

Balancing Freedom and Structure: Tight–Loose Cultural Orientations in European Student Radio Organisations

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This paper examines the organisational culture of European student radio stations through the lens of the tight–loose cultural continuum, drawing on the author's previous studies that explored these organisations at the levels of artefacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions using Edgar Schein's model of organisational culture. European student radio stations exist within resource-constrained and transient environments, requiring constant adaptation. This paper reinterprets data from three earlier empirical studies, an analysis of organisational artefacts, a competing values framework analysis of espoused values, and a qualitative case study of core assumptions, through the theory of cultural tightness and looseness. The findings reveal how stations balance flexibility and structure, with some gravitating toward tighter rules for stability, while others maintain looser norms to foster creativity. The paper contributes to understanding the organisational dynamics of youth-driven, mission-oriented media institutions, offering an analytical framework to evaluate how cultural regulation shapes their evolution.

Introduction

European student radio stations offer a unique and compelling context for studying organisational culture in turbulent environments. University, college, campus and student radio stations are primarily volunteer-run, often housed within higher education institutions, and characterised by high turnover, limited resources, and a strong community-oriented mission (Sauls, 2000; Freeman, 2022; Wallace, 2008; Raymond, 2016; Hautaniemi, 2022; 2024a; 2024b). Despite their precarious structures, many student radios remain operational for years, even decades, reflecting a resilient form of cultural organisation. Norms, the shared, often unwritten expectations that guide how members of an organisation behave and interact, are crucial for organisational permanence. By shaping predictable action patterns, norms reduce ambiguity and allow organisations to function smoothly without formal rules or supervision. (Gelfand et al., 2023; Cabra et al., 2022; Gross and Vostroknutov, 2022.) In doing so, they contribute to structural stability and continuity, especially in dynamic or volunteer-driven environments.

This paper investigates cultural regulation through norms within European student radio organisations by revisiting qualitative survey and quantitative interview data from European student radio stations collected originally for holistic organisational culture exploration (Hautaniemi, 2022; 2024a; 2024b; forthcoming). It explores the

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strength of norms in the independent yet interconnected levels of organisational culture; artefacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions (Schein, 2010). While each layer captures different dimensions of culture, it is imperative to examine them as a whole to better understand the normative structure of the culture as a whole. To interpret the findings, the paper draws on the theory of tight and loose cultures (Gelfand et al., 2006; Gelfand et al., 2011; Gelfand, 2018), which classifies national cultures, regions, and organisations based on the strength of their norms and tolerance for deviance. Tight cultures have strict rules and a low tolerance for ambiguity; loose cultures emphasise flexibility and openness.

Student radio thrives on looseness, creative experimentation, decentralised leadership, and informality while operating in an environment with high volatility and uncertainty, including technical reliability, fluctuating funding, and high volunteer turnover often following the academic year (Freeman, 2022; Hautaniemi, 2024a). As such, student radio provides an ideal case for exploring how cultural tightness and looseness play out in normative structures.

Understanding this balance is increasingly important in today's organisational landscape, where volatility, decentralisation, and hybrid working arrangements have disrupted conventional models of leadership and control and where the only thing constant is change (Alvesson and Svingsson, 2015). Grassroots and volunteer-driven organisations, in particular, offer insight into how collective norms can substitute for formal structure and how cultural logic shapes behavioural expectations in uncertain conditions.

This study contributes new empirical insight by re-coding original data with a tight–loose framework, revealing how protective norms appear in volunteer media settings in ways that prior studies did not capture. It also adds to a broader conversation about norms in contemporary, voluntary, precarious and creative organisations by showing how tight and loose elements operate across different cultural layers. Building on Schein's (2010) three-level cultural framework, this research evaluates findings from European student radio stations through Michelle Gelfand's (2018; Gelfand et al., 2006) theory of tight and loose cultures. Its key research question is how European student radio stations manifest and balance tight and loose cultural orientations while navigating volatility, creativity, and organisational persistence.

Literature Review

Organisational Culture and Norms

Organisational culture is the shared system of meanings that shapes how people behave, interact, and interpret organisational roles. At its core, it encompasses the norms, values, assumptions, and artefacts that collectively define what is considered acceptable, necessary, or taboo within the organisational context. (Schein, 2010) Norms, informal rules and expectations governing behaviour play a central role in maintaining and transmitting culture across individuals and groups (Feldman, 1984; Cabra et al., 2022; Gelfand, 2018).

