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QUIET QUITTING AS A MULTILEVEL ADAPTIVE WITHDRAWAL PROCESS: AN INTEGRATED CONCEPTUAL MODEL

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Purpose: The aim of this paper is to develop an integrated multilevel conceptual model explaining Quiet Quitting by synthesizing seven theoretical clusters and identifying the mechanisms through which structural, organizational, psychological, relational, and social factors contribute to employee withdrawal.
Design/methodology/approach: This conceptual paper applies a theory synthesis and meta-integrative approach to integrate insights from organizational behaviour, human resource management, and employee withdrawal literature. Seven theoretical clusters are synthesized into a unified multilevel explanatory framework.
Findings: The study proposes an integrated model suggesting that Quiet Quitting emerges through the interaction of structural antecedents, organizational relationships, psychological mechanisms, social dynamics, and withdrawal trajectories. The model conceptualizes Quiet Quitting as a multilevel adaptive withdrawal process rather than a simple motivational deficit.
Practical implications: The model highlights the importance of addressing workload, organizational fairness, leadership quality, autonomy, resource availability, and psychological safety as key factors influencing Quiet Quitting.
Social implications: The study contributes to understanding how contemporary work environments influence employee well-being, work–life boundaries, and sustainable employment relationships.
Originality/value: The paper integrates seven theoretical perspectives into a coherent multilevel framework and proposes a novel conceptualization of Quiet Quitting as an adaptive withdrawal process.
Keywords: quiet quitting, Integrated Conceptual Model Explaining Quiet Quitting.
Category of the paper: conceptual paper.

1. Introduction

Quiet Quitting (QQ) has recently become one of the most widely discussed phenomena in contemporary organizational behaviour and human resource management. The concept gained substantial public attention through professional networks and social media discussions; however, the underlying phenomenon reflects long-established patterns of employee psychological withdrawal, reduced discretionary effort, and declining attachment to work. Unlike traditional withdrawal behaviours, such as absenteeism or voluntary turnover, Quiet Quitting describes a situation in which employees continue to perform their formally required duties while intentionally limiting additional contributions that exceed contractual expectations (Formica, Sfodera, 2022; Galanis et al., 2023; Patel et al., 2025; Bernuzzi et al., 2025). Therefore, QQ represents a specific form of adaptive withdrawal located between full engagement and more advanced forms of organizational disengagement.

The increasing interest in QQ reflects broader transformations affecting contemporary workplaces, including work intensification, expectations of permanent availability, blurred work–life boundaries, growing emotional demands, and changing employee expectations regarding fairness, autonomy, recognition, and organizational support. Contemporary employees increasingly evaluate not only economic rewards but also the quality of organizational relationships, leadership practices, opportunities for development, psychological safety, and alignment between personal and organizational values. When these expectations are persistently unmet, employees may reduce discretionary involvement as a strategy of resource protection, boundary regulation, and adaptation to unfavourable organizational conditions.

Despite growing academic interest, Quiet Quitting remains a theoretically underdeveloped and fragmented construct. Existing explanations frequently analyse QQ through individual theoretical perspectives, emphasizing selected mechanisms such as burnout, reduced motivation, organizational injustice, psychological contract violation, work alienation, or employee resistance. Although these approaches provide important insights, they generally explain only particular aspects of the phenomenon and do not sufficiently capture how multiple mechanisms interact across different levels of analysis. In particular, existing research lacks an integrative explanation of how structural conditions, organizational relationships, psychological processes, social dynamics, and withdrawal trajectories jointly contribute to the emergence and development of QQ.

Although QQ shares theoretical foundations with established concepts such as organizational withdrawal, employee disengagement, psychological withdrawal, reduced organizational citizenship behaviour, and turnover processes (Berry et al., 2012; Lowery et al., 2021; Patel et al., 2025), it cannot be fully explained by any single existing framework. The distinctive feature of QQ lies in the simultaneous preservation of formal role performance and reduction of discretionary effort. Thus, QQ should not be treated as an entirely new behavioural phenomenon, but rather as a contemporary manifestation of multiple established withdrawal mechanisms converging within modern work environments.

Despite the growing body of literature on QQ, existing studies remain fragmented and largely theory-specific. To the best of the author's knowledge, no previous study has proposed an integrated multilevel conceptual model that systematically synthesizes the major theoretical explanations of Quiet Quitting within a single explanatory framework. Consequently, there remains a need for a model that explains how structural, organizational, social, and psychological mechanisms interact to produce Quiet Quitting behaviours.

Previous research demonstrates that employee withdrawal develops through cumulative interactions between individual experiences and organizational conditions rather than through a single causal factor. Accordingly, QQ may emerge from the accumulation of excessive job demands, insufficient resources, unmet psychological needs, weakened reciprocity, perceived injustice, negative cognitive and emotional evaluations, social normalization of withdrawal behaviours, progressive disengagement processes, and structural conditions associated with power asymmetry and unsustainable work cultures. These mechanisms operate simultaneously at micro-, meso-, and macro-organizational levels, creating a need for a multilevel theoretical framework capable of explaining their interrelationships.

