How to Solve Quiet Quitting:
Social Media Narratives, Worker Stereotypes,
and Managerial Control

Abstract. Managerial control practices evolve as elite actors—CEOs, business schools, and consulting firms—legitimate new approaches. Yet, platformized journalism increasingly elevates *social media narratives*—press coverage of viral online content produced by unknown creators seeking to monetize attention. Can such narratives shape managerial cognition, or do managers dismiss them as low-quality inputs to evidence-based decision-making? We examine 'quiet quitting,' a news story based on viral TikTok content that received unusually widespread business press coverage in 2022–2023 and framed Gen Z employees as leading a historic rise in counterproductive work behaviors. Our qualitative analysis of news articles (N=170) shows that journalists themselves raised concerns about the narrative's accuracy, external validity, and newsworthiness, even as the story circulated. Across a series of survey experiments (N=3,167), we find that managers exposed to the dubious quiet quitting narrative did not increase selection of empathetic normative control practices (e.g. town halls, employee surveys). Instead, they significantly increased selection of rational (e.g. pay-for-performance incentives) and coercive control practices (e.g. returning workers to the office, digital surveillance). The narrative activated worker stereotypes about opportunism, and this mechanism persisted even when we provided critical commentary or company-specific indicators of strong work engagement. The findings advance the literature on managerial control by identifying social media narratives as a novel factor that can shape managerial cognition. The study more generally illustrates emerging challenges to collective sensemaking posed by the rising centrality of digital platforms in civic life.

Keywords: managerial control, management practices, social media, digital platforms, worker stereotypes

(238/250 words)

"Leaders at large and well-known companies in finance, tech, and health care are very concerned… Human resource professionals say leaders are concerned about whether they can rely on their employees if there's a recession- or if they can afford to fire and replace quiet quitters in a tight labor market… Leaders are worried they won't be able to spot it spreading under their noses." -CEOs seek help to deal with quiet quitting. The Boston Globe; 9/24/22 [77]

Managerial control is a central concern for organization theory. The control practices managers select to motivate their workforce have important consequences for worker autonomy, wellbeing and productivity (Burawoy, 1982; Barley & Kunda, 1992; Bernstein, 2017). Organization scholars have identified critical "longwaves"—historical periods spanning decades of time—where a particular control ideology becomes widely accepted by managers as efficient, appropriate and taken-for-granted (Bodrožić & Adler, 2018). This work portrays managerial control practices and their underlying rationales or ideologies as a response to technological and environmental change. Faced with uncertain and changing operating environments, managers turn to the advice of key thought leaders—CEO's, management gurus, elite business school professors, and consultants—who prescribe management practices that eventually become institutionalized and accepted as legitimate.

However, we know less about whether managers' interpretations of effective control practices may be shaped by media narratives circulating in the business press. This gap is noteworthy given the press's central role in facilitating collective sensemaking around post-pandemic changes in the world of work. Indeed, management researchers increasingly note the challenge of distinguishing rhetoric from reality in the business press accounts of "the new normal"—interpretations of co-occurring policy, technology and demographic impacts (Cameron, Chan, & Anteby, 2022; Anthony, Bechky, & Fayard, 2023; Bridoux et al., 2024). This difficulty in collective sensemaking stems in part from the transformation of journalism itself: the rise of digital media since the late 1990s has eroded the traditional "fourth estate" model, as competition

from online content creators, steep revenue declines, and widespread job losses have rendered journalism increasingly precarious (Abernathy, 2020). In the digital media environment, web analytics and audience metrics now shape editorial priorities, exerting greater pressure than ever for journalists to compete with online content creators for audience attention (Van Aelst et al., 2017; Christin, 2018; Reid & Ramarajan, 2021; Jiang & Wrzesniewski, 2023).

This emerging digital news environment has given rise to 'social media narratives'—press coverage of viral online content produced by creators seeking to monetize attention (Reinemann et al., 2012; Otto, Glogger, & Boukes, 2017; Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, & López-García, 2022). Reflecting this shift, the 2022 American Journalist survey finds that nearly three-quarters of U.S. journalists (74.3%) now rely on social media to identify story ideas (Willnat, Weaver, & Wilhoit, 2024). As journalists increasingly source stories from viral content, scholars across communication, sociology, and political science have raised quality concerns about blurred boundaries between entertainment and news, and the implications for our collective sensemaking. Ideally, managers would respond to questionable claims with evidence-based management— integrating the best available research, local organizational data, and practitioner judgment for managerial control decisions (Rousseau, 2006; Reay, Berta, and Kohn 2009). Yet, we still know little about how managers might interpret these social media narratives, how these narratives shape their perceptions of workers, and whether they influence the control practices managers adopt.