Edgar Schein's (2010) influential model of organisational culture describes culture as existing on three interrelated levels. At the surface level are artefacts, the visible expressions of culture such as rituals, management practices, and communication styles. Just beneath are espoused values, which reflect the organisation's stated principles, goals, and strategies. The deepest level consists of basic underlying assumptions. They are unconscious beliefs about reality, human nature, and organisational life that guide and govern behaviour and attitudes. Norms operate at all these levels but are especially significant in bridging values and assumptions. They translate abstract beliefs into specific behavioural expectations that members follow in daily practice (Schein, 2010; Feldman, 1984; Cabra et al., 2022). These, in turn, manifest in the artefacts that, without understanding the deeper layers, would be hard to understand.

Norms function as the unwritten rules of organisational life, guiding how to act in particular situations (Cabra et al., 2022). They shape how meetings are run, how conflict is handled, and how status is signalled. Unlike formal rules or policies, norms are learned through observation, interaction, and socialisation. New members internalise them through implicit cues, imitation, and feedback from peers and leaders. As such, norms are a key mechanism by which culture is sustained and transmitted over time (Cabra et al., 2022; Schein, 2010; Gelfand, 2018).

The importance of norms becomes particularly visible in times of cultural change or disruption (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). When organisational change initiatives challenge existing assumptions or values, they also unsettle established norms. Resistance to change often stems from the disruption of behavioural expectations, as individuals may feel uncertain or threatened when norms become unclear or contested (Martin, 2002; Schein, 2010; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2015). Thus, any effort to shift culture must contend with the persistence and adaptability of norms, which both reinforce and sometimes contradict official values or strategic goals.

Tight–Loose Theory and Cultural Regulation in Organisations

The theory of tight and loose cultures, developed and explored in recent years by American cultural psychologist Michelle Gelfand (2018; 2012; Gelfand et al., 2006; 2011), provides a framework for understanding the strength of social norms and the degree of tolerance for deviant behaviour within societies and organisations. This theory posits that cultures can be categorised as "tight" or "loose" based on these characteristics.

Strong social norms and a low tolerance for deviant behaviour characterise tight cultures. These societies often have a history of ecological and historical threats, such as high population density, resource scarcity, and territorial conflicts, which necessitate strict adherence to norms to maintain social order (Gelfand et al., 2011; Gelfand, 2012; 2018). In tight cultures, there is a greater emphasis on conformity and uniformity, and deviations from established norms are met with significant sanctions (Gelfand et al., 2006; Gelfand, 2018; Meng, 2022). Groups facing high societal threats develop stronger social norms. In comparison, those facing little threat can afford weaker norms with less punishment for deviance (Roos et al., 2015; Gelfand, 2018). This cultural tightness influences various aspects of society, including

leadership styles, where autonomous leadership is more endorsed and charismatic leadership is less favoured (Aktas et al., 2016).

In contrast, loose cultures have weaker social norms and a higher tolerance for deviant behaviour. These cultures are more permissive and open to diversity and change, allowing for a broader range of acceptable behaviours (Gelfand et al., 2011; Gelfand, 2012; 2018). Loose cultures often arise in environments with fewer external threats, allowing for greater individual freedom and innovation. This cultural looseness is reflected in, e.g., consumer behaviour, where advertising themes often promote ideals and norm deviance (Li et al., 2017).

The tight and loose cultures theory has been applied in various organisational settings to understand and influence employee behaviour, creativity, leadership preferences, and organisational culture. It has significant implications for understanding cross-cultural differences in multiple domains, including organisational dynamics, e.g., perceptions of tightness or looseness, which can moderate the impact of perceived unfair discrimination on employee attitudes (Marcus et al., 2022; Gelfand, 2018). Additionally, the theory provides insights into how cultural norms influence creative behaviour in organisations, with looser team cultures fostering greater creativity and the ability to adapt to and endorse changes in both external and internal environments (Gelfand, 2018; Shi et al., 2023).

In organisations perceived as tight, supportive behaviours are more strongly related to positive employee attitudes. In contrast, negative behaviours have less impact than in loose cultures. This suggests that tight cultures may mitigate the effects of unfair discrimination on employee attitudes (Marcus et al., 2022). Cultural tightness negatively affects employee creativity by reducing work engagement. However, transformational leadership can mitigate this negative impact, suggesting that leadership style plays a crucial role in managing the effects of cultural tightness on creativity (Shi et al., 2023). In student radio settings, one must remember that students often lead organisations with little or no previous management experience (Raymond, 2016). This makes it unlikely that transformational leadership is carried out in such organisations, at least not intentionally. Instead, traditional management's tight, hierarchical "default mode" might become a practical choice for dealing with uncertainty (Hautaniemi, 2024a).

