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Quiet Quitting as a Response to Burnout: Investigating the Psychological Drivers Behind the Trend

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Abstract: The phenomenon of "quiet quitting" has gained significant attention in contemporary organizational discourse, particularly in the post-pandemic era marked by economic uncertainty and evolving workforce expectations. This literature review explores quiet quitting as a psychologically driven, multifaceted response to prolonged workplace stressors, job constraints, and unmet emotional and motivational needs. Anchored in theoretical frameworks such as the Job Demands-Resources model, Conservation of Resources theory, Self-Determination Theory, and the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the review investigates how burnout, emotional exhaustion, perceptions of unfairness, and lack of psychological safety contribute to the passive withdrawal by the employees. Additionally, the review examines how macro-level influences—such as toxic workplace cultures, the Great Resignation, and shifting values among Generation Z—intersect with individual-level factors to exacerbate disengagement. The findings underscore that quiet quitting is not merely a trend popularized by social media or indicator of laziness but a coping mechanism emerging from structural and psychological constraints. This review concludes by offering evidence-based recommendations for organizational leaders to address the root causes of disengagement through cultural, structural, and psychological interventions aimed at fostering resilience, equity, and sustainable engagement in the workplace.

Keywords: *Quiet Quitting, Workplace Disengagement, Employee Burnout, Organizational Behavior, Post Pandemic Workplace*.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a major global shift, profoundly altering various aspects of society, including the workplace. While the rise of remote work offers certain advantages, it also brings unforeseen challenges. One such phenomenon, initially discussed on social media and now gaining scholarly attention, is "quiet quitting." This refers to a situation in where employees do the bare minimum required for their job and no longer go above and beyond.

Quiet quitting is not a new phenomenon. It has been around for a long time but owing to the widespread use of social media, it has gained popularity. (Hiltzik, 2023). The term "quiet quitting" gained attention on the social media platform TikTok, where a user described it as the act of disengaging from expectations to consistently exceed job requirements. Rather than resigning from one's position, quiet quitting involves fulfilling core responsibilities without participating in the culture of overwork or "hustle culture". This reflects a broader sentiment that personal value should not be solely determined by professional productivity or labor output.

Historically, similar practices have existed under different names. The pursuit of "work-life balance" has long been a focal point of labor discourse, reflecting employees' desire to maintain boundaries between professional obligations and personal well-being. Moreover, labor unions frequently employed "work-to-rule" strategies during contract negotiations, wherein workers deliberately limit their output to the bare minimum required by their contracts. In the public sector, particularly among law enforcement, analogous tactics like the so-called "blue flu"—a coordinated use of sick leave to protest working conditions—have been used to assert collective bargaining power. (Hiltzik, 2023)

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Often associated with worker anomie, ennui, and burnout, the notion refers to employees who feel overwhelmed by increasing duties and lengthy work hours, as well as a lack of recognition, and opt to focus their efforts solely on the necessary tasks listed in their job descriptions. (Hiltzik, 2023).

The precursors of quiet quitting were two significant events, (1) the Great Resignation, and (2) Generation Z. The Great Resignation, a term coined by organizational psychologist Anthony Klotz (Cohen, 2021), refers to the widespread phenomenon during and after the COVID-19 pandemic when millions of employees voluntarily left their jobs. This mass exodus was not a mere response to immediate health concerns but a deeper reassessment of work life balance, job satisfaction and, personal fulfilment at a collective level. The shift to remote work during lockdown offered employees a rare opportunity to reflect on the role of work in their lives, leading them to question long hours, low autonomy and rigid organizational culture. (Kaplan, 2021; Krugman, 2021; Geisler, 2021). As a result, individuals increasingly prioritize mental health, flexibility, and purpose—paving the way for subtler forms of disengagement such as quiet quitting.

Generation Z, a new and influential cohort in the workforce, has played a significant role in the rise of quiet quitting. Characterized by digital fluency, a preference for flexibility, a desire for meaningful work, and a pragmatic approach to career development, Gen Z employees expect respectful treatment, opportunities for growth, and work-life balance (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Turner, 2015; Schawbel, 2014; Patel, 2017). Their strong emphasis on personal well-being and workplace values makes them more likely to disengage quietly when these expectations are unmet, with studies indicating that a substantial portion of quiet quitters belong to this generation (Youthall, 2022).

This literature review aimed to explore the psychological drivers to quiet quitting. Specifically, it analyzes the emotional and cognitive factors that contribute to employee disengagement and how an organization avoids quiet quitting.

Understanding quiet quitting is crucial in today's evolving workplace, where burnout and disengagement threaten both employees' well-being and organizational success. By uncovering the psychological mechanisms behind this trend, this review contributes to the ongoing discussion on mental health at work, employee retention, and sustainable organizational practices.