To address this research gap, this paper develops an Integrated Multilevel Conceptual Model of Quiet Quitting by synthesizing seven theoretical clusters identified by Zwiech (2026). The proposed model explains QQ as a multilevel adaptive withdrawal process emerging from the interaction between structural conditions, organizational relationships, psychological mechanisms, social processes, and behavioural withdrawal trajectories. Rather than conceptualizing QQ as an individual motivational deficit or employee attitude problem, the model positions QQ as a dynamic organizational phenomenon resulting from the interaction between employees and their work environments.

The article makes several theoretical contributions. First, it integrates previously fragmented explanations of QQ into a coherent multilevel conceptual framework combining structural, organizational, relational, psychological, social, and behavioural perspectives. Second, it explains the mechanisms through which external organizational conditions are transformed into individual withdrawal behaviours by identifying psychological and social processes as critical explanatory pathways. Third, it advances the understanding of QQ by conceptualizing it as an adaptive form of withdrawal that may simultaneously represent resource protection, boundary regulation, and resistance to unsustainable organizational

expectations. Finally, the model provides theoretically derived propositions that establish an agenda for future empirical research.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, the seven theoretical clusters (Zwiech, 2026) underlying the proposed framework are presented. Second, these clusters are integrated into a multilevel conceptual model explaining the emergence and development of QQ. Third, theoretical propositions and directions for future empirical validation are formulated. Finally, the theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations, and future research directions are discussed.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Quiet Quitting: Seven Conceptual Clusters

The proposed conceptual model of QQ is based on the assumption that this phenomenon is a multidimensional process of psychological, behavioral, emotional, and relational withdrawal resulting from the interaction of individual, organizational, and structural factors. The seven theoretical clusters proposed by Zwiech (2026) represent various mechanisms leading to the reduction of discretionary effort while maintaining the formal fulfillment of professional responsibilities.

Zwiech (2026) identified the following seven clusters:

1. The Needs–Resources–Requirements Cluster (Cluster 1).
2. The Social Exchange, Reciprocity, and Fairness Cluster (Cluster 2).
3. The Motivation and Self-Regulation Cluster (Cluster 3).
4. The Cognitive Appraisal and Interpretation Cluster (Cluster 4).
5. The Social and Relational Transmission Cluster (Cluster 5).
6. The Withdrawal Process and Trajectory Cluster (Cluster 6)
7. The Structural and Anti-Work Cluster (Cluster 7).

The first cluster focuses on the relationship between job demands, available resources, and the ability to meet an employee's basic needs. QQ emerges when chronic workload, emotional pressure, and excessive demands exceed available organizational and personal resources, which is consistent with the JD-R and COR perspectives on demand-resource imbalance and resource depletion (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker, Demerouti, 2017; Hobfoll, 2011; Galanis et al., 2025; Georgiadou et al., 2025; Yang, Lin, 2024). Employees limit extra-role involvement as a mechanism for protecting their mental, emotional, and cognitive energy. In this cluster, QQ is interpreted as a strategy for preserving resources and adapting to a long-term imbalance between individual demands and capabilities. This mechanism involves resource depletion, frustration of unmet developmental and relational needs, and limiting the investment of additional effort when regeneration is impossible.

The second cluster addresses the quality of the relationship between the employee and the organization. QQ develops when employees experience a violation of reciprocity, unmet expectations, a lack of fairness, or a mismatch between individual and organizational values (Rousseau, 1995; Adams, 1963, 1965; Greenberg, 1987; Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown et al., 2023; Gray et al., 2025; Patel et al., 2025; Zwiech, 2024a, 2024b). In this approach, employees constantly evaluate the exchange relationship: their level of contribution in relation to the benefits, support, recognition, and treatment they receive. If the relationship is perceived as unfair or unbalanced, employees reduce additional effort as a means of restoring balance. QQ is therefore a reaction to the disruption of the psychological contract, weakening of trust and the feeling that the organization does not reciprocate the employee's commitment.

The third cluster explains QQ through motivational processes and individual behavioral regulation. Employees reduce their engagement when they no longer perceive the importance, value, or profitability of additional effort. QQ here results from a decline in intrinsic motivation, frustration of the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and a rational assessment of the costs and benefits associated with further investment in work (Deci, Ryan, 2000; Deci et al., 2017; Sop, 2025; Patel et al., 2025; Bordoloi et al., 2025). Employees self-regulate by shifting from behaviors that exceed formal requirements to minimal performance. This cluster emphasizes that QQ does not mean complete inaction, but rather a conscious reduction of investment to a level justified by a formal contract.

