Gen Z, Quiet Quitting, and Organizational Commitment: A Dual-Pathway Theory of Effort–Commitment Decoupling

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Abstract

Quiet quitting has become a prominent label for employees who meet their formal obligations while limiting discretionary effort. Yet the label creates a theoretical puzzle: identical role-bounded behavior may indicate deteriorating organizational attachment or a sustainable attempt to preserve it. This conceptual paper examines that puzzle in the context of Generation Z without assuming that cohort membership determines work values. Through purposive, critical integration of peer-reviewed research on quiet quitting, organizational commitment, social exchange, self-determination, and work-role boundaries, the paper develops an effort–commitment decoupling framework. Social exchange theory explains whether employees interpret optional contributions as reciprocated or exploited; self-determination theory explains whether regulating extra-role effort expresses autonomous self-governance or defensive withdrawal. The framework proposes two routes to outwardly similar behavior: breach-driven recalibration, associated with erosion of affective commitment, and autonomy-preserving boundary stewardship, potentially compatible with durable commitment. Continuance constraints and managers' interpretations of role boundaries qualify these paths, and misrecognition can transform protective restraint into genuine disengagement over time. Six propositions specify antecedents, mechanisms, commitment trajectories, and feedback. The main contribution is to locate quiet quitting neither automatically inside commitment nor automatically outside it, but at the contested boundary between agreed role requirements and discretionary labor. For research, this implies measuring behavior, motive, role legitimacy, and commitment separately; for practice, it favors negotiated expectations and autonomy-supportive management over generational labeling or indiscriminate demands for extra effort.

1. Introduction

1.1 The theoretical puzzle

Quiet quitting describes a situation in which employees continue meeting essential work requirements yet reduce contributions not formally required of them. The phrase entered popular discourse in 2022, but the practices it aggregates effort calibration, boundary setting, disengagement, and resistance to unrecognized work have longer organizational histories. Recent research has reached divergent definitions, ranging from intentional minimum-role performance to a multidimensional disengagement state (Armstrong & Pfandler, 2024; Gray et al., 2025). The central problem is therefore not simply whether quiet quitting exists. It is whether reduced discretionary work can be interpreted as evidence of diminished organizational commitment when the boundaries of legitimate duties are themselves negotiated, unevenly understood, and changing.

The issue is especially salient in commentary on Generation Z, commonly associated with younger labor-market entrants and heightened expectations of autonomy, meaning, flexibility, and well-being. Such narratives contain potentially useful questions about employment conditions, but cohort labels are imprecise proxies for motives. A meta-analysis found small or negligible

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generational differences in several work attitudes, and later critical reviews demonstrate how age, historical period, occupation, and selection effects are routinely mistaken for cohort properties (Costanza et al., 2012; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Rudolph et al., 2021). Accordingly, this paper treats Gen Z as a context in which role expectations and career-entry uncertainty may be highly visible, not as a psychologically homogeneous class or an independent cause of quiet quitting.

A striking tension emerges from the commitment literature. Organizational commitment is a psychological attachment that cannot be inferred straightforwardly from remaining employed or from any single contribution. Meyer and Allen (1991) differentiate attachment based on desire, need, and obligation; Klein et al. (2012) instead seek conceptual clarity around volitional dedication to a particular target. Meanwhile, the organizational citizenship literature documents that employees disagree about which apparently optional acts constitute their jobs (Morrison, 1994; Organ, 1997). Kahn (1990) likewise argues that psychological engagement depends on meaningfulness, safety, and availability; the absence of one visible form of extra-role effort cannot independently reveal these conditions. An employee who stops answering late-night messages might be disengaging, protecting health, or honoring a previously agreed work schedule. The external act is comparable, but its relation to commitment is not.

1.2 What scholarship explains—and does not

Contemporary empirical studies provide more than anecdote. Harris (2025) uses longitudinal qualitative evidence to show that quiet quitting is neither monolithic nor inevitably associated with uniformly beneficial or harmful consequences. Gray et al. (2025) separate a behavioral core from its antecedents and outcomes and find that psychological-contract processes are related to quiet quitting; Hervé and Oh (2025) relate it to perceived control and affective commitment. A 2026 special-issue synthesis differentiates reactive, value-driven, deliberate, and passive forms. These advances undermine sweeping claims that all role-bounded employees are disloyal. Yet motivation-based taxonomies alone do not fully specify when and why a given pattern of effort changes commitment over time, nor how managerial responses alter that trajectory.

A second tension arises from the norm of reciprocity. Social exchange scholarship predicts that employees adjust contributions when organizational treatment is perceived as inequitable or promises are broken (Gouldner, 1960; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). However, a reduction in unpaid optional labor may also restore a fair exchange by correcting previously excessive demands. Thus, the same reduction could signal withdrawal from an unfair relationship or a boundary adjustment that makes continued participation viable. If the formal exchange remains satisfactory, a restrained level of extra-role participation need not imply lower affective attachment. Explaining this possibility requires separating evaluations of reciprocity from employees' self-regulatory reasons for limiting effort.