Informal cultural tightness, characterised by unwritten norms and social sanctions, has a more significant negative impact on employee creativity than formal cultural tightness. This highlights the importance of understanding formal and informal organisational cultural dynamics (Chua et al., 2024). In tight cultures, there is a preference for dominant leaders, reflecting a need for strong leadership in environments with strict norms. This preference is mediated by authoritarianism and a desire for dominant leadership styles (Chen et al., 2023).

Tight cultures are less likely to deviate from national cultural norms. Still, purposeful diversity strategies can help develop unique organisational cultures even in tight environments. This interplay between national and organisational cultures is crucial for fostering distinct identities (Lee and Kramer, 2016).

The application of tight and loose culture theory in organisational settings reveals its significant impact on employee attitudes, creativity, leadership preferences, and the development of organisational culture (Tsai et al., 2023). In settings where

most of the operations rely on volunteer work, such as a student radio station, the commitment and motivation of the people are critical.

Student Radio Stations in Europe

Student radio refers to broadcasting or streaming radio stations affiliated with higher education institutions with substantial student involvement in content production, programming, and governance. While terminology varies (college radio in North America, campus radio in Canada and parts of Europe, and university radio in Latin America), the shared foundation is participatory media shaped by youth initiative and autonomy (Sauls, 2000; Wall, 2007; Fauteux, 2015). These stations serve as platforms for experimentation, alternative expression, and learning by doing, setting themselves apart from the more hierarchical and standardised logic of mainstream broadcasting. One of their defining pedagogical features is the trial-and-error learning model, where students gain hands-on experience in technical production, editorial judgment, and content creation (Scifo, 2007; Laor, 2019; Priestman, 1999; Raymond, 2016). These stations also embody community orientation and locality. Content often reflects the campus and surrounding community's specific social and cultural dynamics. In many European countries, student radio aligns legally and philosophically with community media, which values participation, non-commercialism, and democratic control (Coyer and Hintz, 2010) while connecting to early educational endeavours of European radio (Pavlik, 2017). According to UNESCO (2017), this media model includes access for non-professionals, horizontal decision-making, empowerment through skill-building, and an explicit focus on amplifying marginalised perspectives.

Over the past century, student radio has upheld a cultural identity grounded in non-commercialism, representational diversity, and a commitment to subcultural or underrepresented voices (Rubin, 2015; Fauteux, 2015; Sloten, 2008; Tremblay, 2003). American college stations have often championed musical and political countercultures, whereas European stations present a more heterogeneous landscape. While some replicate the independent ethos of U.S. models, others, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, have emerged as tools of civic inclusion and minority empowerment (Doliwa, 2015; Planšak, 2010). In countries like the UK, student radio has often been technologically experimental and geared toward youth culture (Bailey, 2023). In many cases, student radio aligns with the values and structures of community media: participatory production, access for non-professionals, nonprofit orientation, and horizontal governance (Coyer and Hintz, 2010; UNESCO, 2017).

Student radio stations face persistent organisational challenges despite this ideological and structural distinctiveness. Audience retention and relevance are difficult to maintain in a saturated digital media landscape. As students increasingly turn to streaming platforms and podcasts, radio must compete with more polished, algorithm-driven content. Maintaining authenticity while staying relevant is a delicate balance (Freeman, 2022).

Volunteer turnover and loss of institutional memory are endemic. As student involvement is inherently transitory, many stations struggle to preserve continuity in operations, values, and technical competence. Adding to the challenge, student

radio stations are primarily operated and managed by students, the youth with no previous managerial experience, not to mention the lack of expertise to manage constant change. (Raymond, 2016; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2015; Hautaniemi, forthcoming.)

Editorial independence is another source of tension. While many stations promote independent thinking and activism, university administrations may seek to frame student radio as an institutional PR tool. These clashing perspectives can lead to conflict over the station's mission and autonomy (Berryman, 2022; Scifo, 2007). Also, as some stations house students and community members doing their own thing, tensions may arise with content choices and over the station's key focus (Wilson David, 2015; Wallace, 2008).

The management of student radio stations typically falls to rotating groups of students, sometimes supported by a faculty advisor or station manager. This person may be a technical expert, compliance officer, mentor, or institutional liaison (Raymond, 2016; Sauls, 2000). However, these advisory roles are frequently under-resourced and lack apparent institutional authority (Freeman, 2022).

As Freeman (2022) notes, student radio must be "liquid, flexible, and adaptable," reflecting evolving student identities, addressing fragmented audiences, and amplifying diverse perspectives to sustain. Sustainable management often requires a balance between creative freedom and operational stability, in other words, between tight and loose norms (Hautaniemi, forthcoming).

