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Quiet quitting culture as covert organizational resistance: a sociological reading of contemporary work

ABSTRACT

This reflective article aimed to examine quiet quitting as a form of covert organizational resistance, rather than interpreting it as a motivational deficit or a transient generational trend. A qualitative research approach was developed, based on a critical and interpretive analysis of recent literature on quiet quitting and the contributions of classical and contemporary sociology of work related to resistance, labor dignity, and social exchange theory. Published sources were treated as primary material for conceptual analysis, without resorting to statistical verification procedures. The results showed that quiet quitting reproduces historically documented patterns of everyday, low-visibility resistance by substituting open confrontation with the silent establishment of boundaries in contexts characterized by job insecurity, limited capacity for collective voice, and imbalances in the reciprocity of organizational citizenship. Furthermore, it was shown that this practice constitutes a rational response to work environments where surveillance, algorithmic control, and precarious employment increase the costs of explicit resistance. It is concluded that quiet quitting should be understood as a contemporary form of organizational communication and symbolic negotiation of dignity at work, rather than as a manifestation of individual disinterest. This broadens its theoretical understanding and provides a useful analytical framework for the sociology of organizations, human resource management, labor relations, and work psychology.

Keywords: quiet quitting; organizational resistance; workplace dignity; job demands-resources; organizational citizenship behavior; sociology of work.

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La cultura del quiet quitting como resistencia organizacional encubierta: una lectura sociológica del trabajo contemporáneo

RESUMEN

Este artículo de reflexión tuvo como objetivo examinar el quiet quitting como una forma de resistencia organizacional encubierta, en lugar de interpretarlo como un déficit motivacional

o una tendencia generacional transitoria. Se desarrolló una investigación de enfoque cualitativo, sustentada en un análisis crítico e interpretativo de la literatura reciente sobre quiet quitting y de los aportes de la sociología clásica y contemporánea del trabajo relacionados con la resistencia, la dignidad laboral y la teoría del intercambio social. Las fuentes publicadas fueron tratadas como material primario para el análisis conceptual, sin recurrir a procedimientos de comprobación estadística. Los resultados mostraron que el quiet quitting reproduce patrones históricamente documentados de resistencia cotidiana y de baja visibilidad, al sustituir la confrontación abierta por el establecimiento silencioso de límites frente a contextos caracterizados por inseguridad laboral, limitada capacidad de voz colectiva y desequilibrios en la reciprocidad de la ciudadanía organizacional. Asimismo, se evidenció que esta práctica constituye una respuesta racional a entornos laborales donde la vigilancia, el control algorítmico y la precarización incrementan los costos de la resistencia explícita. Se concluye que el quiet quitting debe comprenderse como una forma contemporánea de comunicación organizacional y de negociación simbólica de la dignidad en el trabajo, más que como una manifestación de desinterés individual, lo que amplía su comprensión teórica y aporta un marco analítico útil para la sociología de las organizaciones, la gestión de recursos humanos, las relaciones laborales y la psicología del trabajo.

Palabras clave: quiet quitting; resistencia organizacional; dignidad laboral; demandas y recursos laborales; comportamiento de ciudadanía organizacional; sociología del trabajo.

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A Cultura do Despedimento Silencioso como Resistência Organizacional Encoberta: Uma Leitura Sociológica do Trabalho Contemporâneo

RESUMO

Este artigo reflexivo teve como objetivo examinar a demissão silenciosa como uma forma de resistência organizacional encoberta, em vez de a interpretar como um déficit motivacional ou uma tendência geracional transitória. Foi desenvolvida uma abordagem de investigação qualitativa, baseada numa análise crítica e interpretativa da literatura recente sobre o despedimento silencioso e das contribuições da sociologia do trabalho clássica e contemporânea relacionadas com a resistência, a dignidade do trabalho e a teoria da troca social. As fontes publicadas foram tratadas como material primário para análise conceptual, sem recurso a procedimentos de verificação estatística. Os resultados mostraram que o despedimento silencioso reproduz padrões historicamente documentados de resistência quotidiana e discreta, substituindo o confronto aberto pelo estabelecimento silencioso de limites em contextos caracterizados por insegurança no trabalho, capacidade limitada de expressão colectiva e desequilíbrios na reciprocidade da cidadania organizacional. Além disso, está demonstrado que esta prática constitui uma resposta racional a ambientes de trabalho onde a vigilância, o controlo algorítmico e o emprego precário aumentam os custos da resistência explícita. Daqui se conclui que o abandono silencioso deve ser entendido como uma forma contemporânea de comunicação organizacional e de negociação simbólica da dignidade no trabalho, e não como uma manifestação de desinteresse individual. Isto alarga a sua compreensão teórica e fornece uma estrutura analítica útil para a sociologia das organizações, a gestão de recursos humanos, as relações laborais e a psicologia do trabalho.