The third tension concerns managerial measurement. Employees may reduce a visible category of citizenship behavior while remaining committed to task quality, clients, colleagues, or a professional calling. Broad scales of disengagement can incorporate motivational precursors or downstream consequences into the behavioral definition, creating circular explanations (Anand et al., 2024; Talukder & Prieto, 2025). Role boundaries also differ across organizations and

professions: emergency responsiveness may be obligatory in one occupation and unreasonable in another. Unless the obligations being limited are identified independently, the construct quietly converts management's preferred performance norm into a scientific definition of commitment.

1.3 Research problem, questions, and contribution

The central research problem is an unresolved effort–commitment inference: when Generation Z employees retain prescribed performance but curtail optional effort, under what circumstances does that behavior indicate declining commitment, and when can it coexist with or protect commitment? Three questions guide the analysis. First, how do perceived reciprocity and autonomy needs generate distinct reasons for role-bounded effort? Second, how do those reasons imply different trajectories of affective attachment, continuance-based staying, and constructive voice? Third, when do organizational expectations and managers' interpretations convert initially sustainable boundaries into relational withdrawal?

The paper advances three linked contributions. It first reframes quiet quitting as an observable effort configuration whose motivational meaning must be established rather than presumed, developing an explicit distinction between breach-driven recalibration and autonomy-preserving boundary stewardship. Second, it extends social exchange reasoning by introducing the legitimacy of discretionary demands as an interpretive hinge: limiting optional work can restore reciprocity as well as signal its collapse. Third, it theorizes a temporal feedback process in which managers' stigmatizing interpretations can erode an initially intact exchange relationship. The extension thus addresses the motivational, relational, and temporal limitations of one-to-one mappings from minimal extra-role effort to weak commitment.

The theoretical lens is deliberately parsimonious. Social exchange theory provides the primary explanation of relationship appraisal and contingent reciprocation; self-determination theory adds the distinct psychological mechanism of autonomous versus controlled regulation (Blau, 1964; Deci et al., 2017). Established commitment and boundary constructs specify outcomes and context rather than functioning as an unbounded collection of theories. After reviewing conceptual boundaries and research streams, the paper develops this integration, explains its conceptual method, presents six propositions with a model, and considers theoretical, managerial, and empirical implications.

2. Critical Literature Review

2.1 Quiet quitting, role boundaries, and commitment

Recent scholarship does not support a single uncontested definition of quiet quitting; a recent scoping review confirms that overlapping labels and operationalizations remain central research challenges (Bernuzzi et al., 2025). Armstrong and Pfandler (2024) question whether a new umbrella label adds explanatory value beyond its constituent behaviors; Gray et al. (2025) operationalize intentional performance of minimum job requirements; Other researchers develop a broader multidimensional construct incorporating disengagement and boundary preferences. Other researchers propose a behavioral anchor in calibrated withholding of optional extra-role effort while allowing deliberate and passive routes. For the present argument, quiet quitting is defined narrowly as sustained fulfillment of legitimate in-role duties accompanied by a reduction or

withholding of discretionary contributions relative to previously enacted or locally expected levels. This definition excludes absenteeism, sabotage, contractual underperformance, and the mere experience of burnout; it also refrains from building low commitment into the definition.

The phrase "legitimate in-role duties" matters because work expectations are partly social rather than solely contractual. Morrison (1994) found that employees' categorization of citizenship acts as in-role or extra-role varied and was associated with their behavior. Organ (1997) similarly warned against treating all citizenship activity as automatically extra-role or unrewarded. Podsakoff et al. (2000) documented substantial variation in citizenship dimensions and measures. Thus, role-bounded performance is not equivalent to a fixed universal number of hours or helping acts. It involves negotiated or contested scope, and its meaning depends on whether a request is optional, compensated, role-essential, or disguised as voluntary but systematically penalized when refused.

Organizational commitment refers to the person–organization bond, not the totality of work motivation. Meyer and Allen's (1991) affective, continuance, and normative components distinguish wanting to remain, needing to remain, and feeling obliged to remain. Early scale research differentiated the components (Allen & Meyer, 1990), and meta-analyses show distinct correlates and consequences (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 2002). Solinger et al. (2008) challenge the treatment of all three as equivalent components of a uniform attitude, while Klein et al. (2012) defend a more focused definition of commitment as volitional dedication and responsibility. This article therefore uses affective commitment as the focal relational outcome, treats continuance commitment as a constraint on exit, and considers normative obligation as a potentially ambivalent pressure rather than collapsing the components into a single loyalty score.

2.2 Research stream one: exchange deficits and contract breach

Social exchange and perceived organizational support research establish that treatment by employers shapes employees' willingness to reciprocate (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Psychological contracts capture beliefs about reciprocal obligations that may extend beyond explicit written terms (Rousseau, 1989); trust and perceived equity influence how those obligations are assessed (Adams, 1963; Atkinson, 2007). In recent quiet-quitting research, Gray et al. (2025) find links between contract fulfillment or breach, job satisfaction, and minimum-role effort, whereas Hervé and Oh (2025) identify perceived control and affective commitment as relevant mechanisms. These studies support a relational account but do not make a negative commitment consequence inevitable for every observed boundary. Contractual clarity can also make a reduction in uncompensated work a consensual recalibration rather than a repudiation of the employer.

