

Quiet Quitting among Generation Z Employees: A Phenomenological Study in the Indonesian Workplace

Original Article

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Abstract

Quiet quitting, defined as limiting work performance strictly to contractual obligations without voluntary extra-role behavior, has emerged as a significant organizational challenge in post-pandemic workplaces. This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of Generation Z (Gen Z) employees in Indonesia, examining how they define, justify, and enact quiet quitting (QQ) behaviors across diverse industry sectors. Drawing on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 12 Gen Z employees from startup, banking, and creative industries, the study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Four core themes emerged: (1) work-life boundary protection, (2) emotional withdrawal as self-preservation, (3) minimum-effort behavior as rational adaptation, and (4) psychological contract violation. Findings indicate that QQ in Indonesia is not simply workplace disengagement but a culturally mediated, intentionally strategic response to systemic organizational failures, particularly insufficient recognition, poor managerial communication, and incompatible work cultures. These results have implications for human resource management practice, managerial competency development, and organizational policy design in Indonesian workplaces.

Keywords: Quiet Quitting, Generation Z, Phenomenology, Employee Engagement, Psychological Contract.

1. Introduction

The contemporary world of work has undergone a profound transformation since the COVID-19 pandemic, fundamentally altering how employees conceptualize their relationship with employment (Schaufeli, 2021). Among the most discussed manifestations of this shift is the phenomenon of "quiet quitting" (QQ), a term that gained widespread currency following a viral TikTok video in 2022 and rapidly entered organizational discourse worldwide. Despite its colloquial framing, quiet quitting describes a substantive behavioral pattern with measurable organizational consequences: employees who deliberately confine their performance to the minimum requirements of their job descriptions, consciously withdrawing voluntary effort, initiative, and emotional investment (Harter, 2022).

The theoretical foundation for understanding workplace engagement and, by extension, disengagement was established by Kahn (1990) in his seminal work on personal engagement and disengagement at work. Kahn conceptualized engagement as the simultaneous harnessing of an employee's physical, cognitive, and emotional self in work performance. Critically, Kahn identified three psychological conditions that enable engagement: meaningfulness, safety, and



availability. Quiet quitting, as observed in contemporary workplaces, can be understood as the systematic withdrawal of psychological presence across these three dimensions. Employees remain physically present but withdraw emotionally and cognitively. This distinction is pivotal: QQ does not equate to resignation but represents a more insidious, less visible form of disengagement that may persist undetected within organizations for extended periods.

Global data on employee engagement corroborate the urgency of this phenomenon. Gallup's State of the Global Workplace report noted that employee engagement reached its lowest level in approximately a decade in several regions around 2022, with actively disengaged employees constituting a significant proportion of the workforce in many countries (Gallup, 2022). In Indonesia, a survey conducted by Alvara Research Center (2023) found that 65% of Gen Z respondents expressed concern about the prevalence of quiet quitting, signaling that this is a tangible and personally felt issue among young Indonesian workers. These figures frame QQ not as an individual attitudinal aberration but as a systemic signal of organizational and structural dysfunction.

Generation Z individuals born between approximately 1997 and 2012 constitute the focal population of this study for several reasons. First, Gen Z employees are entering and rapidly expanding their presence in the Indonesian labor market, making their work values and behavioral dispositions organizationally consequential. Second, Gen Z's relationship with work is qualitatively distinct from previous generations: they exhibit stronger emphasis on work-life balance, greater psychological boundary-setting, heightened sensitivity to authenticity and purpose, and lower tolerance for hierarchical management styles (Deloitte, 2025). Third, despite growing scholarly attention to quiet quitting globally, empirical phenomenological research grounded in the Indonesian context with its distinctive cultural values, such as *gotong royong* (cooperation) and complex intergenerational workplace dynamics, remains limited.

