



## Introduction

Recently, the term ‘quiet quitting’ emerged as cultural terminology for the emerging trend of employee disengagement: doing just the minimum required by your job without quitting or expressing discontent. Though the phrase became popular through social media, the behaviors are already well-documented within organizational scholarship through categories such as work withdrawal, job disengagement, organizational silence, and psychological contract violation (Campton et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the shift in the term heralds more than a lexical fashion. It indicates a more profound organizational dilemma: a physically present but psychologically absent workforce is increasingly common in younger generations within fast-changing working cultures (Xueyun et al., 2023). Quiet quitting is more than a category of behavior; this concept is a problematization of shifting work expectations and, as such, deserves theoretical attention.

The psychological contract is at the phenomenon’s core – the unstated, unwritten agreement between employee and employer regarding reciprocal obligations and expectations (Rousseau, 1989). Psychological Contract Theory (PCT) describes how broken expectations, particularly in poorly structured environments, result in emotional withdrawal and disengagement (Rousseau, 1995). Such assumptions, however, were built up within structured corporate environments where communication and role definition are somewhat formalized. Startup environments are usually fluid environments where job definition is undefined, expectations are informal and emotional labor exists – conditions that make the psychological contract more volatile and susceptible to misalignment (Georgiadou et al., 2025).

These structural nuances are also compounded in high power-distance cultures such as Nepal, where expressions of discontent can be suppressed. Such cultures further weaken the psychological contract as employees tend to internalize broken promises rather than expressing concerns through voice behaviors, perpetuating behaviors such as quiet quitting (Ochis, 2024). Hofstede’s models still apply and demonstrate how high power distance and collectivism discourage voice behaviors, while low individualism promotes conformity (Hofstede, 2001).

Gen Z further complicates the situation. Globally, Gen Z is defined by its desire for autonomy, flexibility, mental health, and purposeful work (Krasulja & Vasiljević-Blagojević, 2024). Such values are typically presented as universal ones, but their expression is filtered through local norms. In Nepal, where economic insecurity, respect for hierarchy, and avoidance of conflict are embedded, Gen Z workers might feel unable, or unwilling, to speak out freely. Instead, they might choose silent withdrawal, but not as resistance, rather as adaptive self-defence in the constricted organizational and social settings. Based on cultural standards, Hofstede’s framework still holds value and illustrates how high power distance and collectivism can discourage institutional voice behavior, and low individualism promotes conformity (Xueyun et al., 2023).

These are especially evident in Nepal’s emergent tech startup scene, where flat hierarchies and innovation are promised alongside purposeful work. However, in reality, numerous startups experience unclear job roles with excessive workloads and poorly developed HR practices (Xueyun et al., 2023). Symbolic empowerment is provided without much structural support (Ochis, 2024). This contradiction between startup expectations and workplace conditions can foster implicit disappointment in workers, particularly Gen Z workers, whose expectations are greatly influenced by digital exposure to international work cultures (Nguyen & Vu, 2025). Failing to fulfil the implicit psychological contract – via recognition, learning, or fairness – youth workers can remain physically present but internally and intellectually disengage (Corbin & Flenady, 2024).

Despite their salience, empirical work is scarce in non-corporate and non-Western settings. Current work on quiet quitting is descriptive, Western-focused, and relies heavily on survey research (Harris, 2025). Most neglect the interaction of organizational form, cultural norms, and generational identity (Sarwar et al., 2024). Further, the position of startups as a psychologically insecure workspace has garnered sparse academic attention despite being disproportionately filled with early-career professionals (Ochis, 2024). At best, no qualitative study focusing on Gen Z workers’ construction, interpretation, and negotiation of disengagement in tech startups exists to our

knowledge in Nepal alone – a significant omission considering the demographic and economic changes framing the digital economy in the nation.

This research overcomes this limitation by exploring how Gen Z workers in Nepali startup companies experience and realize quiet quitting using the Psychological Contract Theory as a solid but problematized framework. Instead of supposing the latter wholly accounts for disengagement in the startup context, this research inquires if its presuppositions apply to a context characterized by its informality, collectivist cultures, and generational change.

The study is based on the following research questions:

- How do Gen Z workers in Nepali tech firms understand and define quiet quitting in their work context?
- What psychological contract expectations are created in startup cultures, and how are they thought to be violated?
- How do cultural norms and organizational ambiguity mediate the experience and expression of Gen Z employee disengagement?