An exchange-deficit interpretation is strongest where discretionary contributions have been persistently demanded without commensurate recognition or support. The central mechanism is not simple cost minimization but a judgment that the employer has failed to reciprocate contributions or respect implicit promises. Corbin and Flenady (2024) similarly interpret quiet quitting as a response to workplace misrecognition. Gendered microaggressions represent a distinct proposed pathway in which the apparently voluntary character of additional work may conceal unequal relational treatment (Priya & Sreejith, 2025). Yet the direction of the response is ambiguous: an

employee may disengage from the organization, or may reject an exploitative norm while continuing to identify with the organization's core mission. The literature often treats this ambiguity as heterogeneity of employees; the present paper instead locates part of it in the legitimacy of what is counted as "extra."

2.3 Research stream two: demand, resource, and recovery processes

The job demands–resources tradition links demanding conditions and insufficient resources to exhaustion, while resources can support work engagement and adaptive action (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008, 2017; Bakker et al., 2023). Conservation-of-resources reasoning similarly highlights threats to valued personal resources (Hobfoll, 1989), although resource protection alone does not establish whether an employee remains committed. Quiet-quitting research finds associations with strain, psychological availability, and working conditions. Agarwal et al. (2025), for example, examine high-performance work systems and psychological conditions, while Atalay and Dağıstan (2024) ask whether quiet quitting is a new label for older organizational behavior. The strength of this stream is its account of energy depletion and job conditions, but a weakness is the potential assumption that limiting effort is always a symptom of depletion. Employees can establish limits before becoming exhausted; that anticipatory regulation is different from an involuntary loss of engagement.

Research on boundaries further complicates the deficit story. Work and nonwork roles require permeability choices and everyday transitions, not simply maximal investment in employment (Ashforth et al., 2000). Kossek et al. (2012) distinguish boundary-management profiles according to interruption behavior, identity, and control. During remote work, workloads and monitoring can contribute to work–home interference, while support and autonomy help shape work experiences (Wang et al., 2021). If reduced after-hours availability reflects a deliberate, credible boundary, the act need not imply alienation. Conversely, highly unstable schedules or punitive monitoring may turn the same boundary into perceived organizational disobedience. The relevant question is whether effort limitation is governed by autonomous choice or by threat and exhaustion.

2.4 Research stream three: citizenship, voice, and the dark side of excess

Extra-role effort is often valuable because spontaneous help, voice, and initiative cannot be fully specified in a contract. But the citizenship literature also cautions against glorifying unlimited voluntary work. Bolino et al. (2013) review potential costs of citizenship, including pressure and conflict. By distinguishing citizenship from obligatory tasks, Organ (1997) showed why organizational norms cannot be treated as self-evident. A withdrawal of extra-role effort may reduce colleagues' support or learning opportunities, but moral or performance judgments require comparing tasks against role requirements, workloads, and organizational reciprocity. A contribution is not costless simply because it is formally voluntary.

The distinction between voice and silence is especially important. Morrison (2014, 2023) documents that employees withhold suggestions or concerns for reasons including anticipated interpersonal or organizational consequences. Quiet quitting and employee silence overlap in some manifestations but are not interchangeable: an employee may decline overtime while openly offering improvement ideas; another may comply with hours yet avoid raising safety problems. If

research measures a single composite of low initiative, silence, disengagement, and restricted hours, it cannot identify which component predicts commitment. A more defensible model treats task performance, discretionary helping, constructive voice, and affective attachment as empirically distinct outcomes whose relationships may change over time; such discriminant validity is essential when a new measure shares wording with its expected outcomes (Bagozzi et al., 1991).

2.5 Research stream four: Gen Z and the cohort inference problem

Studies of younger employees make legitimate contributions but do not establish a distinctive Gen Z psychological syndrome. Taufik et al. (2024) examine quiet quitting among millennial and Gen Z workers in Indonesia, associating job satisfaction with the behavior, while Chaudhry (2024) proposes exchange-based organizational conditions relevant to Gen Z engagement and commitment. These findings are contextual rather than proof of a universal cohort disposition. Gen Z workers may also be concentrated in early-career roles with limited control, incomplete socialization, relatively high uncertainty, and fewer accumulated alternatives. Age, tenure, job class, labor-market conditions, and national institutional context can produce seemingly generational contrasts without a cohort-specific causal process (Costanza et al., 2012; Rudolph et al., 2018).

The cohort category is thus an analytic sensitizer, not an essentialist predictor. A contemporary labor-market entrant socialized through remote coordination, public narratives about burnout, and heightened digital availability may develop explicit norms about boundaries; a same-age worker in unstable service employment may lack the bargaining power to enact those norms. Consequently, within-Gen Z differences should be expected. Lyons and Kuron (2014) emphasize inconsistent evidence and methodological obstacles in cohort comparison; Rudolph et al. (2021) argue for designs that disentangle age, period, and cohort. Any theory claiming that Gen Z "causes" quiet quitting must therefore demonstrate an effect beyond such alternative explanations.

2.6 Synthesis of the unresolved problem

Four literatures converge on a real behavior but attach conflicting meanings to it. Exchange research explains withdrawal after breach; demands research explains conservation of depleted capacity; citizenship research demonstrates ambiguity in voluntary work; and cohort research warns against demographic reification. Recent conceptual and empirical advances have already distinguished passive from deliberate and protest from boundary setting (Harris, 2025). The remaining theoretical task is narrower and more demanding: specify how assessments of legitimate reciprocity interact with motivation quality to generate different commitment trajectories, and explain how managerial interpretation can change those trajectories. This is an explanatory problem, not a claim that the constructs have never been studied together.