The Indonesian fashion and creative industries provide a particularly instructive context for this investigation. These sectors are defined by creativity, rapid iteration, and the expectation of discretionary effort conditions under which withdrawal of voluntary engagement is especially consequential. Prior studies in Indonesian organizational behavior have highlighted the significance of work discipline and intrinsic motivation in creative sector productivity (Manullang et al., 2025), yet the specific mechanisms through which Gen Z employees navigate tension between institutional expectations and personal wellbeing boundaries remain underexplored.

This study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do Gen Z employees in Indonesia subjectively define and experience quiet quitting? (2) What psychological, relational, and organizational factors are perceived as drivers of QQ behavior? (3) How does QQ manifest behaviorally across the dimensions of work-life balance, emotional engagement, effort, and psychological boundaries? The overarching aim is to generate a thick, contextually grounded understanding of the phenomenon that can inform more effective and equitable organizational responses.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptual Foundations of Employee Engagement and Disengagement

Kahn's (1990) foundational theory remains the most widely cited framework for understanding employee engagement. His concept of "personal engagement" describes the extent to which employees bring their full physical, cognitive, and emotional selves to work. Kahn proposed that engagement is not a fixed trait but a dynamic, context-dependent state shaped by three psychological conditions: meaningfulness (the sense that one's work is worthwhile), safety (the perception that one can express oneself without negative consequences), and availability (the psychological and physical resources necessary to engage). Disengagement, in Kahn's (1990) formulation, represents a deliberate withdrawal of self from work, a protective mechanism employed when these conditions are unmet.

Building on this framework, Schaufeli et al. (2002) operationalized work engagement as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. The conceptual inverse disengagement is characterized by exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy, corresponding closely to the burnout construct. Quiet quitting occupies an intermediate position in this continuum: it is neither the active engagement Schaufeli et al. describe nor full-scale burnout or voluntary turnover, but rather a calculated, self-protective reduction of engagement that maintains surface compliance while withdrawing psychological investment.

2.2. Quiet Quitting: Defining the Construct

The academic operationalization of quiet quitting has been the subject of recent scholarly debate. Formica and Sfodera (2022) characterized QQ as employees doing "just enough" to retain employment without contributing discretionary effort. Harter (2022) distinguished between quiet quitters who meet but do not exceed job requirements and actively disengaged employees who actively undermine organizational goals, positioning QQ as a distinct behavioral category requiring separate theoretical treatment. In the Indonesian context, "QQ" has been colloquially rendered as "bekerja sewajarnya" (working as is warranted), a phrase that reflects the cultural acceptance of limiting effort to what is explicitly required (Manullang et al., 2025).

Empirical research consistently identifies burnout and work-life balance as proximal predictors of QQ. Studies examining Gen Z employees in urban Indonesian settings confirm that work overload, insufficient organizational support, and lack of recognition are primary antecedents (Alvara Research Center, 2023; Manullang et al., 2025). The psychological contract literature offers a complementary explanatory lens: Rousseau's (1989) theory of psychological contracts, the implicit beliefs employees hold about mutual obligations with employers, suggests that QQ behavior frequently follows perceived contract violation, wherein employees reduce effort in response to unmet organizational promises regarding recognition, growth, and fair treatment.

2.3. Generation Z and the Indonesian Work Context

Generation Z employees bring a distinctive value system to workplace relationships. Deloitte's Global Gen Z and Millennial Survey (2025) identified several defining characteristics: prioritization of mental health and well-being, insistence on work flexibility, demand for meaningful work that aligns with personal values, and preference for transparent,

non-hierarchical communication. These characteristics create potential friction with traditional Indonesian organizational cultures, which have historically emphasized collectivist values, deference to authority, and willingness to sacrifice personal time for organizational commitment.