By locating the everyday lives of young professionals dealing with unclear roles and cultural expectations at their center, this research adds depth and context sensitivity to our understanding of quitting. Theoretically, it problematizes the exportability of Psychological Contract Theory to startup and collectivist environments and proposes potential extensions or elaborations. Empirically, it presents scarce qualitative evidence about Gen Z disengagement in a non-Western startup ecosystem. Practically, the research will assist startup leaders and HR professionals in crafting more sustainable, expectations-based workspaces to retain and engage young people, not through benefits but through clarity, reciprocity, and trust.

Finally, this research does more than chart this behavioral trend; it examines how young professionals across weak reform environments manage the emotional landscape of disappointed expectations and thereby sheds more light broadly on the future of work across emerging economies.

## Literature Review

### Introduction

The ‘quiet quitting’ concept has rapidly shifted from social media discussion to organizational and management study. While broadly reported across Western media outlets, it remains significantly theorized or examined in contextually diverse environments (Hamouche et al., 2023). Quiet quitting being misinterpreted as laziness or passive resistance is a recalibration of employee effort reflecting perceived over-and misalignment between personal and organizational expectations and actualities (Nguyen & Vu, 2025).

Though this experience intersects with developed organizational behavior measures such as work withdrawal, job disengagement, and psychological contract violation, it resists classification (Karrani et al., 2024). It seems to work at cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels while still appearing to comply. Perhaps most importantly, it is increasingly viewed as a strategic, generationally and culturally modulated behavior, particularly among younger workers in insecure or informal work contexts (Georgiadou et al., 2025). This literature examines quiet quitting across three intertwined areas: the conceptual development of disengagement, the use and limitations of Psychological Contract Theory, and the contextual mediation of generation, culture, and startup organizational form.

### Quiet Quitting: Behavior, Narrative, or Cultural Boundary-Setting?

Conceptually, quiet quitting has been treated as a synonym for disengagement, yet this conflation is problematic. Traditional disengagement literature emphasizes dysfunctional withdrawal behaviors (e.g., absenteeism, reduced productivity) or affective detachment (Hamouche et al., 2023). In contrast, quiet quitting involves intentional boundary enforcement, where employees fulfil their job requirements but withdraw from non-contractual obligations, particularly extra-role behaviors, such as organizational citizenship or emotional labor (Nguyen & Vu, 2025).

This reframing moves beyond behavioral indicators to address motivational and

relational dimensions. Quiet quitting, especially among Generation Z, is increasingly portrayed as a rational, even healthy, response to overwork, under-recognition, and psychological fatigue (Krasulja & Vasiljeviæ-Blagojeviæ, 2024). It is not necessarily indicative of disengagement but may represent an employee's decision to preserve self-worth in organizations that fail to meet implicit expectations (Ochis, 2024).

However, much of the emerging research is situated in Western, formalized work contexts, typically using quantitative self-report instruments that cannot capture the cultural and structural subtleties. For instance, in high power-distance or collectivist societies, quiet quitting may reflect norm-governed withdrawal. This response allows individuals to preserve social harmony while emotionally distancing themselves from the organization (Georgiadou et al., 2025). This suggests that the meaning and expression of quiet quitting are not universal but culturally and contextually shaped perspectives largely missing in the current literature.

### **Psychological Contract Theory: Foundational and Fragile?**

Psychological Contract Theory (PCT) offers a foundational framework for understanding how unmet expectations lead to employee withdrawal. First introduced by Rousseau, PCT defines psychological contracts as implicit, unspoken beliefs about mutual obligations between employer and employee (Rousseau, 1995). These contracts, often categorized as relational (social-emotional) or transactional (economic), help explain how perceptions of breach or violation lead to reduced organizational commitment and effort (Irfan Ullah et al., 2022).

While PCT has proven durable across multiple contexts, its assumptions – clarity of roles, relative organizational stability, and individualist rationality – are increasingly strained in informal, fast-paced, and culturally embedded environments such as startups in emerging economies. In startup settings, role ambiguity, flat hierarchies, and non-codified management practices create situations where

expectations are vague, evolving, and asymmetrical (Campton et al., 2023). Employees often receive symbolic empowerment (e.g., startup culture, mission alignment) but lack the structural support that anchors expectations (Georgiadou et al., 2025).

Furthermore, most applications of PCT assume Western norms of voice and agency. Individuals may be less inclined to vocalize breaches in collectivist and high-power-distance cultures. Instead, they may engage in silent behavioral adaptation – a pattern closely resembling quiet quitting (Corbin & Flenady, 2024). This creates a boundary condition for PCT: Does it adequately explain how psychological contracts function in work cultures that emphasize indirect communication, difference, and social conformity?