3. Theoretical Foundation and Integration

3.1 Social exchange theory as the primary foundation

Blau's (1964) social exchange framework conceptualizes durable relationships in terms of exchanges that create expectations of future reciprocation, with obligations often unspecified in advance. Gouldner (1960) clarifies reciprocity as more than immediate quid pro quo, and Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) emphasize the theory's multiple rules and ambiguities. Within organizations, employees may offer effort, loyalty, skill, initiative, or availability, while employers

provide pay, recognition, development, voice opportunities, and fair treatment. Perceived organizational support captures beliefs that the organization values and cares for employees (Eisenberger et al., 1986). The key prediction is not that every effort reduction represents calculation, but that people revise the extent of discretionary exchange when they judge relational treatment as legitimate or illegitimate.

This perspective offers a strong explanation for breach-driven quiet quitting. When promises about career progression or workload fairness seem unfulfilled, workers may narrow their contributions to reduce unreciprocated investment. Psychological-contract research demonstrates why expectations can be violated even when formal employment terms remain technically intact (Rousseau, 1989). Yet an explanatory limit persists: social exchange theory alone does not determine the experience of reducing effort. Workers can experience an identical decision as resentful self-protection, morally warranted repair of a reciprocal relationship, or autonomously chosen work–life ordering. Nor does exchange theory specify why an employee may remain deeply dedicated to an organization while refusing a particular manager's expectation of after-hours availability.

We extend exchange theory by distinguishing the perceived legitimacy of a discretionary demand from the sheer magnitude of discretionary effort. A norm requiring routinely uncompensated availability may be interpreted as an illegitimate claim on employee resources; refusal can therefore restore exchange proportionality. By contrast, declining to help during an agreed critical event after receiving substantial reciprocal support may communicate reduced willingness to reciprocate. Legitimacy is neither objective managerial preference nor simply worker convenience. It is a socially construed judgment influenced by explicit agreements, role safety obligations, compensation, workload distribution, procedural fairness, and the credibility of promised benefits (Morrison, 1994; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

3.2 Self-determination theory as the distinct motivational mechanism

Self-determination theory (SDT) contributes an explanation of the quality rather than merely the level of motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) distinguish more autonomous forms of regulation from those driven by external pressure or internal compulsion; Gagné and Deci (2005) extend this distinction to work settings. Deci et al. (2017) explain how satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness supports higher-quality work motivation, while Van den Broeck et al. (2016) synthesize evidence concerning those needs at work. The theory does not imply that autonomous employees necessarily work fewer hours. Rather, autonomy describes experienced volition: one can freely volunteer for extra work or freely decline it depending on value, capacity, and context.

SDT resolves a limitation of exchange explanations. Two employees can each perform only their agreed role yet have sharply different motivational states. One, experiencing thwarted autonomy and relational exclusion, withdraws optional assistance defensively; another, whose core tasks remain meaningful and whose manager respects limits, prioritizes sustainable involvement without rejecting the organization. Need satisfaction is not the same variable as organizational support: the former concerns an employee's motivational experience; the latter concerns appraisal of

organizational treatment. Keeping the distinction allows coherent integration without conflating predictors, mediators, and outcomes.

3.3 Integration, compatibility, and tension

The proposed causal ordering is: perceived reciprocal treatment and the legitimacy of discretionary demands shape the appraisal of the employment relationship; need-supportive versus controlling conditions shape how employees regulate optional effort; behavioral role-boundedness follows; and commitment develops according to the meaning of that behavior and subsequent organizational response. The two theories are compatible when reciprocal treatment creates room for autonomous participation. They diverge when an employee perceives an exchange as financially fair but controlling, or when autonomy is high but recognition and reciprocal obligations remain poor. These cases make integration necessary rather than decorative.

Organizational commitment supplies a critical discriminant outcome. Affective commitment is expected to decline most reliably when discretionary effort withdrawal expresses damaged reciprocity and thwarted belonging, not merely when total optional hours fall. Continuance commitment may remain high because outside options are limited, producing continued tenure without restored attachment (Meyer et al., 2002; Solinger et al., 2008). Conversely, a clear and autonomously maintained boundary can coexist with affective commitment where formal contributions are meaningful and reciprocal terms are honored. This is a contingent conceptual proposition, not a demonstrated general benefit of quiet quitting.

The integration also embeds time. Quiet quitting is frequently observed by others who infer motives without access to employees' appraisals. Management can interpret restricted availability as conscientious boundary management or as proof of indifference. The latter interpretation may produce exclusion, diminished opportunity, punitive evaluation, and eventual exchange deterioration. Accordingly, commitment is not assumed to be fixed before behavior: perceived treatment influences effort calibration, and responses to that calibration can recursively change treatment and attachment (Morrison, 2023). This dynamic creates a testable explanation for why initially adaptive restraint may eventually become harmful.