II. QUIET QUITTING

During the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work was introduced worldwide. This led employees to recognize many benefits of remote working such as work life balance, flexibility and comfort (Shukla et al., 2022). However, this increased workload, wages inequity, and roles conflict which paved the way to burnout, disengagement, and turnover intention due to the disruption in employees' work attitudes, habits and behaviors. This led to many employees, especially 10 million people in the US, to resign from their existing position. This was named the "Great Resignation". Even though the movement has been slowing down, the demands for a better work life balance is still persistent. This has led to "quiet quitting". Quiet quitting refers to not quitting a job but adopting work behavior in which the employee only performs as per the job description without any extra efforts. They do not try to go above and beyond their jobs and, work within the working hours. Employees choose to quit rather than quit is because not all of them have the choice to leave their jobs because of economic uncertainties and a competitive job market.

Quiet quitting shares similarities with other concepts like "work-to-rule" and "disengagement". Eaton and Rubinstein (2006) described work to rule as a tactic used in labor disputes where employees strictly adhere to the terms and conditions of their employment contract. They are asked to do what is required and nothing more which results in intentionally slowing down operations by refusing to perform tasks outside their formal duties or hours. This usually occurs due to a form of protest to the management, pay, or working conditions, often employed by the union to exert pressure on negotiations with the company.

While engagement involves investing the physical, mental and emotional self into the role, disengagement reflects a conscious or unconscious defense mechanism against organizational stressors (Kahn, 1990). Disengagement in the sense of work is the lack of connection, enthusiasm, and commitment to one's job and organization. This can include decreased productivity, a lack of participation and negative attitudes.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK EXPLAINING QUIET QUITTING

A. Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model

Various theoretical frameworks on work behavior and burnout include the Job Demand- Resources (JD-R) model by Bakker and Demerouti (2007) which predicts that every occupation has its own unique stress-related risk factors which can be broadly classified into two categories. One is job demand and the other is job resources. This makes it easy for the model to adapt to different work environments. Job demands refer to the characteristics of the job that require consistent efforts, such as high work pressure or emotionally intense client interactions, which can lead to stress if recovery is inadequate (Meihman & Mulder, 1998). However, job help employees achieve their work goals, navigate job demands and promote personal goals and development. Insufficient job resources can hinder goal achievement and contribute to disengagement (Demerouti et al., 2001). The model assumes three key relationships: (1) job demands predict burnout, particularly its energetic component, exhaustion; (2) job resources predict work engagement; and (3) job resources can buffer the negative effects of job demands on burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

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Quiet quitting can be viewed as a behavioral outcome of a prolonged imbalance between job demands and job resources. When employees are consistently subjected to high demands, —such as long hours, emotional labor, or constant deadlines—without adequate recovery or support, they begin to experience exhaustion, one of the main features of burnout as outlined in the JD-R model. At the same time, when job resources are lacking such as minimal feedback, limited autonomy, or absence of recognition, motivation and engagement begin to erode. Employees no longer feel that their additional efforts are valued or lead to meaningful outcomes, prompting them to withdraw discretionary effort as a form of psychological self-preservation. Thus the JD-R model not only explains the mechanisms behind burnout but also sheds light on the motivational decline that drives employees towards quiet quitting.

B. Mashlach Burnout Inventory

Another prominent tool is the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) which is considered a standard tool for measuring burnout in organization and research context (Maslach & Leiter, 2021). Burnout, while historically present in the literature as well as in the experiences of people, started gaining popularity during COVID 19. It substantially worsened due to occupational stress, incompetent work-life balance and job demands. The MBI aligns with WHO's classification of burnout as an occupational phenomenon, defined by three core dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced professional efficacy (WHO, 2019). Research using MBI has explored how specific job conditions are related to different burnout dimensions. For instance, high job demands may predict exhaustion, whereas poor workplace support may contribute to cynicism or reduced efficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 2021).

C. Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources (COR) theory asserts that individuals are motivated to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources, such as energy, time, personal well-being, and social support as a fundamental part of human behavior and survival (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). According to COR theory, stress occurs not only when resources are lost but also when they are threatened or when there is an insufficient return following substantial efforts to gain them. Importantly, this theory highlights that losing resources affects people much more strongly than gaining them, making them more sensitive to situations where they might lose something (Hobfoll, 1989). In the workplace, this framework provides an explanation for burnout and related behaviors. Constant exposure to stress such as high workload, poor leadership and insufficient support can lead to the incremental depletion of personal resources. From this perspective, burnout can be classified as a psychological strategy for conserving the remaining resources by disengaging from overwhelming demands (Hobfoll et al., 2015). Quiet quitting can be viewed as a behavioral manifestation of resource conservation. Employees might adopt this strategy not out of laziness or lack of ambition but as a self-protective response to perceived or actual resource depletion, such as emotional exhaustion or diminished self-efficacy (Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Rather than appraising workplace stress as a matter of individual perception, COR theory frames these behaviors within the objective loss and mismanagement of key psychological and social resources.