In this study, PCT is treated not as a ready-made lens but as a theoretical structure to be tested, pressured, and possibly extended. It raises several core questions:

- How are psychological contracts formed in informal, non-hierarchical work settings?
- How are expectations breached when contracts are never explicitly articulated?
- What response forms are available or acceptable in a culture where voice is constrained?

Answering these requires a culturally sensitive, empirically grounded approach to studying psychological contracts in situ, not in abstraction.

### **Gen Z at Work: Global Discourse, Local Constraint**

A significant share of quiet quitting discourse attributes the behavior to Generation Z, whose work values are described as emphasizing purpose, flexibility, authenticity, and well-being (Krasulja & Vasiljeviæ-Blagojeviæ, 2024). These values contrast sharply with the hierarchical, rigid, and exploitative structures that define many traditional work environments. Research suggests that Gen Z employees are less likely to tolerate toxic environments and more likely to resist excessive job demands,



sometimes by silently withdrawing (Nguyen & Vu, 2025; Taufik et al., 2024).

However, this portrayal risks being overly universalist. Much of the literature is grounded in urban, Western economies and fails to account for how sociocultural and economic constraints shape Gen Z behavior in emerging markets. In Nepal, for example, young professionals often face limited job mobility, familial expectations, and deeply embedded cultural norms around hierarchy and loyalty. Even if they share the digital-global values of their Western peers, their action space is more constrained (Pokharel & Maharjan, 2024; Xueyun et al., 2023).

Cultural frameworks, such as Hofstede's dimensions (power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance), and insights from the GLOBE study provide helpful starting points. For instance, in high power-distance settings, employees may avoid confrontation with supervisors, even when expectations are violated. In collectivist cultures, group harmony trumps individual expression, making open dissent risky or inappropriate (Georgiadou et al., 2025). Therefore, quiet quitting may serve as a culturally sanctioned way to disengage without disrupting hierarchy or social norms.

Thus, Gen Z in Nepal may not be disengaging because they are "entitled" or "lazy," but because they are navigating a complex web of global values and local limitations. This distinction deserves deeper theoretical and empirical attention.

### Startups as Structurally Ambiguous Psychological Ecosystems

Startups are typically romanticized as meritocratic spaces where innovation and purposeful work happen. However such companies typically operate in resource scarcity, role confusion, and institutional informality conditions (Cininta & Wisesa, 2023). In Nepal, also, the number of tech startups has also increased with advancing digital access and international investment, but the companies usually operate in the absence of proper HR practices, job postings, or career development paths (K.C. & Sharma, 2023).

This structural ambivalence significantly impacts the establishment and breaking of psychological contracts. Without systematized feedback or onboarding processes, expectations are sometimes constructed through founder behavior, peer norms, and implicit cultural cues (Bhattarai & Bahadur Budhathoki, 2023). This can result in a confusing workplace where workload intensity, emotional labor, and obscure rewards converge for early-career Gen Z workers. Employees can feel let down if their promises of flexibility or development are broken, but they might not have the means or the ability to share them.

Emerging research on entrepreneurial burnout, emotional labor in new ventures, and psychological precarity indicates that such environments are both stimulating and draining (Corbin & Flenady, 2024). Startups require passion but do not necessarily respond with support or growth. In this situation, quiet quitting is no act of resistance but rather a pragmatic recalibration – a means to safeguard oneself within a system where expectations are frequently left unfilled and one's voice is culturally suppressed.

### Where Literature Falls Short

While substantial literature exists on disengagement, generational identity, and organizational culture, several critical limitations remain:

- **Contextual blindness:** Most disengagement research assumes formal, Western organizational structures and ignores the fluid, informal nature of startups – especially in emerging economies (Hamouche et al., 2023).
- **Cultural oversimplification:** Gen Z is treated as a monolithic cohort, ignoring how local values, economic precarity, and cultural scripts influence behavior (Nguyen & Vu, 2025).
- **Theoretical inertia:** PCT is rarely interrogated in boundaryless work environments. Its assumptions of rational expectations and formal roles may not hold in non-Western or non-hierarchical contexts (Georgiadou et al., 2025).

- **Behavioral reductionism:** Quiet quitting is often measured through quantitative proxies, neglecting the narrative and emotional dimensions of disengagement (Harris, 2025).