4. Conceptual Methodology

4.1 Design and literature identification

This is a theory-building conceptual inquiry, not an empirical investigation, systematic review, or meta-analysis. It combines theory integration with conceptual model development in the sense discussed by Jaakkola (2020). A purposive body of literature was assembled through targeted web-based searches of academic publisher records, scholarly indexing pages, PubMed records where available, and university publication repositories. Search concepts included "quiet quitting," "Generation Z," "organizational commitment," "social exchange," "self-determination," "organizational citizenship," "role boundaries," and related combinations. Particular attention was given to peer-reviewed scholarship published during 2021–2026, supplemented by foundational sources required for conceptual accuracy. These searches were not performed in a reproducible database protocol; no exhaustive retrieval, document-flow count, or formal risk-of-bias assessment is claimed.

The literature was retained according to its explanatory role, not its agreement with a preferred conclusion. Recent quiet-quitting publications were prioritized for construct definition, measurement debates, and evidence on relationships with perceived control, contract breach, psychological conditions, and commitment (Gray et al., 2025; Harris, 2025; Hervé & Oh, 2025). Established scholarship anchored the meanings of reciprocity, self-determined regulation, commitment, organizational citizenship, and generational effects. Publisher or authoritative bibliographic records were used to check titles, authors, years, journal details, and DOI strings where supplied. Source claims were kept narrower than the concepts or findings reported in those records.

4.2 Synthesis and proposition construction

The synthesis proceeded through four analytic comparisons. First, competing quiet-quitting definitions were separated into behavior, antecedent, motive, and outcome to avoid circularity. Second, the literature was organized around four explanations—exchange adjustment, demand-related withdrawal, role-boundary stewardship, and cohort narratives—rather than chronological study summaries. Third, social exchange and SDT were compared to isolate their nonredundant explanatory mechanisms. Fourth, the model examined counterexamples, including satisfied employees who protect personal time and constrained employees who remain despite low attachment. These steps informed the antecedent–process–outcome distinctions represented in Figure 1.

Propositions were constructed as conditional claims: the same outwardly bounded contribution should have different implications when coupled with different appraisals of reciprocity and autonomy. Competing explanations were retained wherever the available literature could not adjudicate between them. The analysis therefore does not infer causal effects from cross-sectional associations, assert universality for Gen Z, or claim that managerial interventions have been tested by this manuscript. Its contribution is a falsifiable explanatory architecture, intended to direct subsequent longitudinal, multilevel, and cross-cultural research rather than to simulate an empirical research procedure.

5. Conceptual Analysis and Framework Development

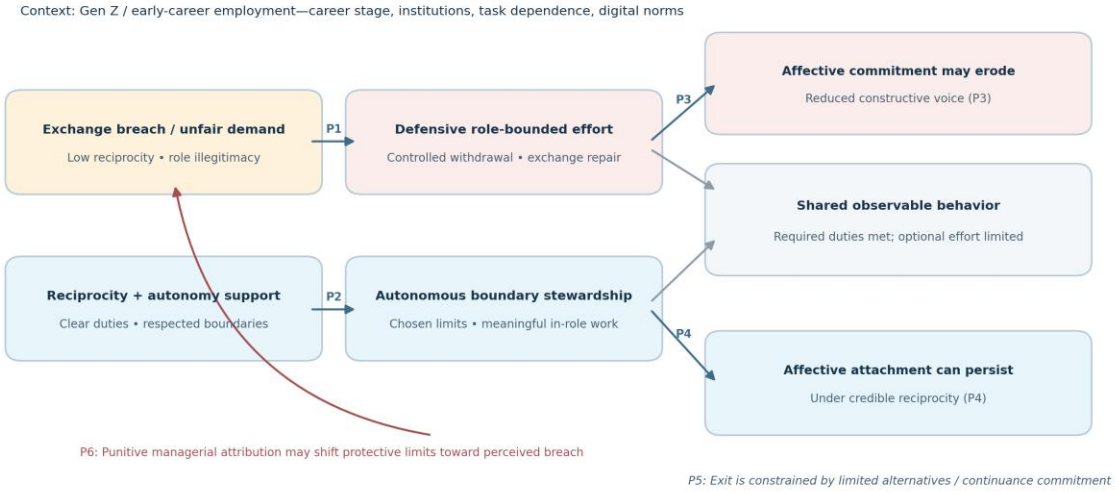
5.1 The effort–commitment decoupling framework

Figure 1 depicts a distinction between the observable effort state and its relational meaning. The antecedent layer comprises perceived reciprocal fulfillment or breach and perceived legitimacy of discretionary-role expectations. The motivational layer distinguishes defensive exchange repair under need frustration from autonomous stewardship under need support. Both can yield role-bounded effort: doing required work while reducing optional contributions. The outcome layer is not a single commitment score; it distinguishes affective attachment, constrained staying, and constructive voice. Supervisory attribution and subsequent treatment form the feedback mechanism. Generation Z is situated as an employment-context descriptor rather than a deterministic cause.

This architecture avoids equating a limit on organizational citizenship with an absence of identification. An employee can decline optional overtime while remaining proud of the employer’s purpose, doing excellent prescribed work, and offering timely safety voice. Another employee can

maintain the same output solely because exit is economically infeasible. The crucial measurements are actual scope of legitimate obligations, changes in optional behaviors, employee-reported motivation, subsequent organizational response, and changes in target-specific commitment. Without these separations, a statistical association between quiet-quitting scores and low commitment can be partly tautological if the scale already includes feeling detached.

Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Framework



Note. P1–P6 correspond to the formal propositions. The convergent behavioral appearance does not imply equivalent motivation or outcomes.