IV. PSYCHOLOGICAL DRIVERS OF QUIET QUITTING

Recent literature increasingly frames quiet quitting not as monolithic or deviant behavior, but as a rational psychological response to prolonged work-related stressors and deteriorating workplace conditions (Boy & Sürmeli, 2023).

A. Burnout

One of the primary psychological drivers is burnout, a chronic state of job stress that leads to severe emotional exhaustion , depersonalization and lack of personal accomplishmennt (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001) with emotional exhaustion as the primary symptom (Golembeiwski et al., 1998; Meesters & Waslander, 2010). This condition stems from persistent overwork and insufficient organizational support (Bretland & Thorsteinsson, 2015).

A strong correlation exists between burnout and quiet quitting. For instance, ResumeBuilder (2022) indicates that 80% of those who engage in quiet quitting report feeling burned out, and Lu et al. (2023) confirmed significant links between burnout levels and the intention to reduce discretionary effort at work. These stressors not only foster disengagement and emotional withdrawal but also drive employees to adopt quiet quitting as a coping mechanism to preserve mental health and resist exploitative work norms.

Employees face an elevated risk of job stress and burnout under conditions such as limited resources or time, excessive overtime, overwhelming workloads, insufficient rest, or unrealistic expectations (*Understand the Organizational Climate: Start - ProQuest*, n.d.; Rose et al., 2002). Lin et al. (2017) further highlighted a causal relationship between job stress and workplace burnout.

The profound impact of burnout extends to workers' health, future ability to work, and workplace productivity (Demerouti et al., 2021). It significantly contributes to staff turnover, loss of motivation, increased absenteeism, and negatively affects both the worker's family and the healthcare system (Demerouti et al., 2021). Unrelieved negative emotions can accumulate, potentially causing mental and physical harm and, posing a threat to safety and well being (Leung et al., 2015). Surveys across the UK and US consistently show burnout rates exceeding 50%, disproportionately affecting women, which reflects a growing public health and organizational concern (Gallegos, 2024)

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B. Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is a key dimension of burnout and, is defined as a psychological state characterized by feelings of emotional overextension and depletion of emotional and physical resources (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). In organizational settings, this condition is often the result of persistent interpersonal stressors and cumulative emotional demands that exceed an individual's coping capacity. Among these stressors, coworker incivility—defined as low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm, such as ignoring, interrupting, or making impertinent remarks (Pearson, Andersson, & Wegner, 2001)—has emerged as a significant and pervasive contributor to emotional exhaustion.

Coworker incivility is particularly harmful because of its recurrent and subtle nature, which often goes unaddressed by management and leading to a toxic and psychologically taxing environment. Research indicates that such incivility can erode psychological well-being, diminish job satisfaction, and increase intentions to withdraw from the workplace (Laschinger et al., 2009; Lim & Cortina, 2005). The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) offers a robust framework for understanding this dynamic. According to COR theory, individuals strive to acquire, retain, and protect valued resources—such as emotional energy, social support, and a sense of respect. When exposed to stressors, such as incivility, these resources are threatened or depleted. If resource loss exceeds replenishment, employees are likely to enter a state of emotional exhaustion, which undermines their performance and well-being (Neveu, 2007).

Furthermore, Affective Events Theory (AET) (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) explains how daily workplace events—such as negative interpersonal encounters—can trigger emotional responses that impact long-term attitudes and behaviors. Incivility, as a negative affective event, can induce feelings of frustration, anger, and sadness, thereby contributing to chronic emotional strain. Over time, the accumulation of such negative affective experiences can exhaust employees' emotional resources, leading to disengagement, decreased service quality, and ultimately, higher turnover intentions.

In summary, emotional exhaustion is not solely a function of workload or job demands; it is deeply shaped by the social and emotional climate of the workplace. Coworker incivility acts as a corrosive force that steadily undermines emotional well-being, especially when there are recovery mechanisms, —such as supportive leadership or positive peer relationships.