Palabras clave: abandono silencioso; resistência organizacional; dignidade no trabalho; demandas e recursos laborais; comportamento de cidadania organizacional; sociologia do trabalho.

INTRODUCTION

In the autumn of 2022, a short video posted by a career coach gave a name to something organizational sociologists had described for decades under other labels: employees who keep their job but stop giving anything beyond it (Klotz & Bolino, 2022). The clip, and the term it popularized, "quiet quitting," spread far faster than most workplace concepts do, in large part because it named a feeling many workers already recognized in themselves. Within weeks, the phrase had migrated from social media into human-resource departments, boardrooms, and, soon after, academic journals, where it has since generated a fast-growing body of empirical and conceptual work (Dilchert et al., 2026; Gabelaia & Bagociunaite, 2024; Patel et al., 2025).

Most of that early commentary treated quiet quitting as a problem to be diagnosed and corrected: a motivational deficit, a generational quirk of Gen Z workers, or a symptom of post-pandemic burnout that better management could reverse (Richardson, 2023). This article takes a different starting point. Rather than asking why employees have stopped trying, it asks what quiet quitting accomplishes for the people who practice it, and what that accomplishment tells us about the structure of the employment relationship itself. The working argument is straightforward: quiet quitting is not primarily a withdrawal of ability or a withdrawal of care, but a withdrawal of discretion, and discretionary effort is precisely the currency that organizations have historically extracted without contractual obligation to reciprocate (Homans, 1958; Huseman et al., 1987). Read this way, quiet quitting belongs to a much older sociological family: the family of covert, low-visibility resistance through which workers who lack formal power push back against demands they consider excessive or unfair, without ever naming their behavior as resistance and often without coordinating with anyone else (Hodson, 2001; Scott, 1985).

The claim is not that every instance of reduced effort is a political act. Exhaustion, illness, disengagement born of genuine indifference, and simple disorganization are real and do not require a resistance framework to be explained. The claim is narrower and, I think, more useful: a meaningful share of what gets reported as quiet quitting fits the profile of resistance rather than the profile of apathy, because it is targeted, bounded, and reversible in ways that pure burnout typically is not. Workers who are quiet quitting can usually describe exactly which tasks they have stopped doing and why; they retain the capacity to re-engage if the terms of the exchange change. That specificity is the signature of a boundary being drawn, not of a system shutting down.

Three bodies of literature converge to support this reading. The first is the emerging quiet quitting literature itself, most of it published in the last three years and concentrated in healthcare and knowledge-work settings, which consistently links the phenomenon to perceived unfairness, unreciprocated effort, and unmet recognition rather than to low ability or low intelligence about the job (Patel et al., 2025; Toska et al., 2025). The second is the sociology of workplace resistance, running from early industrial-relations studies of deliberate output restriction through Hodson's (2001) synthesis of dignity struggles on the shop floor to Scott's (1985) account of the "weapons of the weak" available to actors who cannot resist openly. The third is organizational behavior research on the boundary between organizational citizenship behavior and counterproductive work behavior, which shows that the same employee can slide from one to the other depending on how fairly citizenship is rewarded (Fan et al., 2023; Spanouli & Hofmans, 2016).