Indonesian workplace culture is further complicated by the influence of local values. The principle of *gotong royong*, while ostensibly promoting collective solidarity, can be instrumentalized to pressure employees to exceed formal boundaries without commensurate recognition. Gen Z employees, who are more likely to assert individual psychological boundaries, may experience this cultural pressure as a driver of disengagement rather than motivation. The intersection of these global generational dynamics with local cultural imperatives makes the Indonesian context a uniquely informative site for phenomenological inquiry into quiet quitting.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study employs an interpretive phenomenological approach, grounded in the philosophical tradition of Husserl (1970) and operationalized through the methodological framework of Moustakas (1994). Phenomenology is suitable for this investigation because it prioritizes participants' firsthand, lived experiences of a phenomenon, allowing the researcher to construct a rich, contextually grounded understanding of how Gen Z employees subjectively define, experience, and interpret quiet quitting. Rather than testing hypotheses or measuring frequencies, this study seeks to produce what Geertz (1973) termed "thick description," layered, interpretive accounts that capture the complexity of human experience within its cultural and relational context.

3.2. Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit 12 Gen Z employees (born 1997–2007) currently employed in Indonesia. Participants were drawn across three industry sectors to capture variation in organizational culture and work demands: startup technology companies ($n = 4$), commercial banking ($n = 4$), and creative industries, including fashion design, content production, and graphic design ($n = 4$). Inclusion criteria required that participants: (a) were currently employed full-time or part-time in their sector; (b) self-identified as experiencing or having recently experienced behaviors consistent with quiet quitting; and (c) were willing to participate in a recorded interview. Purposive inclusion of multiple sectors was intended to surface both cross-cutting themes and sector-specific nuances.

The sample comprised 7 women and 5 men, with ages ranging from 21 to 27 years ($M = 23.8$). Organizational tenure ranged from 8 months to 4 years. Eleven participants were located in major Indonesian urban centers (Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung); one participant was based in a secondary city. All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, with selective direct quotations translated into English for reporting purposes. To protect participant confidentiality, all names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between January and March 2025, via a combination of face-to-face meetings and video calls (Zoom, Google Meet). Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. An interview guide was developed based on a review of relevant literature and pilot-tested with two Gen Z employees not included in the main sample. The guide covered five thematic domains: (1) subjective definition and personal experience of quiet quitting; (2) precipitating events and contributing organizational conditions; (3) behavioral manifestations across work tasks and interpersonal relationships; (4) management of psychological and physical work-life boundaries; and (5) perceived organizational responses to disengagement.

Consistent with semi-structured interview methodology, the guide was employed flexibly to allow participants to introduce topics of subjective salience not anticipated in the protocol (King, 2004). All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' explicit written consent and transcribed verbatim. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary thematic summaries with five participants who agreed to this follow-up procedure, in order to verify interpretive accuracy.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis: (1) familiarization with data through repeated reading of transcripts; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) searching for themes by clustering related codes; (4) reviewing and refining themes against the dataset; (5) defining and naming themes with analytical precision; and (6) producing the written report. Analysis was conducted inductively, with themes allowed to emerge from participant accounts rather than being imposed from prior frameworks, though the researchers remained alert to theoretical resonances with existing literature on engagement, psychological contracts, and boundary work.

To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed several strategies recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985): prolonged engagement with the data through multiple readings, peer debriefing with a colleague experienced in qualitative organizational research, and an audit trail documenting analytical decisions. Researcher reflexivity was addressed through written memoing throughout the analytical process, acknowledging the researchers' own familiarity with organizational contexts similar to those described by participants.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained before data collection. All participants provided written informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Given the sensitive organizational nature of the topic, including potential risks of participant identification by employers data were anonymized at the point of transcription. Institutional affiliations were not disclosed in the dataset, and quotations have been edited only to remove potentially identifying details.

4. Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis of the 12 interview transcripts yielded four overarching themes, each comprising two to three sub-themes. These themes are presented below with representative participant quotations. The themes are not mutually exclusive; they frequently intersect and mutually reinforce one another in participants' accounts.

Theme 1: Work-Life Boundary Protection as Non-Negotiable Self-Care

The most consistently and passionately articulated theme across all 12 participants was the assertion of a clear, non-negotiable boundary between professional and personal life. Participants did not describe this boundary as a preference or convenience but as a condition of psychological survival.