There is a pressing need for a qualitative, culturally grounded, theory-testing exploration of how employees negotiate unmet expectations in such environments.

### Framing the Contribution

This study positions quiet quitting not as a fad, but as a theoretical provocation: What does it reveal about the limits of our existing constructs? It uses Psychological Contract Theory not merely as a framework, but as a lens under pressure, tested in a context where expectations are implicit, voice is constrained, and work is precarious. It seeks to refine our understanding of contractual behavior under ambiguity while integrating cultural and generational dynamics often excluded from mainstream OB theorizing.

By integrating insights from disengagement theory, cross-cultural management, and startup research, this study presents a recontextualized and nuanced theory of employee withdrawal that considers the roles of structure, identity, and silence.

## Research Method

### Research Design and Epistemological Positioning

This research used a qualitative interpretive research design to examine how Generation Z workers within Nepali tech startups understand and experience ‘quiet quitting’ in terms of disappointed work expectations and workplace norms related to disengagement. Because the research focus lies on the subjective construction of meaning, negotiating identity, and organizational ambivalence, qualitative methods proved the most suitable through which to elicit the cognitive and emotional facets of employee withdrawal (Georgiadou et al., 2025).

The research is theoretically based on Psychological Contract Theory (PCT), but it calls into question its application in informal, non-Western, and multifaceted work environments

like Nepali startups. This necessitated a design approach to reveal locally constructed understandings and nuanced interpretations of principles such as effort, fairness, and disengagement. Therefore, the research was embedded in a constructivist-interpretive epistemology and presumed that participants co-create meaning within their organizational and cultural contexts (Kral et al., 2002).

### Research Setting

The study was conducted within Kathmandu’s early-stage tech startup ecosystem, the center of Nepal’s emerging digital economy. The startups involved were all less than ten years old, operating in software development, digital services, fintech, app-based platforms, and e-commerce. These firms typically exhibit lean structures, informal HR practices, and intense performance expectations – conditions that make psychological contracts highly subjective and fluid (Bhattarai & Bahadur Budhathoki, 2023).

The Nepali tech startup environment, while inspired by global startup ideals (agility, innovation, autonomy), is shaped by local labor market constraints, hierarchical cultural norms, and resource scarcity, making it a fertile context for investigating disengagement behaviors like quiet quitting (K.C. & Sharma, 2023).

### Participants and Sampling Strategy

A total of 25 Gen Z participants (ages 21-27) were interviewed. The sample included 13 females and 12 males, with varied job roles across technical (software development, UI/UX) and non-technical (marketing, HR, business operations) functions. Work experience in startups ranged from 6 months to 4 years.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, leveraging the researcher’s existing professional network within the startup ecosystem. Specifically, the researcher, a leadership trainer and consultant has delivered workshops, mentoring programs, and skill development sessions for multiple startups based in Kathmandu. This insider status provided privileged access to founders, HR teams, and employees who were willing to refer participants or self-nominate (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024).

While this role facilitated access and trust, it also introduced potential bias risks, including:

- Participants may have responded in socially desirable ways.
- Employees may have felt inhibited if they perceived the researcher as aligned with management.
- The sample may have been skewed toward startups with a stronger developmental or training culture.

To mitigate these risks, the researcher:

- Clarified their neutral academic role before interviews.
- Assured confidentiality and independence from any organizational reporting lines.
- Reiterated that participation had no link to training programs or performance evaluation.
- Used pseudonyms and anonymized data to protect identities.
- Kept a reflexive journal to monitor assumptions and influence throughout the process (Ademolu, 2024).

Participants were not recruited from startups where the researcher had direct supervisory involvement or ongoing contractual relationships during the data collection period.

### Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between October 2024 and February 2025. Interviews were conducted in-person or online (Zoom/Google Meet) based on participant preference and pandemic considerations.

Each session lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Interviews were conducted in English or Nepali, with participants choosing their preferred language. Nepali interviews were translated and back-translated to ensure fidelity (Dodgson, 2019).

The interview protocol included prompts on:

- Initial expectations upon joining the startup

- Changes in motivation, energy, and perceived recognition
- Interpretations of effort, fairness, and organizational support
- Definitions of and reflections on “quiet quitting”
- Cultural and emotional considerations influencing withdrawal behavior

Interviews were conducted in private coworking rooms, cafés, or via encrypted calls to facilitate open dialogue. All participants provided written or verbal informed consent and were assured that their data would be used solely for academic research purposes.

### Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s six-phase framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

- Familiarization with the transcripts
- Initial code generation (open, inductive)
- Theme development across participant accounts
- Review and refinement of thematic categories
- Defining themes aligned with research questions and theoretical framing
- Writing-up, with thematic narratives supported by direct quotes

To ensure rigor:

- A second coder reviewed 25% of the transcripts, and discrepancies were resolved collaboratively.
- Deviant cases were actively explored to prevent thematic convergence.
- Themes were iteratively compared to constructs in PCT and cultural theories (Hofstede, GLOBE) to understand both alignment and dissonance.
- Analysis was conducted manually with codebooks and matrices developed in Excel. A decision was made not to use software (e.g., NVivo) to maintain close, iterative contact with the raw data (Campbell et al., 2021).

### Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

The study adhered to ethical research standards. All participants received a clear explanation of their rights, including the option to participate voluntarily, the right to withdraw at any time, and assurances of confidentiality.

To establish trustworthiness, the following steps were taken:

- **Credibility:** Five participants reviewed early theme summaries to validate interpretations (member checks).
- **Transferability:** Detailed contextual and demographic information enables relevance assessment to other settings.
- **Dependability:** A complete audit trail, including interview logs, coding decisions, and researcher memos, was maintained.
- **Confirmability:** Ongoing reflexive journaling was used to surface and challenge the researcher's biases as a trainer and ecosystem insider.

### Reflexivity and Positionality

The researcher's dual role – as an academic and a trainer within the Nepali startup ecosystem – presented advantages and ethical complexity. This insider position enabled access, cultural fluency, and participant comfort, particularly with a topic that touches on internal disappointment, emotional withdrawal, and subtle resistance.

At the same time, the researcher remained conscious of:

- The potential for participants to view them as part of the management structure.
- The risk of over-rapport leads to muted critique or over-alignment with participant narratives.
- The ethical imperative is to separate the trainer's identity from the researcher's role throughout the study.

These tensions were managed through role clarification, careful boundary-setting, and critical self-reflection, ensuring the integrity of both data collection and interpretation (Ademolu, 2024).

## Results

This section reports five interrelated themes developed through inductive analysis of interviews conducted with Gen Z workers at Nepali startups. They form a trajectory: starting with disappointed expectations, moving through emotional recalibration in the context of cultural limitations, and finally, protective disengagement. Each theme is substantiated with raw participant quotations representing the rich expressions of quiet quitting within unique startup environments in Nepal.

### Theme 1: Erosion of the Psychological Contract

The participants joined startups with high hopes of being mentored, appreciated, and having a voice in decision-making, often influenced by startup pitches and induction discourses. Instead, they faced structural informality, irregular feedback, and a transactional work culture.

- *"I expected to be guided, but I was left to figure it out alone."*

The perceived failure between the implied promise and the experience subverted motivation and laid early seeds of disillusionment.

*"We joined to build something meaningful, but often end up fixing what was rushed without us."*

These encounters prompted a redefinition of what work was "worth it" and helped lay the ground for quiet quitting trajectories.

### Theme 2: Strategic Emotional Withdrawal

After this breach, people began reining in emotional and creative investments. This was not negligence, it was intentional boundary-making.

- *"I used to stay late to polish designs. Now I log off at 6, no matter what."*

Emotional withdrawal took the form of subdued enthusiasm, withdrawn initiative, and a direction towards effort that was closely aligned with job definitions.

- *"I stopped pitching ideas. I just do what's assigned."*



These withdrawals tended to be presented as being required in self-protection, particularly in those perceived as unrewarding or chaotic environments.

### Theme 3: Cultural Compliance and Silenced Dissent

Quitting was not a matter of direct resistance to the rules. Numerous participants felt they couldn't express their discontent based on norms of deference, harmony, and a hierarchy based on age.

- *"You have to smile through the frustration here."*
- *"If you raise concerns, you are labelled as not being a team player."*

In this situation, silence emerged as the culturally sanctioned expression of withdrawal. A choice between inaction and withdrawal rather than confrontation indicated the mediating role played by cultural scripts in the performance of quiet quitting.

### Theme 4: Invisible Labor and Recognition Deficit

They described experiencing much behind-the-scenes or emotional labor that did not get recognized. Acknowledgement occurred when crises struck, but consistent preventive or creative efforts often were not recognized.

- *"No one noticed the feature I stayed late to finish – until it broke."*
- *"Only noticed when it breaks. Never when it works."*

This imbalance reduced participants' intention to do discretionary work and hastened their withdrawal from the team initiative.