These organisational characteristics make student radio a compelling context for exploring cultural regulation through the lens of tight–loose theory. Loose cultures tend to flourish in environments where innovation, diversity, and decentralised decision-making are critical, aligning with the ethos of many student radio stations. At the same time, tight norms often emerge in high uncertainty, ecological or social threat, and institutional fragility (Gelfand 2008; 2018). Constant personnel change, resource volatility, and pressure to prove legitimacy to host institutions introduce situational instability.

Methodology and Data

According to Schein (2010), organisational culture should not be interpreted by focusing only on one layer but by examining the interplay of artefacts, espoused values, and core assumptions. This study is based on the original empirical data collected for three earlier articles by Hautaniemi (2022; 2024a; 2024b; forthcoming), examining the different layers of the organisational culture of European student radio stations.

First, this research employs qualitative survey data from European student radio stations 2018. The survey investigated the practices, choices and views on the station's role. It was aimed at station managers, faculty advisors and editors (later called 'managers'). The managers were chosen as respondents because they have decision-making capacity and a presupposed comprehensive view of their station's organisational practices and choices. Data from 90 respondents from 21 countries were gathered, of which fifty-one were managers, representing 46 individual stations

from 19 countries. Second, the exploration is based on qualitative interview material from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with active station staff and volunteers in Austria, Finland, and Ireland conducted in 2019-2022. These original materials form the empirical base for all three published studies by the author. As the research data is several years old, one should consider it cautiously. Nevertheless, as cultures often resist change and alter slowly (Schein, 2010; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2015; Parker and Bradley, 2000), it offers a relatively contemporary glimpse into the organisational culture of European student radio stations.

While the previous articles each analysed one layer of organisational culture separately — artefacts (Hautaniemi, 2022), espoused values (Hautaniemi, 2024a), and underlying assumptions (Hautaniemi, 2024b) — this study re-examines the complete data set through an additional theoretical lens. Building on Edgar Schein's (2010) three-level model of organisational culture, it interprets how norms of tightness and looseness (Gelfand, 2011, 2018) manifest at each level. This approach enables a more integrated understanding of how visible structures, declared priorities, and deeply held assumptions work together to balance freedom, responsibility, and resilience in volunteer-run youth media.

The analysis draws on survey questions about rules of conduct, management structures, strategic plans, and systematic procedures for the norms found on the artefact layer. It asks about their significance for the organisation on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is the least, and 10 is the most important. Here, their mean level implies the tightness of the culture, with standard deviation explaining how universal this measure is.

On the norms found on the values layer, the Competing Values Framework (CVF) analysis sum variables (Hautaniemi, 2024a) are explored to analyse which cultural logic (Clan, Adhocracy, Hierarchy, Market) implies looser or tighter norm systems. The CVF, developed by Cameron and Quinn (2011), is a widely used model for analysing organisational culture by mapping competing demands along two dimensions: internal versus external focus and flexibility versus control. Crossing these dimensions produces four core cultural types: Clan (collaborative and family-like), Adhocracy (innovative and entrepreneurial), Hierarchy (structured and rule-bound), and Market (competitive and results-oriented). These typologies are calculated through survey instruments that ask respondents to rate the extent to which each set of characteristics describes their organisation. For this research, scores for each culture type were averaged to reveal the dominant cultural logic, indicating relative tightness or looseness.

For the core assumptions layer, the original interview transcripts were revisited to analyse them from the norms' perspective, identifying how participants described what is expected, accepted, discouraged, or controlled within the station community. Special attention was given to statements about responsibility, accountability and peer expectations.

By applying this additional layer of interpretation, the study clarifies how student radio stations construct protective norms that help sustain their identity and operations under high turnover, limited resources, and open participation. This re-analysis expands the empirical value of the original data by showing how tight-

loose cultural dynamics operate not in isolation but across interlinked layers of organisational life.

Results

The following sections present the findings from re-analysing the original survey and interview data, structured according to Schein's (2010) three-level model. Each layer highlights how cultural tightness and looseness appear in concrete organisational elements.

Organisational Artefacts

The artefact layer of organisational culture encompasses the visible structures, rules, and operating procedures that dictate how organisations coordinate activities and maintain order (Schein, 2010). A prominent sign of a tight culture is the widespread presence of formal management structures. In fact, 78% of survey respondents indicated that their station has an official management framework, demonstrating that such defined coordination mechanisms are prevalent in this otherwise fluid sector. Moreover, when asked to rate how systematic their station's management is on a scale from 1 (not systematic) to 10 (highly systematic), respondents provided an average score of 6.3 (standard deviation (SD) = 1.6). This moderate score suggests that while many stations employ routine procedures, some blend formal approaches with more flexible and informal practices.