"I used to reply to my manager's WhatsApp at 11 PM. I thought that was just how it worked. But after six months, I started having sleep problems and anxiety. So I made a rule: after 8 PM, I don't open anything work-related. That's not being lazy. That's staying sane." (Participant 3, banking sector, female, 24)

A sub-theme that emerged with particular salience in the creative industry participants was what several described as the "invisible overtime" problem, the expectation that creative workers are always available because they are perceived as working from passion rather than obligation.

"In fashion, people assume you love it so much you'll stay until midnight without extra pay. Yes, I love what I do. But love doesn't pay rent. And love doesn't prevent burnout. So I stopped treating love as a justification for being exploited." (Participant 9, creative sector, female, 26)

Participants also identified social media as a newly contested boundary terrain. Several described how managerial encroachment into personal social media spaces through follow requests, tagging, or direct messaging outside work hours via Instagram or WhatsApp functioned as an extension of surveillance and work demands into nominally private spaces, triggering boundary assertion behaviors.

"When my supervisor followed my Instagram, my stories immediately became more guarded. I started posting less. Then she started texting me about work through Instagram DM on weekends. I felt like no space was mine anymore." (Participant 7, startup sector, male, 23)

Theme 2: Emotional Withdrawal as Rational Self-Preservation

All participants described a process of gradual emotional withdrawal from their organizations, a progressive divestment of psychological investment that was experienced not as apathy but as a deliberate, protective choice made in response to perceived organizational failure to reciprocate engagement.

"At first, I genuinely cared. I proposed ideas, I stayed late, I invested. But when none of it was acknowledged, not even a 'good work,' I started asking myself, why am I giving 100% when the organization gives me back 60%? So I adjusted to match." (Participant 1, startup sector, male, 25)

Participants framed emotional withdrawal using the language of fairness and reciprocity, consistent with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). This framing was important: participants

explicitly rejected characterizations of their behavior as "malas" (lazy) and instead positioned emotional disengagement as an evidence-based recalibration of investment proportionate to return.

"It's not that I stopped caring about my work. It's that I stopped caring about this company specifically. I still do good work. I just don't give them free access to my emotions, my time, and my loyalty when they haven't earned it." (Participant 5, banking sector, female, 22)

A sub-theme of intergenerational communication friction was prominent. Several participants described significant emotional labor involved in navigating managers from older generations whose communication expectations, including immediate responsiveness, visible enthusiasm, and uncritical compliance, participants experienced as emotionally exhausting and antithetical to their own values.

Theme 3: Minimum-Effort Behavior as Pragmatic Adaptation

Participants described a behavioral cluster organized around meeting but not exceeding formal job requirements. Contrary to popular discourse that frames this as incompetence or lack of ambition, participants articulated minimum-effort behavior as a consciously calibrated strategy reflecting a realistic assessment of organizational incentive structures.

"I know exactly what my KPIs are. I hit them. That's what my contract says. Proposing extra initiatives is not in my job description. I stopped proposing them when I noticed the people who worked extra hard got promoted at the same rate as everyone else. The math didn't work." (Participant 11, banking sector, male, 27)

In the creative sector, minimum-effort behavior took a specific form: participants described confining their creative contribution to what was explicitly commissioned, ceasing the spontaneous ideation and experimental exploration that had previously characterized their work. This finding is particularly significant for organizations in creative industries, where voluntary creative contribution beyond formal task completion is central to competitive differentiation.

"I used to come in with five ideas when they asked for one. Now I bring one. A solid one, technically correct. But I keep the other four for my own projects, because at least there I know the effort is for me." (Participant 10, creative sector, female, 24)

Theme 4: Psychological Contract Violation and Trust Erosion

Running as a longitudinal thread through participants' narratives was the theme of broken implicit agreements, the perception that organizations had violated commitments, whether explicit or implied, during recruitment, onboarding, or appraisal conversations. These perceived violations operated across several dimensions: unfulfilled promises of career development, inconsistency between organizational values as communicated and as enacted, and failure to provide the recognition commensurate with effort expended.