The remainder of the article develops this argument in two steps. The next section reviews the conceptual and empirical literature on quiet quitting alongside the classical resistance and

exchange theories that, this article contends, anticipated it. The discussion section then builds the central argument, showing point by point how quiet quitting reproduces the logic of covert resistance and what that reframing changes for how organizations should respond to it. A final section draws out conclusions, limitations, and directions for future empirical work capable of testing the resistance hypothesis directly.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOPIC

Theoretical and Empirical Background

Theorizing quiet quitting

Quiet quitting entered public vocabulary as a piece of workplace slang, but the construct it points to has proven durable enough to attract serious conceptual work. Klotz and Bolino (2022), the management scholars most associated with popularizing the term in its current sense, defined quiet quitters as employees who continue to meet their formal job requirements while withdrawing from the "extra mile" behaviors — staying late, volunteering for stretch assignments, attending optional meetings — that organizations have come to expect without contractually demanding them. Subsequent scholarship has pushed the definition further, distinguishing quiet quitting from adjacent constructs such as burnout, presenteeism, and turnover intention. Dilchert et al. (2026), synthesizing academic and practitioner literatures, conceptualize quiet quitting as a form of psychological withdrawal that extends beyond task disengagement to include a weakening of social ties at work, a general disinclination toward the job, and a deliberate effort to hold work and personal life apart. That definition matters because it separates quiet quitting from simple laziness or incompetence: the construct is explicitly about the erosion of a relationship, not the erosion of a skill set.

Empirical work has moved quickly to operationalize the concept. Patel et al. (2025) developed and validated a multidimensional quiet quitting scale, situating the construct alongside established correlates such as counterproductive work behavior, continuance commitment, and burnout, and showing that quiet quitting behaves as a distinct factor rather than as a relabeling of those older constructs. Health services research has been especially productive on this front, likely because healthcare combines high emotional demand with rigid staffing structures that make disengagement highly visible to managers and researchers alike. Toska et al. (2025), surveying hospital staff in Greece, found that roughly six in ten respondents displayed quiet quitting characteristics, with the lowest scores on perceived fairness of rewards correlating with the highest levels of reported disengagement. Boy and Sürmeli (2023) reach a compatible conclusion from a global health perspective, linking the post-pandemic acceleration of quiet quitting among health workers to unresolved workload disparities, pay inequities, and unaddressed workplace violence rather than to any generalized decline in professional commitment. The generational framing that dominated early popular commentary receives more qualified support in Xueyun et al. (2023), whose survey of Gen Z employees in an emerging-economy setting finds that quiet quitting intention is shaped far more by organizational conditions — job insecurity, weak supervisory support, unclear advancement paths — than by age-cohort membership as such, which weakens the "lazy generation" narrative that circulated alongside the term. Rinaldi and Pomarolli (2025), studying nurses in a Northern Italian hospital, likewise describe quiet quitting as a deliberate decision to disengage while maintaining outward compliance, explicitly distinguishing it from burnout on the grounds that quiet quitting preserves the appearance, if not the substance, of normal job performance. Gabelaia and Bagociunaite (2024) reach a similar conclusion from an organizational-culture angle, tracing quiet quitting to a cluster of causes — chronic overload, blocked advancement, weak leadership, and insufficient recognition — that reads less like a list of individual failings than like a catalogue of broken organizational promises. Table 1 summarizes the empirical studies discussed above, alongside their context, method, and the finding most relevant to the resistance framing developed later in this article.