Can social media narratives shape managerial cognition, or do managers recognize and dismiss them as low-quality inputs to evidence-based decision-making? We examine this question using the case of 'quiet quitting'—a social media narrative claiming a historical rise in counterproductive work behaviors, particularly among Gen Z workers—which dominated headlines in the year following the end of the 2020 pandemic. Several features of this news story

make it a relevant case for studying the effects of social media narratives on managerial cognition. First, we view 'quiet quitting' as a prototypical social media narrative, since the term and source material cited in news articles originated from videos posted on the TikTok social media platform. Second, unlike other social media narratives, 'quiet quitting' achieved unusually widespread reach among managers. Between August 2022-August 2023, there were 772 articles in major news and business sources mentioning the term. Although we focus on news articles, the media narrative circulated more widely, becoming a topic of discussion on cable news, talk shows, and digital platforms, garnering up to 2.18 billion potential impressions across major social media platforms by mid-September 2022 (Zara 2022). Finally, unlike other news stories about questionable social media content—such as TikTok's "girl math", LinkedIn's Crying CEO, or claims of Gen Z ditching resumes for TikTok videos—the 'quiet quitting' narrative had direct relevance for the exercise of managerial control. The narrative identified a problem for managers to solve—whether real or imagined—and consultants were quick to offer solutions for how to effectively manage people in an increasingly hybrid environment. All these features make 'quiet quitting' an ideal context to explore whether a social media narrative can influence managerial decision-making.

To explore our research question, we began by conducting a systematic qualitative analysis of articles in major US news and business sources, which led us to characterize 'quiet quitting' as a dubious social media narrative with prescriptive implications for managerial decision-making. We found that 1) critical peer journalists expressed concerns about the accuracy, external validity, and newsworthiness of viral videos as source content for news, 2) the "quiet quitting" narrative used online entertainment content (e.g., trending videos) to tell a story about offline historical change in worker behaviors (e.g., workplace trends), which was made plausible by misinterpreted survey data and uncertain real-world events (e.g., entry of Gen Z in the workplace, pandemic-

induced remote work uptake, and tight labor market conditions), and 3) non-scientific experts, such as consultants, career coaches, authors, and HR technology vendors, provided prescriptive solutions (e.g., more coercive and rational control practices) to resolve the purported problem of quiet quitting. Having established 'quiet quitting' as a dubious social media narrative, we then tested its causal effect on managers' control decisions. Survey experiments showed that exposure to the 'quiet quitting' narrative led managers to select more rational and coercive control practices, such as pay-for-performance incentives, returning workers to the office, and digital surveillance. The narrative activated worker stereotypes about opportunism, a mechanism that proved sticky even when we tested two interventions designed to encourage evidence-based decision making (e.g. critical commentary about the accuracy of the narrative, and providing company-specific performance indicators of strong work engagement). Our findings advance the literature on managerial control by identifying social media narratives as an overlooked factor that can shape managerial cognition, even in the presence of countervailing local evidence. The study more generally illustrates emerging challenges to collective sensemaking about work and employment posed by the rising centrality of digital platforms in civic life.

MANAGERIAL CONTROL IN ORGANIZATION THEORY

Managerial control is focused on the problem of how to ensure worker activities are aligned with the goals of the organization (Ouchi, 1979; Burawoy, 1982; Barley & Kunda, 1992; Bernstein, 2017; Gill, 2019). This involves deciding on which management practices are likely to garner not just workers' consent to the ongoing employment relationship, but rather a deep and enduring sense of commitment to their work. This is particularly critical in knowledge-intensive work environments where professionals experience considerable autonomy and latitude over the

extent of discretionary effort they choose to provide (Cappelli & Eldor, 2023). Managerial control practices are necessary because the dynamic nature of knowledge-intensive work makes it difficult to specify by contract exactly what is required from employees. Hence, the effective exercise of control is often seen as one of the most important aspects of managerial work.