C. Occupational Stress

Stress is a complex psychophysiological phenomenon encompassing the causes (demands or stressors), consequences (distress and eustress), and modifiers of stress response. Cannon (1935) initially labeled this mind-body reaction as an emergency response which is now recognized as a stress response. By the 1980s, occupational stress was identified as a significant health problem in the United States and likely across industrialized Western nations. Sauter et al. (1990) initiated the development of a prevention agenda to address what was considered a stressful epidemic. Stress is directly linked to seven of the ten leading causes of death globally, with cardiovascular disease being the primary cause in both men and women (Quick, 2003). Occupational and organizational stress is a key cardiovascular risk factor (Schnall, Dobson, & Landsbergis, in press).

Occupational stress, as a risk factor, requires an understanding of life history. Unlike acute or toxic conditions, which are curable through treatment, occupational stress is a chronic condition. A wide range of occupational and work demands, along with environmental stressors, can trigger stress responses. Although specific pressures vary, occupational stress concerns are prevalent across all occupations. Work-family conflict is one such overarching risk, where demands from home and personal life interfere with the workplace. Hammer et al. (2011) examined family-to-work and work-to-family conflicts. Poorly managed conflicts at work are also a significant stressor (Hopkins, 2015). While not all conflicts is detrimental, those that do not lead to resolution are both destructive and dysfunctional.

D. Employee Disengagement

Various researchers have explored employee disengagement and linked it to personal and professional characteristics, often by examining the concept of employee engagement. Schaufeli et al. (2002) defined work engagement as "a constructive, satisfying state of mind that is characterized by enthusiasm, dedication, and absorption." The absence of these qualities can hinder employees' ability to fully engage with their job. Abraham (2012) connected employee engagement with organizational tenure. Engaged employees display positive emotions and, enthusiasm, and focus their resources on their work, contributing to their psychological well-being (Fredrickson, 2001).

Heikkeri (2010) characterized disengaged employees as a complex dimension of organizational structure with negative behavioral consequences that require strong managerial skills to address. Halbesleben and Wheeler (2008) found a positive correlation between supervisor ratings and employee engagement in various US occupations, indicating that disengaged employees receive lower ratings and exhibit detachment and lower performance. Al-Kahtani and Allam (2013) emphasized the role of values in preventing negative behaviors, and Koodamara (2016) found a positive relationship between engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Conversely, disengaged employees are not expected to have a positive relationship with these variables.

➢ *Outcomes of Employee Disengagement*

The literature identifies several negative outcomes associated with employee disengagement:

- Negative job attitude: Dissatisfaction, lack of commitment, and absence of organizational citizenship behavior. (Saks, 2006)

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- The absence of teamwork: Reduced cooperation and collaboration.
- Rigidness to accept feedback: Resistance to constructive criticism.
- Lack of trust: Information hoarding and reluctance to share ideas. (Allam & Harish, 2010)
- Low morale: Reduced confidence, spirit, discipline, and energy. (Branham, 2005)
- No learning: Lack of interest in acquiring new skills and knowledge.
- The higher rate of turnover: Increased voluntary and involuntary departures from the organization.
- More health problems: Increased headaches, stomach problems and cardiovascular disorder.
- Higher conflict: Unhealthy relationships and disagreements with colleagues and superiors.
- More absenteeism: Frequent absences from work with questionable excuses.
- Lower level of productivity: Reduced effort and a tendency to blame others, result in low output.
- No innovation and creativity: Failure to contribute new ideas.
- Lack of interpersonal relations: Poor relationships with stakeholders, particularly customers, harming organizational outcomes. (Vajda and SpiritHeart, 2008)

E. Toxic workplace culture

Toxic workplace culture is a critical issue in organizational studies and is characterized by negative behaviors, such as bullying, lack of trust, poor communication, and unethical practices (Frost, 2003). Such environments create fear, stress, and dissatisfaction, negatively impacting employee morale and well-being, and leading to reduced productivity, higher turnover, and damaged organizational reputation (Housman & Minor, 2015). A toxic culture, often fostered by dysfunctional leadership (authoritarian or laissez-faire styles), results in employees feeling undervalued and unsupported. This also impairs teamwork, creativity, and innovation, thus hindering organizational success.

The long-term consequences of these cultures on employee mental health, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment are often underexplored (Harms, Spain, & Hannah, 2011). The urgency to address this issue is amplified by increasing awareness of workplace mental health issues (Clarke & Cooper, 2004). Organizations failing to address toxic cultures face risks to employee well-being and long-term viability, including legal liabilities and the loss of competitive advantage (Kusy & Holloway, 2009).