Strong signs of tightness are also evident in how stations adhere to strategic plans and rules of conduct. Respondents rated their adherence to the strategic plan highly, with a mean score of 8.7 (SD = 0.6). Similarly, the average score for how strictly the explicit rules of conduct are followed was notably high at 7.8 (SD = 1.2). These figures indicate that while stations promote creative freedom in programming and participation, they still rely on formal rules and plans to uphold consistent standards, protect their reputation, and coordinate the behaviour of volunteers.

Nevertheless, the moderate rating for overall systematicity implies that this tightness isn't uniform across all areas. Rules, strategies, and structures coexist alongside more flexible day-to-day practices, allowing rotating volunteer membership and diverse local contexts. This observation supports the notion that tight and loose norms operate simultaneously at the artefact level: while tightness manifests where oversight and compliance are necessary, looseness thrives where openness and adaptability hold value.

The survey data reveal that European student radio stations are neither entirely informal nor fully bureaucratic. Instead, they balance protective procedural norms and opportunities for autonomy, aligning with the broader tight-loose continuum that enables them to maintain their operational resilience and identity amid ongoing changes.

Espoused Values

Espoused values represent the explicitly stated ideals, strategic objectives, and principles that guide how members believe the organisation should function (Schein, 2010). While artefacts are the observable outputs, espoused values reflect the aspirational logics that shape them.

Again, drawing on the survey data allows for examining how student radio organisations position themselves on the axis of four ideal-typical culture types: Clan, Adhocracy, Hierarchy, and Market (Cameron and Quinn, 2011). These categories reflect different value orientations, ranging from flexibility and collaboration to structure and competition.

Aligning the stations on the Competing Values Framework axis reveals that these organisations primarily embody Clan and Adhocracy cultures, which are generally characterised by more flexible norms (Hautaniemi, 2024a; Cameron and Quinn, 2011; Gelfand, 2011). Clan cultures thrive on trust, teamwork, and informal connections rather than strict rules, fostering consistency through shared commitments instead of formal enforcement (Gelfand et al., 2006). On the other hand, Adhocracy cultures focus on risk-taking, innovation, and adaptability, often relying on minimal formal constraints and a high tolerance for straying from standard procedures (Gelfand, 2011; 2018; Gelfand et al., 2006).

Interestingly, some stations also exhibit Hierarchy and Market culture elements, indicating areas where tighter norms come into play (Hautaniemi, 2024a). Hierarchy culture promotes standardised processes and clear authority structures, while Market culture emphasises performance metrics and competitive outcomes (Cameron and Quinn, 2011). The coexistence of these cultural types suggests that student radio stations selectively integrate stricter norms within a broader loose cultural framework, balancing openness with necessary regulations to ensure operational stability and protect their reputation (Hautaniemi, 2024a; forthcoming; Gelfand, 2011; Marcus et al., 2022).

Underlying Assumptions: Identity and Purpose

At the deepest level of organisational culture lie the basic underlying assumptions that form the cognitive, often unconscious and emotional core of how people interpret what is legitimate, meaningful, and valuable within a given setting, influencing norms that protect what is cherished. Analysing interviews from three European student radio stations in Austria (CCR 94.4), Finland (Radio Tutka) and Ireland (Flirt FM), the underlying beliefs show a consistent balance of openness and protective norms. FlirtFM participants describe their station as an inclusive, flexible environment, a safe "port in the storm" where people of different ages and backgrounds are present.

That freedom is something that we definitely protect very dearly, and we really want people to express themselves and not feel that they must fit into something because they can do it here. (Flirt FM)

If someone goes against the community, it may cause conflict in an otherwise collaborative organisation. Volunteers are encouraged to experiment and find unusual

ideas, reflecting what student radio scholars (Sauls, 2000; Fauteux, 2015; Doliwa, 2015; Freeman, 2022) describe as an alternative, participatory ethos. This focus also underscores a normative expectation of being unique and thus using the offered airtime carefully instead of goofing around or mimicking mainstream celebrities. There are clear informal expectations that sustain minimum standards: One can't just go on air if they don't know what they're doing. Such controls demonstrate how protective norms emerge in loose cultural contexts where quality, trust and core identity are at stake (Hautaniemi, forthcoming).

Radio Tutka illustrates a similar mix. Everyone can join, and students freely pitch and eventually do their own shows. Yet strong informal expectations shape reliability. The norm of accountability runs strong, as not fulfilling one's task causes friction. Even though based on voluntarism, one is expected to carry out what is agreed upon.