The fourth cluster indicates that QQ depends not only on objective working conditions but also on the employee's interpretation of them. The same organizational conditions can lead to different reactions depending on the individual's assessment of the situation. The QQ process begins with the cognitive interpretation of work events as unfair, threatening, excessively burdensome, or uncontrollable, which is consistent with cognitive appraisal theory, affective events theory, and attribution-based explanations of workplace responses (Lazarus, 1966, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c; Weiss, Cropanzano, 1996; Muschetto, Siegel, 2021; Alvina et al., 2026; Henry et al., 2025). These interpretations generate emotions such as frustration, disappointment, cynicism, or a sense of powerlessness, which then translate into withdrawal behavior. In the model, this cluster serves as a mediating mechanism between organizational experiences and employee behavior.

The fifth cluster views QQ as a social phenomenon that can spread across teams and organizations. The withdrawal of one employee can influence others through behavioral observation, emotional exchange, and the creation of new group norms, which reflects crossover and social contagion mechanisms in organizational networks (Cowan et al., 2011; Zagenczyk et al., 2020; Yu, Jiao, 2026; Patel et al., 2025). In environments characterized by high levels of stress, burnout, toxic leadership, or low trust, QQ can become socially accepted and reinforced behavior. This cluster demonstrates that QQ is not solely an individual employee decision but can be a process of collective adaptation to organizational conditions.

The sixth cluster views QQ as a stage in a broader process of employee withdrawal from the organization. QQ is not a sudden event but often occurs as an intermediate phase between full engagement and more advanced forms of withdrawal, such as neglect, absenteeism, turnover intentions, or organizational exit (Hirschman, 1970; Farrell, 1983; Turnley, Feldman, 1999; Berry et al., 2012; Kunasz, 2024; Othman et al., 2025). In this perspective, QQ can function as a transitional state or a stable level of limited engagement. The direction of further development depends on the organization's response: improving working conditions can halt the process, while a lack of change can lead to deepening distance and turnover.

Finally, the seventh cluster shifts the analysis of QQ to a structural level, suggesting that the phenomenon may stem from broader organizational inequalities, power asymmetries, and work cultures based on overexploitation. In this framework, QQ can be understood as a form of passive resistance, boundary-setting, or autonomy-restoring behaviour in response to toxic leadership, cultures of constant availability, and unrealistic organizational expectations (Ashforth, 1994; de Hoogh, Den Hartog, 2008; Gandini, 2019; Sinclair et al., 2025; Thakur, Srivastava, 2025; Walker, 2026). This cluster emphasizes that the sources of QQ do not always lie within the individual but can stem from systemic organizational problems.

3. Conceptual Definition of Quiet Quitting

Building on theoretical perspectives emphasizing resource depletion, psychological contract violation, reduced discretionary effort, cognitive-emotional appraisal, social transmission, and withdrawal progression (Demerouti et al., 2001; Hobfoll, 2011; Rousseau, 1995; Weiss, Cropanzano, 1996; Patel et al., 2025; Berry et al., 2012; Zwiech, 2026), the author defined Quiet Quitting as a **multilevel adaptive withdrawal process characterized by the intentional regulation of discretionary effort while maintaining formal organizational role performance**. This definition emphasizes the adaptive, processual, and multilevel nature of QQ and distinguishes it from related constructs such as disengagement, absenteeism, or turnover.

4. An Integrated Multilevel Conceptual Model of Quiet Quitting

The seven theoretical clusters identified by Zwiech (2026) collectively suggest that Quiet Quitting (QQ) should not be understood as a single-dimensional phenomenon, but rather as a multilevel, dynamic, and processual form of employee withdrawal emerging from the interaction of structural, organizational, relational, cognitive-emotional, motivational, and behavioural mechanisms.

The proposed meta-integrative framework assumes that QQ develops through interconnected causal layers operating across micro-, meso-, and macro-organizational levels. Each theoretical cluster captures a different analytical dimension of the same withdrawal process, and together they form a coherent explanatory architecture.

Table 1.
Integrated Multilevel Model of Quiet Quitting: Antecedents, Psychological Mechanisms, and Withdrawal Outcomes– author's proposal

Level of Analysis	**Theoretical Cluster**	**Core Mechanism**	**Mechanism of QQ Formation**	**Main Form of Withdrawal**	**Main Theories**
Level 1 – Structural and organizational antecedents					
Macro-organizational level	Structural and Anti-Work Cluster (Cluster 7)	Structural inequality, exploitation, toxic power relations	Employees perceive work as exploitative, coercive, psychologically unsafe, or morally unacceptable	Resistance-oriented withdrawal; boundary-setting; refusal of discretionary labour	Conflict Theory, Critical Theory, Anti-Work Theory, Despotic/Toxic Leadership Models
Meso-organizational level	Social Exchange, Reciprocity, and Fairness Cluster (Cluster 2)	Relational imbalance and reciprocity failure	Employees perceive psychological contract breach, unfairness, inequity, or value misfit	Reduction of effort to restore relational balance	PCT, SET, Equity Theory, Organizational Justice, P–O Fit
Meso-organizational level	Social and Relational Transmission Cluster (Cluster 5)	Social contagion and normalization of withdrawal	Withdrawal spreads through teams via emotional contagion, burnout crossover, and observational learning	Collective disengagement and normalization of minimal effort	Crossover Theory, Social Contagion Framework

Cont. table 1.