At the interpersonal level, employee interactions are foundational to the workplace climate and play a significant role in quiet quitting. Toxic behaviors, such as gossip, exclusion, or bullying, when left unchecked, can spread rapidly and become normalized (Einarsen et al., 2007). Employees who witness such behavior, especially when they go unpunished, may disengage in protest or self-preservation (Housman & Minor, 2015). Social dynamics, such as like cliques, favoritism, and power imbalances can intensify this effect, leaving some employees feeling isolated and undervalued (Clarke & Cooper, 2004; Kusy & Holloway, 2009). Informal communication channels, especially when driven by negativity, further degrade trust and transparency and encourage employees to detach rather than participate in a toxic social environment (Frost, 2003; Harms et al., 2011).

The consequences of these workplace dynamics extend beyond individual disengagement and reflect broader organizational costs. This undermines collaboration and morale, impacting team cohesion and long-term performance (Kusy & Holloway, 2009). Increased turnover often follows, as workers eventually leave environments where they feel unheard or undervalued, driving up recruitment costs and damaging the organization's reputation (Harms et al., 2011). In more severe cases, organizations may face increased absenteeism, legal risks, and declining public perception—all rooted in a disengaged and disillusioned workforce (Clarke & Cooper, 2004; Frost, 2003).

Ultimately, quiet quitting should be seen not as a failure of employees but as a reflection of deeper organizational and cultural flaws. Addressing this requires more than performance incentives; it demands a reevaluation of leadership practices, structural design, interpersonal dynamics, and a genuine commitment to employee well-being.

F. Lack of Psychological Safety

The concept of psychological safety was first introduced by Schein and Bennis (1965), who described it as the extent to which individuals feel secure and confident about managing change without fear. This foundational understanding laid the groundwork for further development. Kahn (1990) brought renewed attention to the concept, defining psychological safety as an individual's perception of being able to show and employ oneself without fear of negative consequences for self-image, status, or career. Kahn emphasized the role of trusting and supportive interpersonal relationships in fostering this sense of safety.

At the organizational level, only a few studies (e.g., Baer & Frese, 2003; Carmeli, 2007) have attempted to measure psychological safety across all organizations by combining individual responses. These studies modified Edmondson's original measure by changing the word "team" to "organization", and then averaged the results, assuming that most employees had similar experiences. However, this method assumes that everyone in the organization feels psychological safety in the same way, which is often not the case—especially in large, complex companies where employees work in different teams and departments. In reality, people's experiences can vary significantly depending on their specific work environment. This difference is important for understanding why some employees become disengaged while others remain motivated. When psychological safety is not felt equally across the organization, some groups may feel unsupported or unsafe, leading to frustration and disengagement, while others remain more involved and satisfied.

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This finding has direct implications for quiet quitting. When psychological safety is low, employees are less likely to voice concerns, take initiative, or engage proactively with their work—all hallmarks of quiet quitting. Conversely, a psychologically safe environment can mitigate disengagement by fostering openness, belonging, and shared purpose.

Psychological safety mediates the relationship between workplace conditions and outcomes such as innovation, performance, and engagement. In this context, quiet quitting may occur when such mediating processes are absent or obstructed. If leadership fails to foster a climate of trust and inclusion, employees may psychologically withdraw, avoiding discretionary efforts or initiative. In contrast, environments that support voice, respect, and interpersonal risk-taking are more likely to retain motivated and, engaged employees.

G. Perceived Unfairness or Inequity

Research has consistently identified perceived unfairness as a critical factor behind a range of counterproductive work behaviors. Traditionally, these behaviors have been outwardly visible, such as retaliation, sabotage, theft, and interpersonal aggression (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Bies & Tripp, 2001; Ambrose et al., 2002). However, modern manifestations of discontent—particularly in the form of quiet quitting—signal a shift toward more subtle, passive responses to workplace dissatisfaction. Quiet quitting can be understood through the dual lenses of social exchange theory and the attribution model of fairness, particularly when envy and perceived injustice are present.

Social exchange theory indicates that workplace relationships are governed by norms of reciprocity, in which employees' contributions (e.g., time, effort, and loyalty) are expected to be matched by organizational rewards and recognition (Homans, 1961; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When employees perceive that others are being rewarded unfairly, especially when they are peers viewed as envious, they may interpret the imbalance as a violation of the social contract.

Unlike overt acts of sabotage or aggression, quiet quitting can be seen as a passive form of retaliation, where the employee withholds discretionary effort to restore perceived fairness. In this context, envy serves as a psychological amplifier—directing dissatisfaction not only toward the organization or management but also toward the envied peer who is seen as unjustly favored. Even when an envied individual does not directly cause unfairness, the envious employee may emotionally target them, leading to disengagement and withdrawal (L. Greenberg & Barling, 1999; Cropanzano et al., 2002).