### Theme 5: Quiet Quitting as Identity Preservation

In contrast to the apathy narrative, the participants defined quiet quitting as a way to guard their creative identity, emotional capacity, and future job security.

- *"This is how I keep enjoying what I do – by protecting it from the system."*

- *"I still care. I do not over-give anymore."*

Instead of quitting in frustration, they reinterpreted professionalism regarding emotional boundaries. This redefinition allowed them to preserve motivation based on their craft regardless of whether or not the system reciprocated their efforts.

The figure 1 synthesizes the five emergent themes into a processual model, illustrating how quiet quitting is not a singular act but a cumulative response to structural and relational conditions. The process begins with psychological contract erosion (Theme 1), evolves through emotional recalibration (Theme 2), is moderated by cultural compliance (Theme 3), and is amplified by the invisibility of discretionary labor (Theme 4). The outcome is not collapse but redefinition – an identity-protective adaptation (Theme 5).

### Synthesis of Findings

Together, these themes demonstrate that quiet quitting among Nepali Gen Z tech workers is not merely passive disinterest but an active, culturally mediated boundary-setting process. Psychological contract erosion (Theme 1) initiates the process, followed by strategic emotional recalibration (Theme 2), shaped by cultural norms of silence and deference (Theme 3). Invisible labor (Theme 4) reinforces the decision to withdraw, while the outcome (Theme 5) reflects identity-centred redefinition rather than disengagement.

The table 1 summarizes each theme with a concise definition and a representative participant quote, capturing the emotional texture and strategic rationale behind quitting as experienced by Gen Z professionals in Nepali tech startups.

### Discussion

This research offers a theoretically nuanced and contextually rich description of how Gen Z workers in Nepali technological startups experience quiet quitting. Far from being apathy, however, it emerges as a self-conscious and culture-influenced approach to preserving organizational misalignment and relational disillusionment. The five emergent themes – ranging across the deterioration in