Level 2 – Psychological mechanisms					
Micro-psychological level	Needs–Resources–Requirements Cluster (Cluster 1)	Resource depletion and unmet psychological needs	Chronic demands exceed available resources and coping capacity	Defensive conservation of psychological and emotional resources	JD-R, COR, ERG
Micro-psychological level	Motivation and Self-Regulation Cluster (Cluster 3)	Motivational decline and behavioural self-regulation	Employees no longer perceive sufficient motivational, emotional, or instrumental benefits from extra-role effort	Strategic reduction of discretionary engagement	SDT, RCT, OCB–Withdrawal Continuum, SOR
Micro-psychological level	Cognitive Appraisal and Interpretation Cluster (Cluster 4)	Cognitive-emotional interpretation of work experiences	Employees interpret workplace conditions as threatening, unfair, uncontrollable, or emotionally harmful	Emotional withdrawal and cognitive disengagement	AT, AET, CAT
Level 3 – Withdrawal process and outcomes					
Behavioural-process level	Withdrawal Process and Trajectory Cluster (Cluster 6)	Progressive withdrawal trajectory	QQ develops as an intermediate stage between engagement and organizational exit	Stabilized passive withdrawal that may escalate into turnover	WPT, EVLN
Quiet Quitting					
Integrative Outcome	Quiet Quitting (QQ)	Multilevel adaptive withdrawal process	Interaction of structural, relational, motivational, emotional, cognitive, and social mechanisms	Reduced discretionary effort while maintaining formal role performance	Integrative conceptual model proposed by the author

Source: own study.

At the macro level, the Structural and Anti-Work Cluster identifies systemic organizational conditions such as exploitative work cultures, excessive performance pressure, toxic managerial ideologies, power asymmetries, and broader socio-economic transformations that create chronic strain and normalize overwork (Ashforth, 1994; Gandini, 2019; Sinclair et al., 2025; Thakur, Srivastava, 2025; Walker, 2026). These structural conditions form the environmental background within which QQ emerges. Toxic and despotic leadership additionally translate structural pressures into everyday organizational practices, reinforcing emotional exhaustion, weakened psychological safety, and perceptions of organizational injustice.

At the meso-organizational level, the Social Exchange, Reciprocity, and Fairness Cluster explains how employees evaluate the quality of their relationship with the organization. Psychological contract breaches, inequity, organizational injustice, weakened reciprocity, and person–organization misfit undermine trust and relational balance (Rousseau, 1995; Adams, 1963, 1965; Greenberg, 1987; Kristof-Brown et al., 2023; Gray et al., 2025). Simultaneously, the Social and Relational Transmission Cluster demonstrates that withdrawal is socially amplified through group norms, emotional contagion, burnout crossover, and observational learning. Consequently, QQ evolves not only as an individual reaction but also as a socially normalized collective adaptation within teams and organizational networks.

At the micro-psychological level, the Needs–Resources–Requirements Cluster and the Motivation and Self-Regulation Cluster explain the depletion of motivational and psychological capacities underlying QQ. Chronic demands, insufficient resources, unmet psychological needs, and unfavourable cost–benefit evaluations gradually reduce employees' willingness to invest discretionary effort (Demerouti et al., 2001; Hobfoll, 2011; Deci, Ryan, 2000; Deci et al., 2017; Sop, 2025). Employees strategically conserve energy, restore work–life boundaries, and minimize involvement when continued engagement no longer appears psychologically sustainable or personally rewarding.

The Cognitive Appraisal and Interpretation Cluster functions as the central psychological processing mechanism linking organizational conditions with behavioural outcomes. Employees cognitively interpret workplace experiences through attribution, appraisal, and emotional evaluation processes (Lazarus, 1966, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c; Weiss, Cropanzano, 1996; Muschetto, Siegel, 2021). Organizational injustice, toxic leadership, overload, or relational deterioration become psychologically consequential only after being interpreted as threatening, unfair, uncontrollable, or emotionally harmful. These appraisals generate emotional exhaustion, frustration, cynicism, and disengagement, which subsequently activate withdrawal behaviours.

Finally, the Withdrawal Process and Trajectory Cluster explains the temporal dynamics of QQ. QQ is conceptualized not as an isolated act, but as an intermediate stage within a broader withdrawal trajectory. Employees typically move progressively from emotional detachment and reduced discretionary effort toward stronger forms of withdrawal, such as neglect, absenteeism, turnover intentions, and organizational exit (Hirschman, 1970; Farrell, 1983; Turnley, Feldman, 1999; Berry et al., 2012). QQ therefore represents a relatively stable but transitional withdrawal state that may either persist or escalate depending on organizational responses and contextual conditions.