CCR 94.4 students describe their station as a family-like place where crazy ideas that do not fit the mainstream formats can, and should, flourish. This freedom is not unconditional as, again, one must show the idea doesn't compromise the station. New contributors must ideate and demonstrate basic competence before getting airtime. Taking the initiative to learn how to cope with broadcasting and, as one interviewee said, learning to be open-minded to be able to provide novelty are pivotal:

If you work in radio, you can't just stay on your level of interest; you have to be open-minded. There needs to be this motivation to be curious and to get to know different opinions as well. (CCR 94.4)

These protective checks reinforce informal tightness where operational reputation is at stake, supporting Gelfand's (2018) claim of pockets of tightness within otherwise loose cultures protecting the most important values (Hautaniemi, forthcoming).

The interviews confirm that while European student radio stations embrace looseness in how they invite people, test new content, and adapt to constant change, they also depend on tight norms wherever reliability, credibility, and internal cohesion must be safeguarded. This layered balance between freedom and protective expectations illustrates how informal norm regulation sustains identity and operational predictability in volunteer-driven, youth-led organisations (Gelfand, 2018).

These patterns underscore a central paradox: freedom is a sacred and regulated value. Members can express themselves, but not in ways that violate the group's ethos. They are welcome to take initiative, but more so if they conform to the group's mission and normative expectations. From the perspective of tight–loose theory, the underlying assumptions of student radio suggest that tight norms can emerge from loose cultures as mechanisms for protecting deeply held beliefs. In student radio, autonomy, authenticity, and expressive integrity appear policed through informal yet powerful cultural scripts. These scripts ensure continuity and coherence in an otherwise volatile organisational environment, compensating for high turnover, limited institutional memory, and the absence of durable formal authority (Hautaniemi, forthcoming).

Examining artefacts, expressed values, and fundamental assumptions indicate that European student radio stations possess structured and flexible aspects within their culture. Established rules of conduct, management frameworks, and professional expectations create robust norms that guide behaviour, particularly when accountability and continuity are essential. Conversely, open programming, non-hierarchical coordination, and hands-on learning practices foster a sense of autonomy and encourage experimentation, a defining feature of student radio underlining a loose, permissive normative atmosphere. This layered dynamic invites a broader conversation about how tight-loose dynamics can illuminate organisational resilience, especially in precarious, volunteer-driven environments.

Discussion

The findings confirm that European student radio stations manage the tension between freedom and structure through a balanced mix of loose and tight cultural norms. By re-examining original survey and interview data with Gelfand's tight-loose framework, this study shows that protective norms emerge where operational continuity, trust, and quality must be safeguarded, even in fundamentally open, experimental, and volunteer-driven organisations. This supports prior work on domain-specific tightness (Gelfand, 2011; 2018) and extends it by demonstrating how informal peer norms and community expectations substitute for formal hierarchy in youth-led cultural organisations. By parallel applying Schein's (2010) model, the study also clarifies how surface-level artefacts, stated values, and underlying assumptions produce a resilient cultural architecture that helps student radio stations thrive in unstable contexts.

European student radio stations sustain themselves through a layered balance of freedom and protective structure. Each cultural layer contributes differently to this balance but is deeply interconnected. At the artefact level, strict norms are reflected in written rules, formal management structures, and strategic plans establishing minimum behaviour standards in volunteer-based organizations. This framework provides stability, especially amidst frequent turnover. However, there's also flexibility in day-to-day operations, allowing DJs creative expression, welcoming new contributors easily, and fostering an atmosphere of informality. This balance ensures that tight norms govern critical areas like legal compliance. At the same time, there's still room for innovation and creative exploration.

Moving to the espoused values layer, the stations primarily embrace openness, trust, and innovation over rigid rules. These values promote (and presuppose) experimentation and collective engagement while also recognizing the importance of hierarchical traits, such as leadership accountability and process consistency. This dynamic creates a tension between the desire for flexibility and the need for the stability that tight norms provide, aligning with Gelfand's (2018) view that tighter norms often arise in response to social threats.

At the assumptions layer, members view student radio as a "family-like" environment conducive to innovation. This sense of freedom is tempered by informal expectations, such as honouring commitments and showing respect for peers, as

well as subtle peer sanctions for violating these norms. Thus, despite strong formal authority, tight social norms surface to maintain trust and credibility, characterized by less overt but more nuanced forms of sanction.

The connections across these levels make clear that tight and loose norms are not contradictions but complementary. Tight artefacts reinforce stated values of responsibility and reliability. Loose practices and flexible values nurture the experimental, alternative identity that defines student radio's cultural distinctiveness. Deep assumptions about autonomy and self-expression ensure that protective norms are accepted by members as legitimate, not imposed. Together, these layers form a coherent cultural system that allows stations to adapt and survive in volatile conditions, even when this system may not be intentionally structured due to lack of experience (Hautaniemi, forthcoming).