Table 1

Selected empirical studies on quiet quitting reviewed in this article

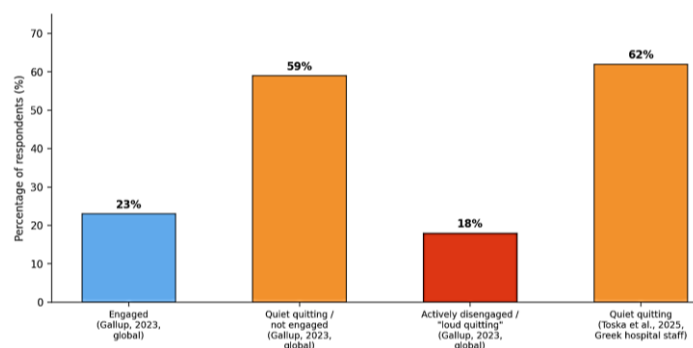
Study	Context sample	/ Method	Finding relevant to the resistance framing
Patel et al. (2025)	Cross-industry employees, scale development sample	Scale construction and validation	Quiet quitting is empirically distinct from burnout and counterproductive work behavior, not a relabeling of either.
Toska et al. (2025)	186 hospital staff, Greece	Cross-sectional survey (Quiet Quitting Scale)	62% showed quiet quitting traits; lowest perceived reward fairness linked to highest disengagement.
Rinaldi Pomaroli (2025)	Nurses, Northern Italy	Case study	Quiet quitting preserves outward compliance while withdrawing discretionary effort; distinguished from burnout.
Boy & Sürmeli (2023)	Global health workforce	Narrative/conceptual review	Links post-pandemic quiet quitting to unresolved workload and pay disparities, not falling commitment.
Xueyun et al. (2023)	Gen Z employees, emerging economy	Survey, PLS-SEM path modeling	Organizational conditions, not age-cohort membership, best predict quiet quitting intention.
Gabelaia & Bagociunaite (2024)	Organizational culture literature	Conceptual synthesis	Traces quiet quitting to overload, blocked advancement, weak leadership, and unmet recognition.
Dilchert et al. (2026)	Academic and practitioner literature	Conceptual synthesis	Defines quiet quitting as withdrawal extending beyond tasks to social ties and organizational attachment.

Note. Compiled by the author(s) from the sources cited in the text.

Reported prevalence figures illustrate the same pattern, although the instruments and populations behind them differ too much to be read as a single trend line rather than as separate snapshots. Gallup's State of the Global Workplace 2023 report classified 59% of the global workforce as "not engaged" (quiet quitting) and a further 18% as "actively disengaged," against only 23% engaged (Gallup, as reported in Cerullo, 2023); Toska et al. (2025) found a comparable 62% figure among hospital staff in Greece using a dedicated quiet quitting scale. Figure 1 presents these figures side by side, purely as descriptive context and not as evidence that a single underlying rate exists across populations and measures.

Figure 1

Reported prevalence of quiet quitting / non-engagement across selected sources.



Note. Percentages are not directly comparable across rows: the Gallup figures classify global employee engagement using Gallup's own instrument, while the Toska et al. (2025) figure uses a dedicated quiet quitting scale applied to a single-country hospital sample. Sources: Gallup, State of the Global Workplace: 2023 Report, as reported in Cerullo (2023); Toska et al. (2025).

Resistance, dignity, and the hidden transcript of work

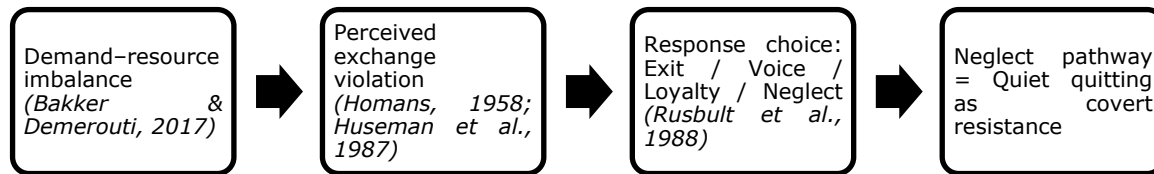
None of this is entirely new territory for sociology. Long before the term quiet quitting existed, industrial sociologists were documenting the many ways that workers who cannot resist openly still find ways to resist quietly. Hodson's (2001) synthesis of workplace ethnographies remains the most systematic account of this pattern: across dozens of studies of shop floors, offices, and service settings, he shows that workers routinely defend their dignity against mismanagement, overwork, and disrespect through tactics that never rise to the level of open conflict — working strictly to rule, withholding informal knowledge, limiting effort to what is formally required — precisely the behavioral signature that quiet quitting research is now describing under a new name. Scott's (1985) classic study of peasant resistance in rural Malaysia coined the phrase "weapons of the weak" for this same repertoire: foot-dragging, feigned ignorance, and minimal compliance chosen by actors who correctly judge that open confrontation would cost them more than it would gain. The parallel to today's white-collar and healthcare workplaces is not perfect — Scott's peasants faced landlords with far more coercive power than a modern HR department — but the underlying logic travels well: where the cost of visible resistance is high and the payoff uncertain, actors resist invisibly instead of not at all.