Taken together, the seven clusters form an integrated causal sequence:

1. Structural and organizational conditions generate chronic strain and relational imbalance.
2. Employees cognitively and emotionally interpret these conditions.
3. Psychological needs, resources, and motivational capacities deteriorate.
4. Withdrawal behaviours become socially reinforced and normalized.
5. QQ emerges as an adaptive, self-protective, and partially resistant form of reduced discretionary engagement.
6. Prolonged QQ may escalate into deeper withdrawal and eventual exit.

The integrative model therefore conceptualizes QQ as:

- simultaneously psychological, relational, social, behavioural, and structural,
- both adaptive and resistant in character,
- dynamic rather than static,
- embedded within broader organizational systems and power relations.

Importantly, the model suggests that no single theory sufficiently explains QQ independently. Instead, QQ emerges from the interaction between organizational structures, social environments, cognitive-emotional interpretations, motivational regulation, and progressive withdrawal mechanisms.

The proposed framework contributes to the literature in three major ways. First, it integrates previously fragmented theoretical explanations into a coherent multilevel structure. Second, it suggests how classical organizational theories converge around common withdrawal mechanisms despite originating from different disciplinary traditions. Third, it positions QQ as a systemic organizational phenomenon rather than merely an individual attitudinal problem or generational trend.

Conceptually, the model suggests that QQ should be understood as a multidimensional adaptive withdrawal phenomenon reflecting employees' attempts to preserve psychological resources, restore autonomy and reciprocity, protect well-being, and resist organizational conditions perceived as chronically unsustainable, unfair, or psychologically harmful.

Figure 1 presents the proposed conceptual model developed by the author.

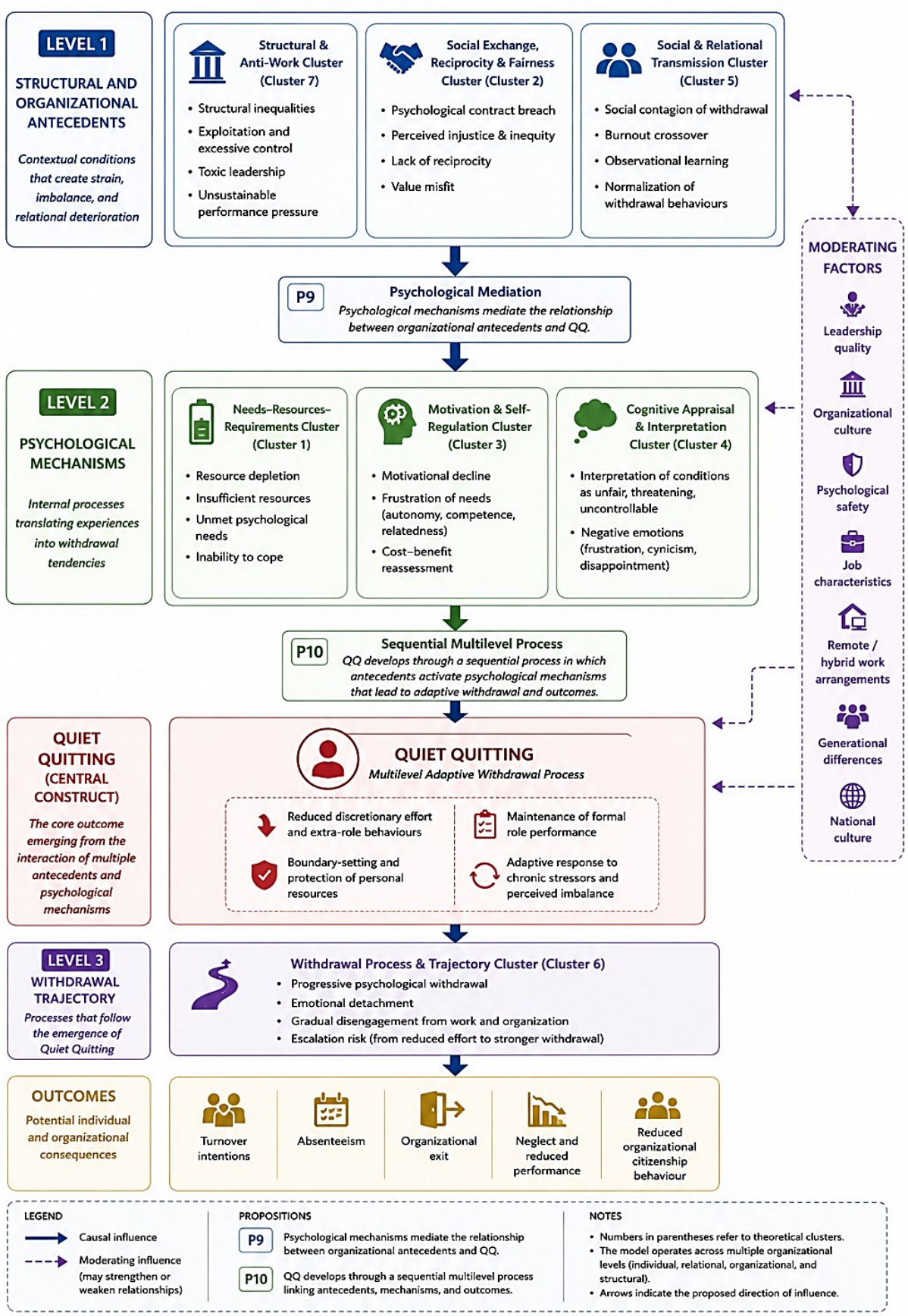


Figure 1. An Integrated Conceptual Model Explaining Quiet Quitting – author's proposal.