Sets of control practices tend to diffuse together with a common underlying managerial ideology. Barley and Kunda (1992) describe three fundamental control ideologies: rational control aimed at "appealing to self-interest", normative control aimed at "winning hearts and minds", and coercive control aimed at "observing and disciplining". Although subsequent theories have proposed more complex arrays and combinations of control dimensions (see Gill, 2019 for an overview), we hew close to the classical text for its parsimony and clear alignment with specific management practices. For example, organization scholars have operationalized rational control by examining pay-for-performance incentives (Sewell, Barker, & Nyberg, 2012; Maltarich et al., 2017), normative control by describing strong cultures and valued professional identities (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984; Anteby, 2008; Koppman, Mattarelli, & Gupta, 2016), and coercive control by studying visual observation, peer scrutiny, and termination of low performers (Sewell, 1998; Sewell & Barker, 2006; Bernstein, 2012; Anteby & Chan, 2018; Rahman & Valentine, 2021).

Research on managerial control presents distinct "longwave" periods or multi-decade historical eras where a particular control ideology gains dominance. This work generally presents a transition away from the coercive control that characterized late 19th factory floors, with subsequent shifts between normative and rational ideologies, as embodied in the progression of industrial betterment, scientific management, human relations, systems rationalism and organizational culture movements that successively defined managerial thinking between 1860-

2005 (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Abrahamson & Eisenman, 2008; Bodrožić & Adler, 2018). Whether driven by technological revolutions, business cycles, or broad cultural sentiments, these historical accounts suggest a sequential process whereby the dominant management ideology, and related management practices, comes to be seen as efficient, legitimate and taken-for-granted.

Elite Thought Leaders in the Traditional Media Landscape

Historical research on management control also identifies several key institutional actors—influential CEO's, elite business schools and consultants—who have facilitated gradual shifts in managerial control practices (Abrahamson, 1996; Soule & Strang, 1998; Dobbin, 2009; Fourcade & Khurana, 2013; Fligstein & Goldstein, 2022). First, influential CEO's have often been credited for serving as high-profile exemplars whose innovations are emulated by peers at other firms. For example, stories of the industrialists Cornelius Vanderbilt, George Pullman and N.O. Nelson building housing and YMCA's for their workers are thought to have catalyzed the industrial betterment movement of the mid to late 19th century (Barley & Kunda, 1992; 366). Other celebrity leaders have been less benevolent, with GE CEO Jack Welch becoming famous for his then-novel strategy of aggressive workforce downsizing, which set a "gold standard" for other CEOs to emulate (Hegele & Kieser, 2001). This diffusion pathway reflects the small world of CEO talent created by restrictive board hiring preferences that prioritize experience and embeddedness (Khurana, 2002).

Elite business schools are also seen as legitimating new management control practices, through curriculum design choices that diffuse across business schools, with students and consultants bringing these prescriptions into their firms (Khurana, 2010; Jung & Shin, 2019). For example, the Harvard Business School is described as amplifying the engineer Frederick Taylor's

rational control doctrine of scientific management in the early 20th century, by adopting it as an organizing framework for all core courses and by bringing Taylor himself in to lecture at the school (Barley & Kunda, 1992). The subsequent human relations counter-movement is also widely credited to Harvard Business School professors Elton Mayo and Fritz Roethlisberger, whose experiments at General Electric's Hawthorne plants garnered widespread attention and led to the development of industrial relations centers and institutes at other elite universities (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Guillen, 1994). A similar pattern is described in the systems rationalism movement of the mid 20th century that saw operations research ideas adopted from the military into business school core curriculum, and the organizational culture countermovement that emerged in the 1980's which saw business school professors advocate for "total quality" practices used by Japanese auto manufacturers (Bodrožić & Adler, 2018).

Prior research has also emphasized the role of consultants as important institutional actors facilitating the diffusion of managerial control practices (Armbrüster, 2006; David, Sine, & Haveman, 2013; Waisberg & Nelson, 2018). The influence of consultants is central in classical accounts of diffusion, as "large organizations choose from a relatively small set of major consulting firms, which, like Johnny Appleseeds, spread a few organizational models throughout the land" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983: 152). For example, during the scientific management movement, a now obscure consulting company led by Charles Eugène Bedaux advised over 700 American businesses on how to use the "Bedaux system" to standardize time spent on a task, accounting for rest and fatigue in determining worker compensation (Guillen, 1994: 57). Internal HR consultants also played a critical role by advocating for the formalization of HR processes, diversity management, and work-life practices, initially framing such efforts as legal compliance but later re-casting them as efficient when faced with deregulation (Dobbin, 2009).

Much of this historical research on US managerial ideologies examines the post-World War II era—described by communications scholars as the 'golden age' of professional journalism where "the 'news media' became gatekeepers of the public agenda, the sources of information about pressing issues of the day, and the public space in which (mainly elites) debated the issues" (Williams and Carpini 2020; p. 392). Perhaps for this reason, prior research on managerial control tends to portray journalists as a passive conduit for disseminating ideologies crafted by elite thought leaders (Abrahamson, 1996).