"During the interview, they talked about work-life balance being a core value. Six months later, I was expected to be reachable on weekends for 'urgent matters' that weren't urgent at all. I felt deceived. After that, I stopped taking what they said at face value." (Participant 2, startup sector, female, 21)

Participants consistently described a specific temporal pattern: an initial period of high engagement and genuine organizational commitment, followed by one or more identifiable "trigger events" typically perceived as unfairness, a broken promise, a dismissive managerial response to initiative, or an explicit boundary violation that initiated a renegotiation of psychological investment. Once this trust erosion was established, participants described great difficulty reversing it without concrete, visible organizational change.

"There was a specific moment. I had worked three weekends on a project. The launch was successful. In the team meeting, my manager mentioned the project, but not my contribution. That was the day I decided: I will no longer give more than required. Not out of anger, but out of self-respect." (Participant 6, creative sector, male, 25)

Table 1. Summary of Themes, Sub-Themes, and Representative Codes

Theme	Sub-Themes	Representative Codes
1. Work-Life Boundary Protection	Invisible overtime; Social media intrusion; Time sovereignty	"After 8 PM rule"; Restricting after-hours availability; Instagram privacy reduction
2. Emotional Withdrawal as Self-Preservation	Reciprocity recalibration; Intergenerational friction; Detachment without resignation	"Adjusting to match"; Managing emotional labor with older managers; Caring about work but not the company.
3. Minimum-Effort Behavior as Pragmatic Adaptation	KPI-bounded performance; Creative withholding; Incentive misalignment	"The math didn't work." Keeping ideas for personal projects; Hitting metrics, no more
4. Psychological Contract Violation & Trust Erosion	Recruitment promise failure; Trigger events; Irreversible recalibration	"Work-life balance as core value" unfulfilled; Single unrecognized success as turning point; "Out of self-respect, not anger"

4.1. Discussion

The findings of this study extend and refine existing frameworks for understanding quiet quitting by embedding the phenomenon within its specific generational and cultural context. Several theoretical and practical implications merit elaboration.

Quiet Quitting as Rational Recalibration, Not Deviance

Consistent with Kahn's (1990) prediction that disengagement follows unmet psychological conditions, participants in this study did not describe QQ as laziness, disinterest, or professional failure. Instead, their accounts were marked by deliberate, evidence-based reasoning about the cost-benefit structure of organizational commitment. This finding challenges managerial framings common, particularly among Gen X and Baby Boomer managers, that pathologize QQ as an attitudinal deficiency or generational weakness (Manullang et al., 2025). Such framings not only misdiagnose the problem but are likely to intensify disengagement by reinforcing the perception that the organization does not respect or understand its employees.

The rationality of participants' QQ behavior aligns with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), which posits that individuals regulate their contributions to social relationships proportionate to perceived reciprocity. When organizations systematically fail to provide meaningful recognition, growth opportunities, or boundary respect, the logical response from

a social exchange perspective is a commensurate reduction of discretionary contribution. Treating this as a moral failing rather than an organizational signal is analytically and managerially unproductive.

The Psychological Contract as Central Mechanism

The prominence of Theme 4 in participants' accounts and its temporal role as a longitudinal thread underpinning the other three themes supports the centrality of psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1989) as an explanatory mechanism for QQ in the Indonesian Gen Z context. Participants consistently described QQ not as an initial disposition but as a response to specific, identifiable violations of implicit organizational promises. This finding has direct implications for organizational entry processes: misrepresentations or vague commitments made during recruitment, onboarding, or performance reviews when not subsequently fulfilled appear to function as potent QQ triggers.

The irreversibility of trust erosion, described by multiple participants, also has practical implications. Several noted that superficial managerial gestures, such as a single appreciation email or an isolated team-building event, were insufficient to restore damaged psychological contracts. This aligns with Morrison and Robinson's (1997) observation that psychological contract breach, once experienced, fundamentally alters the attribution framework employees apply to subsequent organizational behavior, predisposing them to interpret ambiguous actions as further evidence of bad faith. Meaningful re-engagement requires sustained, systematic changes in organizational practice, not episodic goodwill.