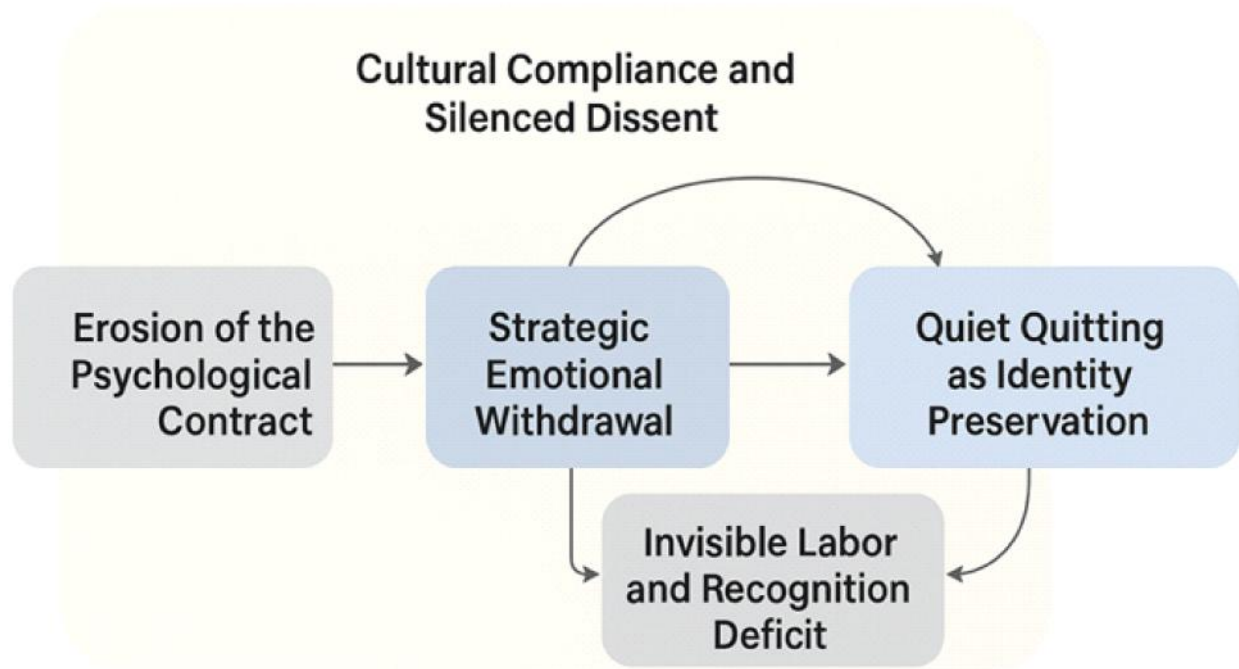


Figure 1. Thematic Map of Quiet Quitting Process

Table 1: Final Themes and Illustrative Quotes

Theme	Condensed Definition	Sample Quote
Erosion of the Psychological Contract	Unmet expectations triggered early disillusionment	"I thought I'd be guided... but I was left alone."
Strategic Emotional Withdrawal	Emotional boundary-setting to preserve energy	"I stopped pitching ideas. I just do what's assigned."
Cultural Compliance and Silenced Dissent	Hierarchy and harmony norms suppressed dissent	"You have to smile through the frustration."
Invisible Labor and Recognition Deficit	Discretionary effort went unnoticed or unappreciated	"Only noticed when it breaks. Never when it works."
Quiet Quitting as Identity Preservation	Protecting self-worth and passion through intentional disengagement	"This is how I keep enjoying what I do – by protecting it from the system."

implicit expectations through identity-driven recalibration – chart a progression in which psychological contract violations, emotional exhaustion, and the scarcity of voice options combine to generate behaviors marking boundaries to maintain personal agency and well-being (Georgiadou et al., 2025).

In this scenario, the origin of quiet quitting is the gradual deterioration of the psychological contract. Employees commonly enrolled in the startup have

strong albeit tacit expectations of mentorship, voice, and development – expectations fostered through the symbolic discourses of startup culture. However, such expectations were responded to with managerial vagueness, sparse feedback, and transactional relations inferior to the envisaged empowerment. Such misalignment created cognitive and emotional dissonance and encouraged employees to renegotiate their levels of engagement silently. As indicated in Psychological Contract Theory, perceived violations – particularly those undisclosed

– interfere with social exchange between employers and employees, resulting in decreased affective commitment and discretionary effort (Hamouche et al., 2023; Karrani et al., 2024).

Strategic withdrawal captures the way participants respond more subtly than resisting directly by re-investing emotionally through establishing emotional boundaries. Instead of withdrawing entirely, staff executed their essential work while withdrawing from additional role behaviors like innovation, emotional labor, or discretionary work. This behavior relates to Corbin & Flenady's (2024) recognition-theoretical description of quiet quitting as a strategy of compensation against misrecognition at work (Corbin & Flenady, 2024).

The Cultural Compliance and Silenced Dissent theme demonstrates how cultural scripts intermediate withdrawal. In Nepal's high power-distance work cultures with collectivist values, confrontation is frowned upon in the culture. Rather, displeasure occurs through subdued disengagement – less energy, minimal feedback, and silent acquiescence. Consistent with research in Greece and Southeast Asia, hierarchy and deference cultural norms are responsible for the silence and invisibility embedded in quiet quitting, where the latter is driven more towards social harmony rather than protest behavior (Georgiadou et al., 2025; Ochis, 2024).

Quiet Quitting as Identity Preservation reinterprets disengagement as a value-affirming self-protection rather than a symptom of failure. Individuals described a need to maintain their integrity and dignity when they felt they were working in extractive or neglectful cultures. This echoes models based on commitment specifically seeing the quiet quitting as a matter of principled boundary-drawing rather than withdrawal per se (Corbin & Flenady, 2024; Hamouche et al., 2023).

Quiet Quitting as Identity Preservation recasts disengagement not as a failure, but as a self-protective act of value alignment. Participants expressed the desire to preserve their dignity and integrity in environments that felt extractive or neglectful. This finding aligns with commitment-based frameworks that recognize quiet quitting as a form of principled boundary-setting, not disengagement per se (Harris, 2025).

Collectively, these findings add a theoretically

enriched and culturally situated understanding of the concept of quiet quitting. Far removed from popular characterizations of disengagement through generational apathy or entitlement, this research identifies how structural vagueness, emotional inequity, and cultural silence converge to frame boundary-setting behaviors. Further, through the foregrounding of voices within a Global South tech industry, it resists the Western universals of organizational models and provides a more nuanced understanding of the negotiation of power, voice, and care in under-theorized settings.

For working professionals, the implications are that more than superficial benefits or reward mechanisms are needed to diminish quiet quitting. They need systemic changes – more straightforward expectations, genuine appreciation, and workplace safety alongside inclusive and respected management. Lacking them will mean the cognitive and affective costs of consistent hard work will still be too high, particularly among early-career workers in insecure setups (Sitorus & Rachmawati, 2024).