Source: own study using AI for visualization.

5. Theoretical Propositions and Directions for Future Empirical Research

The proposed Integrated Conceptual Model Explaining Quiet Quitting provides a theoretical framework for understanding QQ as a multilevel and dynamic withdrawal process. Although the model integrates insights from various theoretical perspectives, its conceptual assumptions require empirical validation. Based on the relationships identified among the seven theoretical clusters, several research propositions are formulated to guide future empirical investigations.

The first proposition concerns the relationship between job demands, available resources, and employees' psychological capacity to maintain discretionary effort. This proposition is grounded in JD-R and COR perspectives, which link excessive job demands, insufficient resources, and resource loss to burnout, disengagement, and withdrawal (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker, Demerouti, 2017; Hobfoll, 2011; Galanis et al., 2025). The Needs–Resources–Requirements Cluster suggests that QQ emerges when employees experience a persistent imbalance between work-related demands and available personal or organizational resources. Chronic workload, emotional demands, insufficient recovery opportunities, and limited organizational support may gradually reduce employees' willingness to invest additional effort beyond formal job requirements. In this perspective, reducing discretionary involvement represents a resource conservation strategy aimed at protecting psychological and emotional energy. Therefore:

Proposition 1. Higher levels of job demands combined with insufficient personal and organizational resources increase the likelihood of Quiet Quitting.

The second proposition refers to the role of reciprocity, fairness, and the quality of the employee–organization relationship. According to Social Exchange Theory, employees evaluate their relationship with organizations through perceived balance between contributions and received outcomes. When employees perceive psychological contract breach, organizational injustice, lack of recognition, or insufficient reciprocity, they may intentionally reduce extra-role behaviours in order to restore perceived balance (Rousseau, 1995; Adams 1963, 1965; Greenberg, 1987; Gray et al., 2025; Patel et al., 2025). QQ can therefore be interpreted as a behavioural response to a deteriorating exchange relationship rather than merely as a decline in employee motivation. Thus:

Proposition 2. Perceived organizational injustice, psychological contract breach, and reduced reciprocity positively influence employees' tendency to engage in Quiet Quitting.

The third proposition focuses on motivational processes underlying QQ. The Motivation and Self-Regulation Cluster indicates that employees continuously evaluate whether additional effort is meaningful, valuable, and personally beneficial. When work no longer satisfies fundamental psychological needs, including autonomy, competence, and relatedness, employees may reduce their investment in discretionary activities (Deci, Ryan, 2000; Deci

et al., 2017; Sop, 2025). QQ represents a form of behavioural self-regulation through which employees adjust their effort to the minimum level required by their formal role. Accordingly:

Proposition 3. Declining intrinsic motivation and frustration of psychological needs increase the transition from high work engagement to Quiet Quitting.

The fourth proposition addresses the mediating role of cognitive and emotional interpretation processes (Lazarus, 1966, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c; Weiss, Cropanzano, 1996; Muschetto, Siegel, 2021). The Cognitive Appraisal and Interpretation Cluster assumes that organizational conditions do not directly translate into withdrawal behaviours. Instead, employees interpret workplace experiences through individual cognitive appraisal processes. Situations such as excessive workload, ineffective leadership, or perceived unfairness become predictors of QQ when employees perceive them as threatening, uncontrollable, unjust, or psychologically harmful. These interpretations generate emotional responses, including frustration, disappointment, cynicism, and detachment, which facilitate withdrawal behaviours. Therefore:

Proposition 4. Cognitive and emotional appraisal processes mediate the relationship between negative workplace experiences and Quiet Quitting.

The fifth proposition concerns the social dimension of QQ (Cowan et al., 2011; Zagenczyk et al., 2020; Yu, Jiao, 2026). The Social and Relational Transmission Cluster suggests that withdrawal behaviours may extend beyond individual experiences and become socially reinforced within teams. Employees observe colleagues' behaviours, exchange emotional experiences, and collectively develop interpretations of organizational reality. In workplaces characterized by high stress, low trust, weak leadership, or widespread dissatisfaction, QQ may become normalized as an acceptable and rational response. Consequently:

Proposition 5. Social influence, emotional contagion, and team-level norms strengthen the development and normalization of Quiet Quitting behaviours.