The Rise of Social Media Narratives in the Digital Media Landscape

The rapid growth of digital media in the late 1990's and early 2000's upended the prior traditional media landscape by forcing journalists to compete with digital content creators over audience attention. In the prior model, professional journalists viewed themselves as the "fourth estate", gatekeeping public discourse and governing the nation by holding government accountable to citizens (Baughman, 2015). However, beginning in the 1990's, online competition ushered in a sharp decline in readership and jobs which has accelerated over time (Daly, 2012). Total revenues of US newspapers peaked at about $49.4B in 2005 and have precipitously declined by 80.4% to just $9.7B in 2022 (Pew, 2022). This collapse has resulted in the closing of 2,100 newspapers from 2004-2020 (Abernathy, 2020), transforming a once stable career path into a form of precarious employment, and expanding the share of news stories written by freelancers (Gollmitzer, 2014, 2019). This has raised concerns about the ability of journalism to constrain misconduct and promote accountability, particularly with the disappearance of local news reporting in many regions (Choi & Valente, 2023).

Widespread adoption of web analytics among journalists has exacerbated this problem, introducing evaluative pressures that prioritize audience engagement over news accuracy. Prior to web analytics, evaluative metrics centered on sales of an entire issue, allowing greater journalistic autonomy by obscuring the role of any individual article within the issue. Christin's (2018; 2020) detailed ethnographic fieldwork inside a New York news publication from 2012-2013, provides a rare glimpse into how the adoption of ChartBeat—software that tracks article clicks, social media mentions, and duration of views, and reader geography—redefined what a "successful" article accomplishes. Facing these new article-level pressures, some journalists boosted their traffic numbers by splitting articles into multiple pages yielding more clicks, or using slideshows requiring readers to click through multiple images to get the full story (Christin 2018; 1403). While many expressed disdain for traffic metrics and gaming tactics, they were also acutely aware of how their numbers would affect their promotion and advancement prospects.

Competition between traditional media and digital media has led to the proliferation of 'social media narratives'— journalistic coverage of viral online content from relatively unknown content creators. A growing majority of journalists (74.3%) now use social media to identify story ideas, according to the most recent 2022 wave of the American Journalist survey of over 1,600 journalists (Willnat, Weaver and Wilhoit 2024). Covering viral social media content can be tempting since it has already been proven to generate audience engagement, despite often questionable news value. Mears' (2023) ethnographic study of successful content creators reveals how production of videos designed to go viral on Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok and YouTube, involves depicting 'situational authenticity' by staging ordinary scenes meant to mimic everyday life situations. Mears describes her ethnographic participation in the content farm's creation of 'authentic-looking' viral videos: "I played a nurse who received a puppy (20 million views), a

Wal-Mart shopper surprised by a prankster in a bunny costume (2 million), and a scorned lover who catches her man cheating (190 million). My name was never mentioned on camera nor in the tag or title, because viewers do not care about the identity of the nurse or the Wal-Mart shopper, only about what happens to her for those few minutes of the attention-grabbing situation" (p. 8). This integration of low-cost social media content has led to increasingly "blurred boundaries between news and entertainment" (Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and López-García 2022) and growing quality concerns about the "dumbing-down, tabloidization, infotainment and softening of news" in ways that undermine collective sensemaking (Reinemann et al., 2012; Otto, Glogger and Boukes 2017; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

Concerns about declining news quality have led many journalists to experience profound role conflict and departure from the profession. Reid and Ramarajan's (2021) interviews with 102 journalists find that many struggled to build careers without chasing "clicks" or producing "gossip", with many now avoiding previously-safe traditional news jobs for fear that competitive pressures would leave them "highly vulnerable to pressure to selectively report or manipulate the facts" or to take shortcuts that "compromised the rigor of their reporting by prioritizing speed over investigative depth" (Reid & Ramarajan, 2021; p.1920-1923). Jiang and Wrzesniewski (2023) interviewed 94 journalists in 2016, asking about their journey in the field and decisions to stay or leave. Their findings led them to describe the cognitive and emotional experience of occupational destabilization: "Every journalist in our sample acknowledged that journalism had been undergoing severe destabilization. Without being prompted, most interviewees likened journalism to a sick or dying person, or compared the experience of seeing the occupation weakened to mourning the death of a loved one" (Jiang & Wrzesniewski, 2023; 1022). Facing declining

professional autonomy and sustained job losses, many chose to leave the industry and re-invent themselves in other occupations.