This interpersonal dimension of envy adds complexity to quiet quitting: employees may disengage not only to signal dissatisfaction with their treatment by the organization, but also to reduce self-perceived inferiority and preserve their self-concept. Thus, quiet quitting can function both as a coping mechanism and subtle form of resistance within the social exchange framework.

Conversely, the attribution model of fairness (Smith et al., 1994) suggests that quiet quitting may also arise in high-fairness environments, particularly when envy is attributed internally. When an employee envies a peer who has succeeded under objectively fair conditions, the experience is more likely to be internalized as a reflection of personal failure or inadequacy (Mikulincer et al., 1989). This perception threatens self-esteem, making individuals more vulnerable to feelings of worthlessness, withdrawal, and disengagement.

In this scenario, quiet quitting becomes a form of emotional self-preservation rather than retaliation. Envious individuals are less likely to blame the organization or other employees and are more likely to blame themselves, resulting in decreased motivation, reduced initiative, and emotional detachment from work. Such behavior aligns with prior findings that link envy and internal attributions to depressive symptoms and passive responses (Kasch et al., 2002; Heatherton & Vohs, 2000).

Interestingly, research has also shown that under conditions of high procedural or interactional fairness, employees may still retaliate against others, possibly because fairness eliminates external justifications for envy, heightening internal self-threat (Barclay et al., 2005). Similarly, quiet quitting in fair environments may reflect a deeper internal struggle where individuals silently disengage because of to self-comparisons that erode confidence and intrinsic motivation.

H. Low Intrinsic Motivation

Not long after Adam Smith's insights into human nature and workplace behavior in The Wealth of Nations, B. F. Skinner's behaviorism offered a "scientific rigor" to the idea that rewards and punishments drive human action (Catania, 1984; Skinner, 1978). This theory emphasizes stimulus-response association, where reinforcement is crucial for learning the desired behaviors. Positive reinforcement encourages repetition through rewards, whereas negative reinforcement alters behavior through punishment (Catania, 1984). Traditional financial incentive programs, designed to modify employee behavior through positive and negative reinforcement, are rooted in this theory.

While studies suggest that financial incentives can improve performance on targeted metrics, such as reducing report turnaround time (Boland et al., 2010) and enhancing technology adoption (Andriole et al., 2010), a crucial distinction exists between "service worker" and "knowledge worker" activities. Financial rewards may boost performance in service jobs, but they do not necessarily have the same positive effects on jobs that involve complex thinking and specialized knowledge (Gneezy et al., 2011). However, relying heavily on financial incentives has limitations and can lead to unintended consequences, potentially contributing to quiet quitting. The "cobra effect" illustrates how monetary rewards can incentivize undesirable behaviors in the long run

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(Martinelli et al., 2018). The "blood donor's dilemma" further highlights how extrinsic motivators can displace intrinsic motivation (Gneezy et al., 2011). Offering monetary rewards for blood donation decreased participation from those initially driven by altruism, as the financial incentive devalued the selfless act.

While financial incentives can be effective in shaping specific behaviors, their overuse or misapplication may undermine intrinsic motivation, distort intention and reduce overall engagement. Particularly in roles requiring creativity and autonomy, overreliance on monetary rewards risks fostering compliance rather than genuine motivation. It has become clear that sustainable engagement requires more than transactional exchanges. This requires a deeper understanding of human behavior and psychological drivers for meaningful work.

I. Work-Life Imbalance

Work-life balance is multidimensional, comprising time balance (equal time allocation between work and personal life), involvement balance (equitable psychological engagement in work and non-work domains), and satisfaction balance (equal levels of satisfaction derived from both spheres) (Greenhaus et al., 2003). Disruptions in this balance have been shown to contribute significantly to employee burnout and dissatisfaction. For example, a study conducted among healthcare professionals in China identified positive correlations between burnout and work-family conflict, including time-based, behavior-based, and strain-based conflict (Yang et al., 2017). Similarly, research in the United Kingdom found that work-life imbalance was associated with diminished well-being and increased feelings of dehumanization among healthcare workers (Rich et al., 2016). These stressors are particularly pronounced among new graduate nurses, where work-life imbalance has been shown to predict burnout and heightened turnover intentions (Boamah & Laschinger, 2016). In the Korean context, a negative correlation has been reported between work-life balance and burnout (Shin et al., 2021).

Employees who experience a persistent imbalance may no longer seek to exceed expectations, not out of laziness, but as a form of boundary-setting to protect their well-being. Therefore, addressing work-life balance is imperative not only for reducing burnout but also for mitigating the rise of quiet quitting as a silent protest against unsustainable workplace demands.