The sixth proposition expands the explanation of QQ beyond individual and relational factors by incorporating structural organizational conditions. The Structural and Anti-Work Cluster suggests that QQ may emerge as a response to broader organizational systems characterized by excessive performance expectations, permanent availability requirements, power asymmetries, and exploitative work cultures (Gandini, 2019; Sinclair et al., 2025; Walker, 2026; Thakur, Srivastava, 2025). In such contexts, reduced discretionary effort may represent an adaptive mechanism through which employees establish boundaries and regain a sense of control over their work and personal resources. Hence:

Proposition 6. Structural organizational conditions, including exploitative work cultures, excessive availability expectations, and power asymmetries, positively influence the emergence of Quiet Quitting.

The seventh proposition refers to the temporal character of QQ. The Withdrawal Process and Trajectory Cluster conceptualizes QQ as a stage within a broader process of employee withdrawal rather than as an isolated behavioural outcome (Berry et al., 2012; Hirschman, 1970;

Farrell, 1983; Turnley, Feldman, 1999; Othman et al., 2025). Employees may gradually move from emotional detachment and reduced discretionary effort toward more advanced forms of withdrawal, including absenteeism, reduced performance, turnover intentions, and organizational exit. However, QQ may also remain a relatively stable state if employees adapt to organizational conditions without leaving the organization. Therefore:

Proposition 7. Quiet Quitting represents an intermediate stage in the employee withdrawal trajectory and may predict subsequent withdrawal outcomes, including turnover intentions and organizational exit.

The eighth proposition concerns organizational interventions aimed at preventing or reducing QQ. Since the proposed model conceptualizes QQ as a phenomenon resulting from multiple interacting mechanisms, effective interventions should address not only individual motivation but also broader organizational conditions. Improving workload management, strengthening leadership quality, increasing fairness and transparency, supporting autonomy, and enhancing psychological safety may reduce the mechanisms that contribute to withdrawal (Hobfoll, 2011; Deci, Ryan, 2000; Greenberg, 1987; de Hoogh, Den Hartog, 2008). Thus:

Proposition 8. Perceived organizational support, autonomy, fairness, leadership quality, and psychological safety are negatively associated with employees' propensity to engage in Quiet Quitting.

The ninth proposition integrates the psychological mechanisms identified in the Needs–Resources–Requirements Cluster, the Motivation and Self-Regulation Cluster, and the Cognitive Appraisal and Interpretation Cluster. This proposition integrates JD-R, COR, SDT, CAT, and AET assumptions by positioning resource depletion, motivational decline, and cognitive-emotional appraisal as mediating mechanisms between organizational conditions and withdrawal behaviour (Demerouti et al., 2001; Hobfoll, 2011; Deci, Ryan, 2000; Lazarus, 1991a; Weiss, Cropanzano, 1996). The proposed model assumes that organizational and structural conditions do not directly and automatically result in QQ. Instead, their influence is transmitted through employees' psychological experiences, including resource depletion, motivational decline, unmet psychological needs, and cognitive-emotional interpretations of workplace conditions. From this perspective, organizational demands, perceived injustice, ineffective leadership, and exploitative work practices become predictors of QQ only when employees experience these conditions as personally significant and psychologically consequential. Resource exhaustion reduces employees' capacity to maintain additional effort, motivational decline weakens the willingness to engage in extra-role behaviours, while negative cognitive and emotional appraisals transform workplace experiences into withdrawal-oriented responses. Therefore, psychological mechanisms represent a critical explanatory pathway through which external organizational conditions are translated into individual withdrawal behaviour. Therefore:

Proposition 9. Psychological mechanisms, including resource depletion, motivational decline, and cognitive-emotional appraisal, mediate the relationship between organizational conditions and Quiet Quitting behaviour.

The tenth proposition reflects the central assumption of the integrated model that QQ represents a dynamic and sequential withdrawal process rather than an isolated behavioural reaction. This proposition extends withdrawal progression and EVLN perspectives by conceptualizing QQ as a sequential multilevel process in which antecedents activate psychological mechanisms and may ultimately lead to stronger withdrawal outcomes (Turnley, Feldman, 1999; Berry et al., 2012; Patel et al., 2025; Zwiech, 2026).The model proposes that QQ develops through interactions between multiple levels of analysis, beginning with broader structural and organizational conditions, progressing through relational and psychological mechanisms, and ultimately resulting in observable withdrawal behaviours. At the macro and meso levels, organizational structures, work cultures, leadership practices, perceived fairness, and social norms create conditions that shape employees' experiences of work. These conditions influence individual-level processes, including resource evaluation, motivation regulation, cognitive appraisal, and emotional responses. When negative experiences accumulate and remain unresolved, employees gradually reduce discretionary involvement while maintaining formal role performance. Over time, this stabilized form of withdrawal may either remain as a long-term adaptation strategy or develop into more advanced forms of withdrawal, including turnover intentions, absenteeism, or organizational exit. This proposition emphasizes that QQ should be understood as the outcome of an interconnected process rather than the consequence of a single factor. The integrated model therefore assumes a developmental sequence in which structural and organizational antecedents activate psychological mechanisms, which subsequently generate behavioural withdrawal outcomes. Thus:

Proposition 10. Quiet Quitting develops through a sequential multilevel process in which structural and organizational conditions influence psychological mechanisms, which subsequently generate behavioural withdrawal and may lead to further withdrawal outcomes.