5.2 Propositions: distinct pathways and outcomes

Proposition 1 (P1): Exchange breach and reactive effort calibration. Perceived psychological-contract breach and illegitimate discretionary demands are expected to increase defensive role-bounded effort through an assessment of insufficient reciprocity, especially when perceived organizational support is low. The premise follows the reciprocity tradition and organizational support literature (Gouldner, 1960; Eisenberger et al., 1986), while recent evidence links contract breach to quiet-quitting behavior (Gray et al., 2025). An alternative is that employees maintain extra-role contributions to protect future opportunities despite perceived breach. The proposition is therefore conditional on the feasibility of reducing optional contributions without immediate role or livelihood loss; it predicts a tendency, not an invariant response.

Proposition 2 (P2): Autonomy-supported boundary stewardship. Where employers honor role agreements and support employee autonomy, workers are expected to be able to limit discretionary availability as autonomous boundary stewardship rather than defensive disengagement. The proposed mechanism is preservation of volition and need satisfaction while commitment-relevant formal contributions continue. SDT and boundary scholarship support this distinction (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Kossek et al., 2012; Deci et al., 2017). A plausible competing interpretation is that boundary practices merely correlate with a lower initial work centrality. The proposition requires

testing against baseline identity, workload, job flexibility, and hours, and it does not claim that all self-imposed limits qualify as quiet quitting.

Proposition 3 (P3): Defensive recalibration and affective erosion. After controlling for prior affective commitment and compliant task performance, breach-driven role-bounded effort is expected to predict subsequent reductions in affective organizational commitment and constructive voice when the perceived breach remains unresolved. The causal argument is that the behavior both expresses and reinforces an appraisal that additional contribution lacks reciprocal meaning. Hervé and Oh (2025) connect perceived control, affective commitment, and quiet quitting, while Morrison (2023) describes conditions under which voice is withheld. Reverse causation remains possible: declining commitment may precede effort reduction. A valid test must model reciprocal paths rather than infer direction from contemporaneous reports.

Proposition 4 (P4): Conditional preservation of attachment. Among employees with high perceived reciprocity, genuine control over nonwork boundaries, and meaningful in-role tasks, autonomous boundary stewardship is expected to show a weaker negative association with subsequent affective commitment than defensive role-bounded effort and may coexist with stable attachment. This is the critical decoupling proposition. Citizenship can be costly when organizational pressure makes it practically compulsory (Bolino et al., 2013), whereas autonomous motivation is compatible with positive organizational involvement (Deci et al., 2017). A rival explanation is selection: strongly committed employees may simply have more bargaining power to maintain limits. Panel designs should therefore account for role status and negotiation power, without assuming a positive causal benefit from restraint.

Proposition 5 (P5): Constrained compliance without affective loyalty. Under perceived job insecurity or limited external alternatives, employees with weak affective attachment may remain in employment while restricting discretionary effort; continuance-based staying will weaken the correspondence between role-bounded behavior and actual exit. The three-component literature distinguishes necessity from desire to remain (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Meyer et al., 2002), and the quiet-quitting literature observes continuing employment within restricted contributions (Harris, 2025). A counterargument is that insecure workers may overperform to avoid dismissal. Thus, the proposition is most relevant where minimum-role compliance is safe and the organization cannot readily punish the withholding of genuinely optional labor.

Proposition 6 (P6): The managerial-attribution feedback loop. When managers label autonomously bounded effort as disloyalty and respond with exclusion, punitive evaluation, or reduced developmental support, initially protective boundary stewardship is expected to shift over time toward perceived exchange breach and declining affective commitment. The proposed mechanism links observable conduct to attribution, enacted treatment, and renewed employee appraisal. Research on role definitions, voice, and quiet-quitting heterogeneity makes this sequence plausible (Morrison, 1994, 2023). An alternative is a constructive managerial response that clarifies duties, compensates additional work, or renegotiates coverage, thereby preventing the spiral. P6 is therefore explicitly a conditional, potentially reversible feedback relationship.

5.3 Boundary conditions and empirical discriminants

The pathways should vary by task interdependence, safety criticality, availability norms, and institutional protection. In jobs where emergency assistance is a codified duty, withholding it is not role-bounded quiet quitting as defined here. In highly collaborative settings, even legitimately optional withdrawals can impose costs on colleagues; these costs are theoretically distinct from whether the employee remains attached. Remote and hybrid work can intensify ambiguity about availability, particularly when digital monitoring replaces negotiated expectations (Wang et al., 2021). Cultural norms surrounding obligation and hierarchy may also shape whether boundary-setting is interpreted as appropriate exchange adjustment or interpersonal disrespect. The framework does not presume that any single boundary norm is globally legitimate.

Gen Z membership is predicted to operate, if at all, through historically situated conditions—career-entry power, platform-mediated work norms, job insecurity, and explicit boundary narratives—not through an innate attitude toward work. A rigorous generational claim would require comparisons of similarly situated workers across cohorts and periods, with attention to age and tenure confounding (Rudolph et al., 2021). Within-cohort diversity should be evaluated rather than averaged away. This positioning also prevents the framework from confusing employee self-regulation with a fixed generational personality and permits investigation of the same mechanisms among employees of other ages.