Two mid-century theories of social exchange help explain why organizations are especially vulnerable to this kind of quiet withdrawal. Homans (1958) argued that ongoing social relationships, including work relationships, function as exchanges in which both parties continuously assess whether what they receive is proportionate to what they give; when the ratio feels unfavorable for long enough, the aggrieved party adjusts its own contribution downward rather than exiting the relationship outright, especially when exit is costly. Huseman et al. (1987) formalized a related insight through their equity sensitivity construct, showing that employees vary in how much under-reward they will tolerate before they begin to withhold effort, but that virtually all employees have a threshold beyond which contribution is deliberately scaled back to restore a felt sense of balance. Read together, these theories predict almost exactly what the quiet quitting literature now reports empirically: disengagement concentrated among employees who feel that discretionary effort has gone unreciprocated, expressed through a calibrated reduction in contribution rather than through resignation or confrontation (Meyer & Allen, 1991, similarly show that this kind of continuance-based attachment — staying because leaving is costly, not because the relationship still feels rewarding — is a distinct and measurable component of organizational commitment).

Hirschman's (1970) exit-voice-loyalty framework, later extended by Rusbult et al. (1988) to include a fourth response, neglect, offers a compact typology for locating quiet quitting among the options available to a dissatisfied employee. Facing declining satisfaction, an employee can leave (exit), complain in the hope of improving conditions (voice), wait it out on the assumption that things will improve (loyalty), or let performance quietly slide without formally naming the complaint (neglect). Rusbult et al. (1988) found neglect to be the response most likely when investment in the job is low relative to alternatives, but also, crucially, when voice feels unlikely to be heard. Quiet quitting fits the neglect category closely: reduced interest and effort, precisely bounded, chosen not because voice was never considered but because it was judged unlikely to work. Figure 2 sets out this pathway from structural imbalance to the neglect response in diagrammatic form.

Figure 2

Conceptual model — from exchange imbalance to covert resistance.



Note. Author-constructed conceptual diagram; it synthesizes the theoretical arguments in Bakker and Demerouti (2017), Homans (1958), Huseman et al. (1987), and Rusbult et al. (1988) and does not represent new empirical data.

Organizational citizenship, its underside, and the resource-demand imbalance

A final strand of literature helps specify exactly which behaviors quiet quitting withdraws. Organizational citizenship behavior — the voluntary, unrewarded extra-role contributions that keep organizations running more smoothly than their formal contracts require — and counterproductive work behavior have traditionally been studied as opposites, but a growing body of work treats them as adjacent points on a single continuum of discretionary behavior rather than as separate categories (Fan et al., 2023). Spanouli and Hofmans (2016) make the mechanism explicit: when organizations pressure employees to perform citizenship behaviors that fall outside their job scope, some employees compensate by increasing mildly counterproductive behavior elsewhere, restoring a personal sense of balance that management never intended to disturb in the first place. Quiet quitting can be read as a milder, more socially acceptable variant of the same compensatory logic — not sabotage, simply the retraction of citizenship that was never owed.

The Job Demands-Resources model supplies the structural conditions under which this retraction becomes likely. Bakker and Demerouti (2017) describe a dual process in which job demands that exceed available resources trigger a health-impairment pathway ending in exhaustion and withdrawal, while adequate resources instead trigger a motivational pathway that sustains engagement and citizenship; Bakker, Demerouti, and Sanz-Vergel (2014) show burnout and engagement as two ends of exactly this continuum, driven by the same demand-resource ratio. Maslach and Leiter (2016) add that burnout's cynicism dimension in particular functions as a protective psychological distance from work that no longer feels reciprocated. Berry, Lelchook, and Clark (2012), reviewing decades of research on lateness, absenteeism, and turnover, show that these withdrawal behaviors form a coherent family rather than isolated incidents, which supports treating quiet quitting as one further point on that same withdrawal spectrum rather than as a wholly new phenomenon. Finally, the shift toward hybrid and remote arrangements, which Bloom et al. (2015) show can raise measured productivity while simultaneously loosening the informal social ties that once made extra-role effort feel natural, has plausibly widened the space in which quiet quitting can occur undetected, since managers now have fewer informal cues through which to notice a boundary being drawn.