J. Poor Leadership and Managerial Support

Leadership styles play a pivotal role in shaping workplace culture and can directly contribute to the rise of quiet quitting—a modern response to toxic or unfulfilled work environments. Authoritarian leadership, which emphasizes control, strict hierarchies, and top-down decision-making, often fosters a climate of fear and micromanagement (Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007). Such environments suppress open dialogue and discourage employee initiative, leading workers to emotionally and mentally withdraw from their roles rather than face risk confrontation or punishment (Skogstad et al., 2007). Similarly, laissez-faire leadership, defined by disengagement and a lack of direction, can create a vacuum where negative behaviors such as favoritism and bullying thrive unchecked (Kusy & Holloway, 2009). In such unregulated spaces, employees may feel unsupported and demoralized, prompting them to silently disengage as a coping mechanism (Harms, Spain, & Hannah, 2011). Even transformational leaders, typically viewed positively, can inadvertently contribute to quiet quitting if they push relentless performance demands without regard for employee well-being, leading to exhaustion and emotional detachment (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Einarsen et al., 2007).

Organizational structures also influence the conditions that give rise to quiet quitting. Highly hierarchical organizations often centralize power, leaving employees feeling voiceless and disempowered (Housman & Minor, 2015). In these settings, the fear of retaliation or being overlooked can drive employees to emotionally check rather than challenge the status quo (Clarke & Cooper, 2004). On the other hand, while flat or decentralized structures aim to empower employees, the lack of clear roles and accountability can result in confusion, miscommunication, and unresolved conflicts, all of which can erode morale and foster quiet disengagement (Frost, 2003; Harms et al., 2011). The presence or absence of clear organizational policies is another contributing factor. Companies that lack robust procedures for addressing workplace issues such as harassment or inequality risk, create an unsafe or unfair environment, which can drive employees to silently withdraw from their responsibilities (Kusy & Holloway, 2009). Conversely, organizations with well-defined ethical policies are more likely to foster trust and prevent silent erosion of engagement (Skogstad et al., 2007).

V. FACTORS, CONSEQUENCES, AND IMPLICATIONS OF QUIET QUITTING

A. Contributing Factors

➢ *Individual-Level Determinants*

While organizational characteristics significantly shape the workplace environment, individual-level variables also serve as critical moderators in determining susceptibility to disengagement. Empirical and theoretical literature highlights that personal traits, generational orientations, psychological resilience, and individual expectations of work-life integration affect how employees interpret and respond to occupational stressors and organizational misalignment.

Employees exhibiting strong psychological capital—including self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience—demonstrate greater resistance to disengagement even under suboptimal conditions (Luthans et al., 2007). Similarly, those with an internal locus of control are more inclined to proactively manage job demands and maintain engagement. In contrast, Generation Z employees, whose workplace values emphasize purpose, flexibility, and holistic well-being (Schroth, 2019), may exhibit a higher propensity for quiet quitting when these expectations are unmet or when

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organizational culture is perceived as misaligned with personal identity and goals.

➢ *Organizational-Level Determinants*

The literature extensively documents the impact of organizational variables on turnover intentions and disengagement (Kim & Fernandez, 2015; Maertz & Campion, 2004; Rubenstein et al., 2017). However, there remains a paucity of research explicitly examining quiet quitting as a discrete construct. Emerging studies suggest that adverse job conditions, limited career development opportunities, low job security, and inadequate managerial support are salient predictors of this form of passive withdrawal (Zhang & Liu, 2020; De Witte, 2005; Eisenberger et al., 1986).

Notably, Zenger and Folkman (2022) have identified ineffective managerial practices as a principal driver of quiet quitting, linking poor leadership to diminished employee motivation and discretionary effort. Furthermore, breaches in the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1989) and violations of perceived mutual obligations between employer and employee often precipitate disengagement, especially when employees feel that organizational promises regarding development, recognition, or autonomy remain unfulfilled.

Building on Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), recent research (De Souza Meira & Hancer, 2021) underscores the reciprocal nature of employee-employer relations, wherein perceived inequities in support, recognition, and opportunity contribute to reduced affective commitment and heightened psychological withdrawal. Despite these insights, empirical validation of mediating mechanisms—such as the role of burnout and well-being in the quiet quitting process—remains an underexplored domain in organizational behavior research.

B. Consequences and Implications

➢ *Individual-Level Consequences*

Quiet quitting, while often positioned as a self-preservation strategy, is associated with several adverse personal outcomes. Chief among these are increased emotional exhaustion, diminished professional efficacy, and elevated levels of cynicism—core components of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Prolonged psychological disengagement has been correlated with deteriorating mental health, manifesting in anxiety, depression, and a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction stemming from unresolved work-life conflict (Stansfeld & Candy, 2006).

