. The espoused according to Sridharan (2022) represents the stated norms and beliefs that are promoted and communicated in an organization. These espoused values are mostly articulated in mission statements, vision statements, objectives, and other official documents. The basic underlying assumption layer is deeply tied to beliefs and values that are taken for granted and often unspoken. This layer represents the core of the organizational culture and shapes employees' thinking, decision-making, and behavior. For instance, an organization may have a deeply held assumption that success is achieved through individual effort rather than collaboration. Understanding Schein's Model of Organizational Culture has practical importance for organizational leaders, managers, and employees. By understanding the different layers of culture, organizations can actively define and shape their culture to align with the overall strategic goals and enhance the performance of their employees.

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## 3 Method

A qualitative desk review was adopted for this research. Data on organizational culture as a social control mechanism were collected, evaluated, and organized from qualitative secondary data and literature from relevant sources. The sources of data for the study were academic journals, books, reports, gray literature, and online sources such as websites, blogs, and online articles. Relevant materials for the study were collected through systematic search and identification of literature relevant to the research problem. Websites, and academic databases such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and Academia were used as sources for the review material. Literature for the study was included based on how relevant they are to the research objectives. Kiely (2024) noted that desk review which is also known as secondary

research can be used to gain a better understanding of a research topic, identify gaps, and inform the next stage of research. It can also be used to provide context and background to a research problem.

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## 4 Results and Discussion

Culture is a prevalent social control system operating in organizations. Under certain conditions, using culture as social control can be a successful strategy for achieving organizational goals that are legitimately strategic and socially redeeming. Nevertheless, social control can also result in behavior characterized by deviance and personal and social exploitation. When beliefs are internalized, and critical thinking is severely restricted, people can be persuaded to act in unethical or harmful ways. This is the dark side of culture. Therefore, social control can be employed to either empower or oppress members of groups and organizations, as well as to achieve either beneficial or harmful social and financial goals.

The discrepancy between emotions experienced and those expressed has potential significance. For instance, one unfavorable effect of suppressing felt emotion has been identified as self-estrangement (Hochschild, 1983). Burnout and emotional numbness are the results of cultures that forbid expressing emotions, according to Van Maanen and Kunda (1989), when discussing the negative aspects of organizational culture as a social control mechanism. Finally, rather than the internalization of beliefs, members' commitment to strong culture firms is more likely to be based on identification or pride of affiliation (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). Following the internalization of an organization's values, members may use their fervor for actions that go beyond accepted social norms, such as lying to others in the name of the "greater good" (e.g., Bainbridge & Stark, 1980; Eberhard, 1974).

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## 5 Conclusion

This study examined the organizational culture as a mechanism for social control in organizations. Based on the review of relevant literature, organizational culture can serve as a powerful tool for defining and shaping the perceptions and behaviors of employees in an organization. This study looked at the concepts of organizational culture and social control and went further to examine the effect of culture on employees within an organization and culture as a social control tool. One important aspect of culture is that it can be created, changed, and splintered to bring about organizational growth. Organizational culture includes the shared beliefs, norms, and practices that shape the behavior of employees in an organization while social control which could be formal or informal is employed by leaders and managers to regulate the behaviors of employees in an organization. Based on these, leaders, managers, and employees can leverage these elements to achieve organizational aims and objectives. Hence, the paper concludes that while organizational culture; shared values and norms within a workplace can promote cooperation and commitment it is paramount for organizational leaders and managers to understand that if organizational culture is not well managed, instead of bringing success to an organization, it could bring failure and damnation.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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