The rise of algorithmic management

One structural change deserves separate attention because it did not exist in the settings that classical resistance theory described: the growing use of algorithmic and data-driven monitoring to manage discretionary effort itself. Newlands (2021) documents how platform-mediated and app-based work extends organizational surveillance into precisely the informal, discretionary zone that Hodson (2001) and Scott (1985) treated as the natural habitat of covert resistance — the zone where a worker could once quietly decide how much extra effort to give without that decision being logged anywhere. Where output, location, and even tone

of communication are continuously tracked, the space in which quiet, undetected boundary-setting can occur does not disappear, but it narrows and shifts: employees increasingly resist through the residual discretion that measurement systems fail to capture, such as the quality of unmeasured collaborative behavior, rather than through the measured behaviors themselves. This suggests that quiet quitting, far from being a uniquely post-pandemic invention, may be one of the more visible current instances of a much older adaptive process — resistance migrating toward whatever margin of discretion still escapes organizational measurement.

Taken together, these three literatures — the young but rapidly maturing quiet quitting scholarship, the classical sociology of workplace resistance, and organizational behavior research on citizenship, commitment, and the demand-resource balance — converge on a shared picture. Quiet quitting looks less like an anomaly introduced by a uniquely disengaged generation and more like the latest empirical expression of a resistance mechanism sociologists have tracked, under different names, across a century of industrial and post-industrial work.

Quiet Quitting as Covert Organizational Resistance

Reading quiet quitting as covert resistance rather than as a motivational failure changes what the phenomenon is taken to communicate, and the remainder of this section works through what that reframing implies.

First, covert resistance is chosen precisely when open resistance is unavailable or too costly, and the contemporary labor market supplies exactly those conditions for a great many workers. Collective voice mechanisms have weakened across most sectors over the past four decades; grievance procedures are slow and asymmetric in the power they assume; and public complaint carries real career risk in a market where a damaged reputation is easy to acquire and hard to shed. Under those constraints, Scott's (1985) weak actors and today's disengaged employees face a structurally similar choice set: accept the terms as given, exit at real personal cost, voice a complaint that may not be heard and may be remembered against them, or scale back contribution quietly enough that it cannot easily be pinned on any single act of insubordination. Quiet quitting is legible, in this light, as the fourth option chosen by workers who correctly judge the first three to be worse. It is not an absence of grievance; it is a grievance expressed in the only register that felt survivable.

Second, the behavioral signature of quiet quitting matches resistance far better than it matches apathy or exhaustion alone. True indifference toward a job rarely produces the careful boundary work that quiet quitting research repeatedly documents — the precise stop at the edge of the formal job description, the continued completion of core duties, the outward maintenance of ordinary professionalism (Rinaldi & Pomarolli, 2025). Hodson (2001) noted the same precision in his ethnographic material decades earlier: workers defending their dignity typically know exactly how far they can pull back without triggering formal sanction, and they calibrate their effort to that line with considerable skill. That calibration is cognitively demanding and socially risky to sustain; it is not the behavior of someone who has stopped caring about their job, but arguably of someone who still cares enough to protect themselves from being asked to give more than they judge fair.

Third, the timing and demographic concentration of the quiet quitting discourse are themselves consistent with a resistance account. The label surged in the immediate aftermath of a pandemic that had, for many workers, made the imbalance between demands and resources unusually visible: the same jobs, often performed under greater strain, for the same or diminished reward, while employers publicly praised resilience rather than adjusting the terms of exchange (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Toska et al. (2025) and Rinaldi and Pomarolli (2025) both locate quiet quitting most heavily among healthcare staff who had absorbed exactly this kind of unreciprocated intensification. A purely motivational account

struggles to explain why disengagement clustered so tightly around the workers who had, if anything, been asked to demonstrate the most discretionary effort during the crisis; a resistance account predicts precisely that clustering, since those are the workers whose sense of exchange had been most visibly violated.