This study aimed to clarify how European student radio stations navigate the challenge of fostering creative freedom while ensuring organizational stability in dynamic volunteer environments. Previous research primarily focused on describing visible structures, value positions and deeply held beliefs (Hautaniemi, 2022, 2024a, 2024b). The new analysis reveals how protective norms can arise even in seemingly loose cultures, helping to stabilize behaviour, protect identities, and ensure predictability. This nuanced dynamic supports Gelfand's (2018) argument that tightness can be domain-specific and informal while also expanding on this idea by showing that informal peer regulation can effectively replace formal hierarchy in youth-led, low-resource media settings.

These findings contribute to ongoing discussions in organisational sociology about how norms uphold structure and predictability amid constant membership turnover, limited funding, and open participation (Marcus et al., 2022; Chua et al., 2024). Rather than viewing tightness and looseness as opposing cultural forces, this study suggests they serve as complementary strategies that promote resilience and continuity while maintaining the experimental and alternative spirit central to student radio. These organisations operate through a dynamic interplay of tight and loose cultural elements that vary by layer, domain, and perceived organisational risk. The culture of student radio is defined by open access to programming, freeform content, and decision-making, reflecting a strong ethos of autonomy, inclusivity, and creative experimentation, hallmarks of loose cultural environments as described by Gelfand (2011; 2018). These practices align closely with previous studies' pedagogical and ideological articulations (Sauls, 2000; Fauteux, 2015; Laor, 2019; Freeman, 2022), where student radio is positioned as an alternative space within the media landscape, non-commercial, participatory, and youth-led.

Yet, even within this loose organisational context, normative tightness consistently emerges. These expectations reflect a form of domain-specific tightness (Gelfand, 2018), where regulation is strategically applied to protect the station's functioning under conditions of high uncertainty and resource scarcity (Reilly and Farnsworth, 2015; Raymond, 2016; Freeman, 2022). Viewed through the deepest level of organisational culture, the core assumptions as described by Schein (2010), beneath championing openness, the stations articulate clear normative expectations about representation and cultural fit: one must take the initiative, find their voice and support a community with a purpose to make a stand, to be an alternative to mainstream

media. While student radio is often framed as a sanctuary for personal expression and social critique, there are usually unspoken expectations around commitment, stylistic (alternative) alignment, and performative competence. These informal but widely recognised expectations govern who belongs and what constitutes "real" student radio (Hautaniemi, forthcoming). In line with Schein's (2010) understanding of culture as a system of unconscious assumptions and Gelfand's (2018) assertion that even loose cultures strictly protect their sacred values, these internal norms serve as invisible but powerful anchors of cultural tightness.

In student radio, social sanctions, informal gatekeeping, and oral traditions of leadership succession maintain group cohesion without formal structures, ensuring continuity despite constant flux. These findings reinforce the literature on participatory and grassroots media, which often balance inclusive access with firm ideological commitments to specific social values. The findings also reinforce that student radio participants function within unwritten traditions that regulate leadership transitions and group belonging. (Coyer and Hintz, 2010; Wilson David, 2015; Wall, 2017; Freeman, 2022; Hautaniemi, forthcoming). Crucially, these norms do not emerge from top-down directives or institutional frameworks but from an organisational culture that has evolved through shared experiences, internalised beliefs, and assumptions about the station's place in the world (Schein, 2010).

The strategic nature of these tight norms offers a model of resilience. As Freeman (2022) argues, student radio must become liquid, flexible, and adaptable, all referring to looseness. Still, this fluidity is supported by precisely those norms that enforce accountability and coherence, elements of tight cultures.

Conclusions

This paper re-examined the organisational culture of European student radio stations by applying Gelfand's (2011, 2018) tight-loose framework directly to original survey and interview data. This re-analysis demonstrates novel insight into how informal tight norms sustain volunteer organisations, a dimension that prior analyses (Hautaniemi 2022, 2024a, 2024b) did not systematically trace. The findings demonstrate that tight and loose cultural elements coexist within these volunteer-driven media organisations, appearing differently across visible artefacts, stated values, and taken-for-granted assumptions. Rules of conduct, strategic planning, and behavioural expectations show how protective norms create localised predictability and safeguard the stations' legitimacy. At the same time, flexible programming, open membership, and experimental formats keep participation accessible and creativity alive.