Additionally, employees who disengage tend to forgo developmental opportunities, reduce discretionary effort, and avoid stretch assignments, leading to stagnation in skill acquisition and a decline in self-efficacy (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Luthans et al., 2007). Over time, this withdrawal from active professional growth compromises both individual employability and career trajectory.

➢ *Organizational-Level Consequences*

At the organizational level, the implications of quiet quitting are equally significant. Disengaged employees often exhibit lower productivity, reduced quality of output, and a marked decline in organizational citizenship behaviors—such as collaboration, innovation, and initiative-taking (Christian et al., 2011; Lee & Allen, 2002). This silent disengagement frequently serves as a precursor to actual turnover, with evidence suggesting that psychologically withdrawn employees are twice as likely to resign within a 12-month period, thereby imposing substantial direct and indirect costs related to attrition (Griffeth et al., 2000; Cascio, 2006).

Moreover, the cumulative effect of widespread quiet quitting can erode organizational culture, fostering a climate of minimal compliance and undermining collective morale. Such environments compromise organizational agility, diminish resilience in times of change, and inhibit the capacity for sustained innovation and performance (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002).

VI. FUTURE RESEARCH AVENUES

To advance the understanding of quiet quitting and its underlying psychological drivers, future studies should pursue the following avenues:

➢ *Longitudinal Designs to Understand Causality*

Most existing research on disengagement and burnout relies on cross-sectional data, which limits causal inferences (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Longitudinal studies, employing measures to track job burnout, well-being, and quiet-quitting behaviors, can help show when and how employees start to mentally disconnect from their work (Sonnentag, 2017).

➢ *Scale Development and Validation for Quiet Quitting*

As quiet quitting is a new concept, it currently lacks a standardized measurement instrument. Future work should develop and validate a psychometrically robust quiet quitting scale that captures both behavioral (reduction in discretionary effort) and attitudinal (psychological disengagement) dimensions (DeVellis, 2016).

➢ *Role of Leadership Styles and Managerial Competence*

Early evidence links poor supervisory behavior to employee disengagement (Zenger & Folkman, 2022). Future research should experimentally or quasi-experimentally evaluate how transformational versus transactional leadership, as well as managerial emotional intelligence, influence quiet quitting trajectories (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Goleman, 1998).

➢ *Technology-Mediated Work and Remote Contexts*

The rise of hybrid and remote work arrangements may alter the dynamics of boundary management and disengagement (Allen et al., 2015). Research should examine how digital communication overload, virtual team norms, and asynchronous work hours contribute to or ameliorate, quiet quitting tendencies.

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- *Psychological Contract Dynamics as Moderators and Mediators*

Although psychological contract breach has been linked to turnover behaviors (Rousseau, 1989; Zhao et al., 2007), its specific role in the quiet quitting process remains underexplored. Future models should test psychological contract violation both as a mediator (linking unmet expectations to disengagement) and moderator (exacerbating the impact of job stressors).

VII. CONCLUSION

This literature review provides a comprehensive examination of the psychological foundations driving quiet quitting, particularly in the context of economic uncertainty and constrained job mobility. Far from being a simplistic expression of apathy or laziness, quiet quitting emerges as a complex and adaptive response to prolonged exposure to adverse workplace conditions, including burnout, emotional exhaustion, and the perceived erosion of the social exchange contract. Drawing on key theoretical models—such as the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and the Maslach Burnout Inventory—this review has underscored how quiet quitting is shaped by the interplay between diminished workplace resources, constrained autonomy, and unmet psychological needs.

Economic precarity intensifies these dynamics, often leaving employees with few viable alternatives for upward mobility or organizational exit. In such environments, quiet quitting may function as a form of passive resistance or emotional self-preservation, particularly when psychological safety is lacking, and toxic workplace cultures prevail. Additionally, generational shifts in work values—most notably among Generation Z, who increasingly prioritize work-life balance and personal well-being—further illuminate the sociocultural dimensions of this trend.

Ultimately, this study positions quiet quitting as a signal of deeper systemic issues within modern organizational structures. Addressing its root causes requires more than superficial engagement initiatives; it necessitates a reevaluation of leadership approaches, organizational justice, and structural support systems that promote sustainable engagement. Future research should investigate the longitudinal impacts of quiet quitting on both individual mental health and organizational effectiveness as well as evaluate the effectiveness of targeted interventions designed to foster genuine motivation, trust, and psychological investment in the workplace.

By understanding the multifaceted psychological drivers of quiet quitting, organizations can design environments that not only reduce disengagement but also actively promote resilience, purpose, and a deeper sense of commitment in their workforce, even in times of economic uncertainty.

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