This research's contributions are limited to its cultural and sectoral scope. That said, its implications are generalizable to other collectivist or high-stakes work environments, and comparative work across industries, generational groups, or management attitudes might sharpen the framework presented here more specifically. Longitudinal designs can also reveal how quiet quitting changes over time in the face of structural change or career advancement.

In summary, this research illustrates how Gen Z workers in Nepali tech startups deploy a culturally complex tactic of emotional conservation and identity protection in the form of quiet quitting. This is a retreat from disappointment in relations rather than labor itself and from cultures in which care is not returned. By understanding this redefinition, organizations and scholars can more reflectively consider the terms upon and through which effort is provided, denied, or reconstituted.

## Conclusion

This research reimagines quiet quitting as a culturally infused and emotionally tactical response to organizational vagueness, unrealized expectations, and limited voice in Gen Z workers at Nepali tech startups. Quiet quitting is considered neither absenteeism nor resistance in this study

but a complex exercise in establishing boundaries – an attempt to maintain identity and emotional integrity in high-speed, loosely structured, and relationally asymmetric working spaces (Georgiadou et al., 2025).

The study supplies empirical evidence that psychological contracts – if unexpressed or misaligned – silently deteriorate motivation and discretionary performance, specifically in collectivist cultures with high power distance, where dissent is suppressed (Corbin & Flenady, 2024). Here, quiet quitting is more than just a withdrawal but an adaptive, permissible strategy of professionalism.

By highlighting narratives from an understudied, non-Western startup ecosystem, the research promotes a more context-aware understanding of employee withdrawal and resilience. It de-resists universalist expectations within HR theory and repositions quiet quitting as an emotionally intelligent action in response to organizational disregard.

## Practical Implications

The study offers several practical insights for leaders, managers, and HR professionals in startup and resource-constrained environments:

- **Recognize Invisible Effort:** Affective and anticipatory labor is often unseen but central to organizational success. Recognition mechanisms, such as reflective feedback and peer validation surface these hidden contributions (Corbin & Flenady, 2024; Georgiadou et al., 2025).
- **Rebuild the Psychological Contract:** Avoid symbolic empowerment that is not supported structurally. Clear role definitions, regular feedback, and transparent reward systems are vital to avoid breach-related disengagement (Hamouche et al., 2023).
- **Enable Culturally Safe Expression:** High power-distance settings suppress open dissent. Introducing anonymous feedback tools and informal mentorship structures can help surface early disengagement cues (Ochis, 2024).
- **Respect Emotional Boundaries:** Motivation and psychological well-being are inseparable. Recognizing emotional workload and protecting non-work time, especially for

early-career employees, fosters sustainable engagement (Solymosi-Szekeres & Stojkoviæ-Zlatanoviæ, 2024).

These insights collectively highlight that retention and engagement are functions of incentives, emotional validation, and relational equity.

## Limitations

As with all qualitative research, the insights from this study are contextually bound. The focus on Gen Z professionals in Nepali tech startups offers deep but localized perspectives that may not be generalizable to other settings. Additionally, the voices of organizational leaders, founders, and managers were not included; their perspectives could have provided a contrast to employee interpretations of expectations and breaches. The study's cross-sectional design captures a specific moment in time and may not account for how patterns of quiet quitting evolve as organizations grow, mature, or adapt.

Nevertheless, the analytical depth and methodological rigor of this study enhance its transferability to other high-pressure, collectivist, or startup environments.

## Directions for Future Research

To build on the findings of this study, future research could explore:

- **Cross-Cultural Comparisons:** Exploring how quiet quitting unfolds in other collectivist and individualist cultures will help clarify the role of cultural norms (Radko, 2024).
- **Leadership Perspectives:** Founders and team leaders often shape psychological contracts. Including their narratives could expose mismatches in mutual expectations (Campton et al., 2023).
- **Longitudinal Studies:** Tracking employees across time and career transitions could show how boundary-setting and disengagement fluctuate (Harris, 2025).
- **Sectoral Variations:** Exploring quiet quitting in service, health, education, or civil society sectors could test the transferability of these themes and refine disengagement theory (Solymosi-Szekeres & Stojkoviæ-Zlatanoviæ, 2024).

Such future inquiries will not only enhance theoretical frameworks, such as Psychological Contract Theory, but also inform context-responsive organizational strategies for fostering meaningful and sustainable engagement.

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