By showing how tight norms can be informally enforced in loose, decentralised contexts, this study extends tight-loose theory into the domain of youth-led, grassroots media — a setting that is rarely studied in this way. In doing so, it answers calls in recent literature (e.g. Chua et al., 2024; Marcus et al., 2022) to examine how informal norm systems affect behaviour, identity, and resilience in contemporary organisational life. This layered dynamic illustrates how groups with high turnover and scarce resources can maintain coherence through a balance of cultural freedom and domain-specific regulation.

Beyond student radio, these insights have broader relevance for research on civil society organisations, creative collectives, and other informal communities that combine open participation with the need for organisational resilience. Future studies could build on this re-analysis by exploring how informal norms evolve over time, how they are passed down between waves of volunteers, and how they interact with formal governance structures in similar hybrid organisations.

Studying student radio through the tight–loose framework opens up new possibilities for understanding how organisations manage cultural ambiguity and normative tension, simultaneously championing openness and innovation and managing constant existential uncertainty. In a field where creative licence and operational precarity coexist, the theory of tight and loose cultures offers an illuminating analytical lens for examining how and what kind of cultural boundaries are shaped, defended, or blurred under unstable conditions. It allows us to ask: How is freedom balanced with responsibility in an environment built on autonomy and voluntary participation? Where do informal rules emerge to protect shared values? Moreover, how do tight and loose elements manifest in various cultural layers, from artefacts to espoused values to deeply held beliefs and assumptions?

The findings presented here contribute to broader organisational culture research by reinforcing the importance of examining what organisations say or do and how meaning, behaviour, and belonging are managed through formal and informal channels. Schein's (2010) model proves helpful in disentangling how tight and loose norms manifest differently across cultural layers. The tight–loose framework (Gelfand et al., 2006; Gelfand, 2018) provides a heuristic to understand why certain areas attract greater regulatory control. In the case of student radio, tightness emerges not to suppress creativity but to preserve freedom responsibly, a paradox that underscores the functional adaptability of these youth-led, volunteer-run media organisations.

This study has several constraints. First, it is limited by its reliance on a limited set of data that is not very current, which, although offering a coherent, layered view of organisational culture, restricts the breadth and generalisability of the findings. The exclusive focus on European student radio stations means the results may not fully apply to other regional or institutional contexts with different regulatory or cultural conditions. Additionally, the retrospective application of tight–loose theory involves reinterpreting data not collected initially for that framework, which may result in omitting relevant indicators. Student radio's inherently informal and fluid nature, high turnover, contextual variability, and evolving peer norms make capturing enduring cultural patterns difficult. Future research should incorporate comparative, longitudinal, or ethnographic approaches to better trace how tight and loose norms develop, shift, and reproduce over time in similarly precarious organisational environments.

Despite these constraints, the current paper offers another critical view on student radio. While some research has been done on North American college radio (e.g., Sauls, 2000; Wallace, 2008; Raymond, 2016; Fauteux, 2015), European scholarship remains limited and fragmented. It is simultaneously a grassroots communication platform, a community-building tool, and a learning environment that empowers hundreds if not thousands, of young people annually through direct participation in media

production. As such, this unique form of participatory media and surprisingly resilient organisational culture demands more research. This study, and others like it, contribute to filling that gap, bringing visibility to an often overlooked yet immensely valuable media form.

The findings also have societal and hands-on implications. They provide practical guidance for leaders, funders, and policymakers who support volunteer-based, youth-driven organisations with minimal formal hierarchy. By clarifying how protective norms emerge alongside openness, the findings show that careful, domain-specific rules can stabilise creative, participatory cultures without undermining their core mission. Student radio stations illustrate how informal norms of accountability, trust, and peer sanctioning substitute for formal oversight, offering a template for other grassroots media, NGOs, or activist collectives that face similar resource constraints and high turnover. Supporting these organisations means recognising that resilient participation depends not only on external funding and policy but also on sustaining the informal social norms that make freedom and continuity possible.

This study contributes to organisational theory by demonstrating that small, volunteer-led, and ideologically fluid organisations can maintain coherence and resilience through strategic, domain-specific tightness. When taking into account that culture management is often viewed as a strenuous task demanding strategic insight, experience and formal leadership training (Schein, 2010; Alvesson and Svenningsson, 2015), student radio stations interestingly manage without such skillset, excelling in creativity (Sauls, 2000; Raymond, 2016). Being part of a voluntary organisation like student radio is often fueled by fun. As Laaksonen and Hietala (2023) have suggested, leaders can leverage humour and fun to create an organisational culture of openness, positive atmosphere and well-being, all prerequisites of innovation. This elicits an intriguing question in future research: how does having fun impact the balancing act of freedom and structure?

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