Fourth, treating quiet quitting as resistance rather than deficiency has direct implications for how organizations might respond, and the two responses point in opposite directions. A deficiency framing invites individual-level fixes: performance coaching, engagement surveys, wellness programming, exhortations to find purpose in the work. A resistance framing invites structural questions instead: which unrewarded citizenship behaviors has the organization come to depend on as though they were contractual; where has the ratio of demands to resources drifted furthest out of balance (Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2014); and which employees have the least legitimate channel available for raising a grievance before they resort to a silent one. Fan et al. (2023) and Spanouli and Hofmans (2016) point toward the same lever: because organizational citizenship and its withdrawal sit on a single continuum, the more sustainable fix is to reduce reliance on uncompensated citizenship rather than to search for ways to extract it more effectively despite the imbalance that produced its withdrawal in the first place.

A caveat has to be entered here, because the argument so far has moved faster than the evidence strictly allows. The empirical studies cited above — Patel et al. (2025), Toska et al. (2025), Boy and Sürmeli (2023) — measure quiet quitting's **correlation** with perceived unfairness; none of them measure intent to resist directly, and none can rule out that the same correlation reflects exhaustion or disillusionment rather than a deliberate act of boundary-setting. The resistance reading offered here is an interpretation of that correlational pattern in light of Hodson's (2001) and Scott's (1985) qualitative accounts of deliberate, calibrated withdrawal, not a finding independently established by the quantitative quiet quitting literature itself. The two accounts — quiet quitting as resistance, quiet quitting as depletion — are not mutually exclusive, and the existing survey instruments were not designed to separate them. That separation is a task for future research, flagged again in the concluding section, and the argument advanced here should be read as a plausible and theoretically grounded interpretation rather than as a demonstrated causal mechanism.

This is not an argument that every employer grievance behind quiet quitting is objectively justified, nor that every employee who reports reduced effort is engaged in a coherent act of resistance rather than simple disengagement. The two states can be difficult to tell apart from the outside, and they likely coexist within the same workforce and sometimes within the same person over time. What the resistance framing does is shift the evidentiary burden: rather than assuming disengagement reflects a problem located inside the employee, it asks organizations to first rule out that the disengagement reflects an accurate reading of an unbalanced exchange. Given how consistently the empirical literature ties quiet quitting to perceived unfairness rather than to low ability or low intelligence about the job (Patel et al., 2025; Toska et al., 2025), that burden seems reasonable to place on the side of the organization rather than the individual.

CONCLUSIONS

Quiet quitting arrived in public conversation as a slang term for a supposedly new kind of worker apathy. Read through the sociology of workplace resistance and through mid-century exchange theory, it looks considerably less new. The precise boundary-setting, the retained capacity for core-task performance, the concentration among workers whose discretionary effort had gone least rewarded, and the historical moment of its emergence all point toward the same conclusion: a meaningful share of what organizations now label quiet quitting is better understood as covert resistance, chosen because the available alternatives — exit, open voice, or continued unreciprocated compliance — were each judged too costly.

This reframing carries a practical implication that is easy to state and harder to act on. If quiet quitting communicates a felt imbalance between demands and resources, or between contribution and reward, then interventions aimed only at restoring individual motivation are unlikely to hold, because they leave the underlying imbalance untouched. Interventions aimed at the imbalance itself — clarifying which extra-role contributions are genuinely voluntary, ensuring that citizenship behavior is recognized rather than assumed, and creating lower-cost channels for legitimate grievance — address the condition that the resistance account identifies as causal rather than the symptom that happens to be visible to management.

None of this settles the debate. It offers a framework, grounded in a century of resistance scholarship, for taking quiet quitting seriously as communication rather than dismissing it as a lapse in character.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As a reflection article, this work synthesizes and interprets existing literature rather than presenting new primary data, and its central claim — that a meaningful share of reported quiet quitting functions as resistance rather than apathy — is therefore a theoretical proposition awaiting direct empirical test. The quiet quitting literature reviewed here is also heavily concentrated in healthcare settings, which may exaggerate the role of chronic understaffing and emotional labor relative to other sectors, and much of the resistance literature it is placed alongside predates the platform-mediated, algorithmically monitored workplaces that now shape a large share of employment. Future research could usefully test the resistance hypothesis directly, for instance by comparing quiet quitting scores against independent measures of perceived exchange fairness and available voice mechanisms, or by tracking whether employees who quiet quit re-engage once the terms of the exchange visibly improve — a pattern the resistance account predicts and a pure-burnout account does not.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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