Taken together, these propositions provide a research agenda for future empirical studies examining the antecedents, mechanisms, and consequences of Quiet Quitting. The proposed framework assumes that QQ should be investigated through multilevel research designs integrating individual psychological processes, interpersonal dynamics, organizational practices, and structural conditions. Future studies may test whether the proposed clusters function as direct predictors, mediators, moderators, or sequential stages within the development of QQ. Collectively, the propositions suggest that Quiet Quitting is best conceptualized as a multistage process in which organizational and structural antecedents influence withdrawal behaviour indirectly through psychological and social mechanisms.

Future research should also investigate potential moderating variables that may strengthen or weaken the relationships proposed in the model. Relevant moderators may include organizational culture, leadership style, occupational characteristics, remote and hybrid work arrangements, tenure, generational differences, and national cultural context. Examining these factors may provide a more nuanced understanding of the conditions under which Quiet Quitting emerges and develops. The proposed model assumes causal relationships among theoretical mechanisms; however, alternative configurations, reciprocal effects, and feedback loops may also exist and require empirical examination.

6. Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the emerging Quiet Quitting literature in several important ways.

First, it conceptualizes Quiet Quitting as a multilevel adaptive withdrawal process rather than as a simple motivational deficit or employee attitude problem.

Second, it integrates seven previously fragmented theoretical clusters into a coherent explanatory framework linking structural antecedents, organizational relationships, psychological mechanisms, social dynamics, and withdrawal outcomes.

Third, the study proposes a novel conceptual definition of Quiet Quitting that emphasizes the intentional regulation of discretionary effort while maintaining formal role performance.

Fourth, the paper develops ten theoretically grounded propositions that provide a foundation for future empirical research and theory testing.

Fifth, the study develops a theoretically grounded typology of seven explanatory clusters that may serve as a new organizing framework for future Quiet Quitting research.

Finally, the model advances withdrawal research by demonstrating how multiple theoretical traditions converge in explaining the emergence and development of Quiet Quitting.

7. Conclusions

This paper develops and theoretically integrates an Integrated Multilevel Conceptual Model of Quiet Quitting based on seven complementary theoretical clusters.

The proposed framework addresses the theoretical fragmentation that currently characterizes the QQ literature and offers a comprehensive explanation of the mechanisms through which reduced discretionary effort emerges and develops.

The model suggests that QQ should not be understood as a simple lack of motivation or commitment. Rather, it represents a multilevel adaptive withdrawal process arising from the interaction of structural conditions, organizational relationships, psychological experiences, social influences, and withdrawal trajectories. This interpretation is consistent with theories emphasizing resource conservation, reciprocity and fairness, cognitive-emotional appraisal, and withdrawal progression (Hobfoll, 2011; Rousseau, 1995; Adams, 1965; Weiss, Cropanzano, 1996; Berry et al., 2012). In this perspective, QQ reflects employees' attempts to preserve resources, restore balance, maintain autonomy, and adapt to organizational environments perceived as unsustainable, unfair, or psychologically demanding.

The primary contribution of the study is the integration of previously disconnected theoretical explanations into a coherent multilevel framework. By linking structural antecedents, psychological mechanisms, and behavioural outcomes, the model demonstrates that no single theory is sufficient to explain QQ independently. Instead, the phenomenon emerges through the cumulative influence of multiple interrelated processes operating across organizational levels.

From a practical perspective, the model suggests that organizations seeking to reduce QQ should address not only employee motivation but also broader organizational conditions, including workload, leadership quality, reciprocity, fairness, resource availability, and psychological safety. Consequently, QQ may be interpreted as an early indicator of deeper organizational challenges rather than merely an employee-level problem.

The study also establishes a foundation for future empirical research. The theoretical propositions derived from the model provide opportunities to test the relationships among organizational conditions, psychological processes, social dynamics, and withdrawal outcomes. Future studies should validate the proposed framework across different organizational and cultural contexts and examine the relative importance of the mechanisms identified in the model.

Although conceptual in nature, the proposed framework advances the understanding of Quiet Quitting by positioning it as a multidimensional and dynamic form of employee withdrawal. By integrating diverse theoretical perspectives, the model contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary workplace disengagement and provides a basis for future theory development and empirical investigation. More broadly, the model contributes to the emerging debate on sustainable employment relationships by explaining how employees adapt to organizational environments that are perceived as chronically demanding, inequitable, or psychologically unsustainable.

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