The model offers concrete discriminant predictions. If quiet quitting were uniformly disengagement, equivalent levels of bounded discretionary effort would reliably predict lower future affective commitment regardless of reciprocal fairness or autonomy. Under the proposed framework, this link should differ systematically between defensive and autonomous motivation; further, managerial misrecognition should predict within-person changes from one pathway toward another. Testing separate behavioral and attitudinal scales, using diary-based measures and independent role audits, would permit rejection of the model should the proposed pathway distinctions fail. Conceptual novelty depends on such vulnerable predictions, not merely on additional arrows in a diagram.

Table 1. Proposition summary and predicted conditions

Proposition	Conceptual relationship	Theoretical rationale	Expected relationship
P1	Perceived breach + illegitimate requests → defensive limits	Reciprocity deficit; low support	Increase in defensive role-boundedness
P2	Honored exchange + autonomy → self-chosen limits	Need support; legitimate role scope	Increase in autonomous boundary stewardship
P3	Unresolved defensive limits → weaker affective bond / voice	Reinforcement of damaged exchange appraisal	Negative lagged association with commitment
P4	Autonomous limits under fair exchange → durable attachment	Volitional boundaries protect meaningful role participation	Weaker negative / possibly null association
P5	Insecure alternatives + weak attachment → staying	Continuance-based constraint separates tenure and desire	Muted association between effort limits and exit
P6	Punitive attribution → breach and later disengagement	Management response endogenously changes reciprocity	Conditional erosion / potentially reversible

Note. All propositions are conceptual and require empirical testing. The two pathways share a behavioral surface but differ in motivational origin and predicted commitment trajectories.

6. Discussion

6.1 Interpretation and relation to prior scholarship

The effort–commitment decoupling framework proposes that withdrawal of discretionary effort is a relationally ambiguous signal. This does not deny costs to organizations when optional helping or proactive voice declines. Instead, it challenges the inference that these costs necessarily reveal a lack of psychological attachment. Early conceptual debates questioned whether quiet quitting adds a distinctive construct to existing categories (Armstrong & Pfandler, 2024; Atalay & Dağıstan, 2024). More recent research separates behavioral scope, intentionality, and motivational basis (Gray et al., 2025). The present account builds on—rather than claims to have invented—these distinctions by specifying how reciprocal legitimacy and autonomy jointly organize commitment trajectories and by introducing managerial attribution as a temporal mechanism.

The framework also qualifies classic exchange predictions. The orthodox expectation is often stated as poor treatment producing reduced employee contribution. Yet treating every curtailed extra-role behavior as a contribution shortfall ignores whether the preexisting norm was legitimate and sustainable. Recalibration can be an attempt to repair an exchange or a reaction to its breakdown. Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) note ambiguity in exchange rules; the proposed legitimacy mechanism turns that ambiguity into a substantive explanatory variable. Boundary stewardship becomes compatible with affective commitment when legitimate role fulfillment and autonomous participation are preserved, whereas repeatedly unrecognized extra-role demands can make continued commitment harder to sustain.

Affective and continuance commitment further clarify apparently contradictory observations. Low discretionary effort can coexist with continued tenure because staying may reflect necessity rather than desire. Conversely, high effort can coexist with weak emotional attachment if workers respond to surveillance, insecure contracts, or career incentives. Meyer et al. (2002) demonstrate why the components should not be conflated; Klein et al. (2012) clarify why behavioral intensity is not itself a definition of commitment. An empirical paper reporting only turnover intentions, generalized engagement, or a composite of commitment components would obscure the framework's key distinctions. The proposed claim therefore concerns quality and target of attachment, not simply employee retention.

6.2 Three theoretical contributions

The first contribution is behavioral–attitudinal disentanglement. Recent quiet-quitting scholarship has already made substantial progress on definitions, including competing narrow and multidimensional scales (Anand et al., 2024). The missing element addressed here is an explicit prediction for when equivalent role-bounded behaviors have contrasting affective-commitment meanings. The framework treats observable restraint as an explanandum and tests underlying motive, reciprocal appraisal, and subsequent attachment separately, reducing risks of definition-driven correlations. It can thus produce empirical evidence that refutes the theory rather than merely confirming overlapping scale content.

The second contribution is the extension of reciprocity from effort quantity to scope legitimacy. Prior exchange research establishes that support and fulfilled obligations generate favorable relational responses (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). The extension

recognizes that organizations and employees also negotiate which contributions are fairly requested. A refusal of illegitimate work may be part of maintaining a reciprocal relationship, while withholding a genuinely consensual contribution may erode it. This explanation is unavailable from effort counts alone and is especially salient where managers equate perpetual availability with loyalty. It does not imply that individual employees can unilaterally redefine safety-critical obligations.

The third contribution is temporal and social: the same conduct may acquire a different motivational meaning through managerial attribution. Harris (2025) shows the value of longitudinal analysis, and Other researchers emphasize how quiet quitting is variously interpreted. The framework specifies an endogenous spiral in which a boundary is punished, reciprocity appraisals worsen, and affective attachment subsequently erodes. The process can also be interrupted by transparent renegotiation. This shifts attention from static "quiet quitter" types toward changing employment relationships, making management behavior part of the causal explanation rather than a neutral observer of employee attitudes.