Cultural Specificity: Indonesian Context

The Indonesian cultural context introduced distinctive nuances to the QQ phenomenon, not fully captured in Western-derived frameworks. Several participants described the experience of social and implicit pressure to embody *gotong royong* (cooperation) as a source of guilt accompanying their QQ behavior, even when they intellectually justified it as self-preservation. This tension between culturally internalized collectivism and personally enacted boundary-setting is absent from most Western accounts of QQ and warrants further theoretical attention.

Additionally, the role of hierarchical organizational structures in the banking sector participants' accounts highlighted how power distance, a well-documented feature of Indonesian organizational culture (Hofstede, 2001), compounds the QQ dynamic. In high-power-distance contexts, employees may be less able to directly negotiate workload, express dissatisfaction, or assert boundaries through legitimate speech acts, making behavioral withdrawal (QQ) the primary available channel for boundary expression. This suggests that organizational interventions aimed at reducing QQ in Indonesian contexts must address structural power asymmetries, not merely implement surface-level employee engagement programs.

Implications for Management Practice

The findings suggest several actionable implications for human resource management and organizational leadership in Indonesia. First, organizations must critically evaluate the alignment between publicly communicated values and enacted management practices,

particularly regarding work-life balance, recognition, and transparency. Failures of this alignment function as trust-eroding psychological contract breaches with lasting disengagement consequences.

Second, managerial competency frameworks require updating to equip managers, especially those from Gen X and Boomer cohorts, with effective communication strategies for Gen Z subordinates. This includes developing the capacity to recognize QQ as an organizational signal rather than an individual fault, initiate non-judgmental exploratory conversations about disengagement, and respond to boundary-setting behavior with respect rather than resistance.

Third, organizations in creative and fashion industries face a particularly acute challenge: their competitive advantage depends on precisely the discretionary creative contribution that QQ systematically withholds. Standard performance management approaches focused on KPI compliance will fail to detect or address this form of creative disengagement. Novel measurement and recognition frameworks that explicitly value and reward creative initiative are needed.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that constrain the generalizability of its findings. The purposive sample of 12 participants, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, limits transferability to other Gen Z populations or organizational contexts. The self-selection of participants who self-identified as experiencing QQ may have introduced a sampling bias toward more reflective or articulate experiencers of the phenomenon. All participants were located in Indonesian urban centers; the experiences of Gen Z workers in smaller cities or rural areas, or in sectors such as manufacturing or agriculture, remain unexamined. Finally, this study collected data from employees only; manager perspectives, which would enable a fuller picture of the QQ dynamic, were not included, a gap acknowledged as a priority for future research.

5. Conclusion

This phenomenological study illuminates quiet quitting among Generation Z employees in Indonesia as a complex, contextually embedded, and fundamentally rational behavioral response to systemic organizational failures. The four themes identified work-life boundary protection, emotional withdrawal as self-preservation, minimum-effort behavior as pragmatic adaptation, and psychological contract violation collectively demonstrate that QQ is neither generational weakness nor individual pathology, but a coherent adaptation strategy activated when organizational conditions persistently fail to meet the psychological needs identified by Kahn (1990) as prerequisites for genuine engagement.

For Indonesian organizations, particularly those in dynamic, creativity-dependent sectors such as fashion and startup technology, the findings represent an urgent call for structural organizational reflection. The costs of misdiagnosing QQ framing it as employee laziness rather than organizational failure extend beyond individual productivity losses to include systemic innovation deficits, talent attrition, and damaged organizational reputation as an employer of choice for the fastest-growing segment of the labor force.

Future research should pursue comparative studies between managerial and employee perspectives on QQ, longitudinal designs that track the behavioral trajectory of QQ over time, and sector-specific studies that examine how industry characteristics modulate the form and intensity of disengagement. The intersection of local cultural values with globally circulating Gen Z workplace norms also merits sustained scholarly attention, as the Indonesian workplace provides a particularly rich context for understanding the complex negotiations between individual well-being, cultural obligation, and organizational demand that define the contemporary employment relationship.

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