6.3 Managerial and policy implications

Managers should begin by clarifying which tasks are mandatory, voluntary, developmentally valuable, or compensated. P1 implies that repeated ambiguities and perceived breach may encourage defensive recalibration; a discussion about workload distribution, recognition, and promises is more theoretically appropriate than interpreting every refused task as unwillingness. P2 and P4 imply that flexible hours and agreed response windows may help employees sustain autonomous commitment when core work is well designed. These are design implications, not interventions demonstrated as effective by this conceptual study. Work systems still require equitable coverage, and boundaries should be coordinated where one person's limits shift unrecognized burdens to others.

Performance management should distinguish task quality, genuine role violations, constructive voice, and optional organizational citizenship. P5 cautions against assuming continued tenure proves engagement or that an employee with limited alternatives is satisfied. P6 implies that stigmatizing labels may become self-fulfilling when they justify withheld mentoring or advancement. Before penalizing a perceived reduction in "going above and beyond," a supervisor should determine whether the activity was required, whether expectations were communicated, and whether resource demands were distributed fairly. Chaudhry (2024) emphasizes organizational work, growth, and cultural conditions for Gen Z, yet age-targeted rules should be avoided unless reliable evidence demonstrates unique needs beyond career stage.

At the policy level, credible written arrangements for availability, transparent workload accounting, and meaningful employee voice could reduce ambiguity over scope legitimacy. The model does not argue for a blanket norm of minimum contribution or for guaranteed rewards for discretionary effort. Rather, it makes a narrower point: cooperative extra-role behavior is most defensible when it is genuinely voluntary and embedded within a credible reciprocal arrangement. Organizations should avoid confusing a sustainable boundary with a performance failure and

should investigate whether apparent silence reflects low motivation or fear of adverse reactions (Morrison, 2014, 2023).

6.4 Limitations and future testing

The paper has no original data, and none of P1–P6 is empirically validated here. Its integration may understate institutional forces such as union representation, collective bargaining, contractual precarity, and occupational power. Social exchange and SDT also do not fully explain all emotional, moral, or identity-based sources of work effort. Employees may overwork for professional pride or withdraw for health reasons even in fair, autonomy-supportive environments. Measurement of role legitimacy risks common-source bias and contested perceptions. The concept of quiet quitting itself remains disputed, and an overly narrow definition could omit forms of psychological withdrawal recognized by multidimensional approaches.

A suitable test would employ a preregistered, multiwave study of employed early-career workers and age-comparable controls, combining employee appraisals, supervisor reports, documented job requirements, and time-stamped changes in extra-role effort. Researchers should measure contract breach, perceived organizational support, need satisfaction, perceived scope legitimacy, motivation for restraint, affective and continuance commitment, voice, and subsequent supervisory responses as separate constructs. Cross-lagged panel or intensive longitudinal models could compare P3's erosive path with P4's protective path and test whether P6 operates through worsening perceived reciprocity. A within-person design would be particularly valuable because the model predicts transitions rather than immutable quiet-quitter categories.

Complementary research should use vignettes to vary compensation, emergency obligations, prior organizational support, and managers' language while holding the behavioral reduction constant. Such experiments could isolate role-legitimacy and attribution mechanisms more clearly than retrospective surveys. Comparative studies should stratify employees by occupation, contract security, national context, and remote-work arrangements; age–period–cohort designs should be preferred over one-time Gen Z comparisons (Rudolph et al., 2018, 2021). Qualitative process tracing can also determine whether workers perceive bounded contribution as exchange repair, survival, or relational abandonment. Findings that show an invariant negative commitment effect of all legitimate role-bounded effort would challenge the theory directly.

7. Conclusion

Quiet quitting is not a sufficient diagnosis of commitment. The behavioral decision to meet obligations without offering additional labor sits at the intersection of perceived reciprocity, legitimate role scope, and autonomous self-regulation. By integrating social exchange theory with self-determination theory, the paper identifies two routes to outwardly similar effort: defensive recalibration after perceived breach and autonomy-preserving stewardship within a credible exchange. Their expected consequences for affective organizational commitment differ, and managers' responses may transform one into the other over time. Continuance constraints further separate remaining employed from wanting to remain.

The particular visibility of quiet quitting among Generation Z should prompt examination of job design, early-career insecurity, and changing boundary norms—not sweeping demographic

judgments. The proposed six-proposition framework advances an effort–commitment decoupling explanation that can be tested through behavior-specific measures, longitudinal designs, independent assessments of role obligations, and comparisons across cohorts and institutional settings. Its broader implication is that organizational commitment is not measured by the unlimited supply of discretionary effort; it is a relational bond whose durability depends partly on the fairness and legitimacy of what organizations ask employees to give.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no financial, professional, technological, commercial, institutional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the content, interpretation, or conclusions presented in this article.

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Data Availability

No new clinical, experimental, or patient-level datasets were generated or analysed during this study. All information discussed in the review was obtained from the published literature and publicly available sources cited in the manuscript. Additional information relating to the review may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Informed Consent

Not applicable. No patients or other human participants were recruited, and no identifiable personal or clinical information was collected or analysed for this review.

Use of Generative AI

Consistent with the guidance of Egan et al. (2025), we disclose that ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used solely for copyediting and language refinement purposes to improve clarity, readability, grammar, sentence structure, and consistency of expression. All substantive aspects of the study, including the conceptualization of the research idea, theorization, development of the research model, methodology, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and development of conclusions, were independently conducted and reported by the authors.

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