Taken together, research on the growing influence of social media in news production carries significant implications for our understanding of managerial control. The destabilization of journalism as an occupation and the rise of social media narratives suggest that business press coverage may be less reliable today than in the eras most carefully examined by management scholars. Studies of the contemporary digital media landscape indicate that stories derived from viral online content often feature questionable claims and blurred boundaries between entertainment and news. This raises an important question: *can a social media narrative shape managerial cognition, or do managers recognize and dismiss such content as a low-quality input to evidence-based decision-making?* To investigate this, we examine the case of quiet quitting—a viral social media narrative that offers a theoretically-relevant lens into how digitally mediated discourse may influence decisions about managerial control practices.

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We examined our research question across one qualitative study and three experimental studies. Table 1 provides an overview of the method, sample and contribution of each individual study. Study 1 used qualitative analysis of archival data to establish the "quiet quitting" narrative as a prototypical instance of a dubious social media narrative. This study demonstrated that critical peer journalists expressed concerns about the accuracy, external validity, and newsworthiness of viral videos as source content for news and that the quiet quitting narrative conflated online entertainment content (e.g., trending videos) with offline historical change in worker behaviors (e.g., workplace trends) by leveraging misinterpreted survey data and uncertain real-world events

(e.g., entry of Gen Z in the workplace, pandemic-induced remote work uptake, and tight labor market conditions). Despite shaky evidentiary grounds, the "quiet quitting" narrative leveraged non-scientific expert perspectives to offer concrete prescriptive recommendations for how managers should address this "real-world" problem (i.e., increased coercive and rational control practices).

Studies 2-4 then turned to an experimental approach to establish the causal effect of this social media narrative on managerial control decisions and to examine the underlying mechanisms of this effect. Specifically, Study 2 demonstrated that exposure to the quiet quitting narrative led managers to select more rational and coercive control practices. This effect persisted even when managers received critical commentary indicating that the narrative was inaccurate (Study 3) and when managers received local information about employee commitment, although this local information suppressed the activation of stereotypes of workers as opportunistic (Study 4). These findings demonstrate the robustness of the "quiet quitting" social media narrative's effect on managerial control decisions, with evidence that these effects are partially explained by the activation of stereotypes of workers as opportunistic.

Data and syntax for the experimental Studies 2-4 can be accessed at https://osf.io/rpczj/overview?view_only=c7835f8226084399b66d2aaace31f7cf. The supplemental online materials (SOM), which contain an additional Supplemental Study 1 and additional measures not relevant to the hypotheses, can also be found at this link for interested readers.

-- Table 1 about here --

STUDY 1: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF ARCHIVAL DATA

We focus on the case of "quiet quitting", a media narrative that emerged in August 2022 and spread quickly across major US news and business sources. By mid-September 2022 the topic had already garnered up to 2.18 billion potential impressions across major social media platforms [76]. Although we focus on print news, the media narrative circulated widely, becoming a topic of discussion on cable news, talk shows, and social media platforms. Between August 2022-August 2023, there were 772 articles in major news and business sources mentioning the term, and 251 articles using the term in the headline or lead paragraph. Figure 1 plots the number of articles in major news and business sources that mention "quiet quitting" during the period we examine.

-- Figure 1 about here --

Data Collection and Analysis

We constructed our sample of articles by using the Factiva database to identify relevant articles appearing in US major news and business sources. We began by including any articles that included the term "quiet quitting" in either the headline or lead paragraph. We then removed articles that were duplicates or reprints of the same article appearing in multiple news publications. This left us with a final analytic sample of 170 articles published from August 2022 to August 2023, covering a range of outlets including The Arizona Republic, Barron's Online, The Boston Globe, Business Insider, Chicago Tribune, Detroit Free Press, The Economic Times, USA Today, MarketWatch, New York Daily News, New York Times, The Guardian, Pittsburgh Post Gazette, Hartford Courant, South Florida Sun-Sentinel, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal.

We used a discursive approach for unpacking social meaning in our archival data, attending to how individuals employ texts to construct field-level institutionalized knowledge (Duriau,

Reger, & Pfarrer, 2007; Leibel, Hallett, & Bechky, 2018). Analyzing articles as the 'end product' of journalistic labor allows us to access and describe how authors' claims are textually produced and legitimated through discursive strategies (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997). While we cannot directly access the intentions of journalists whose work appears in our analytic sample, we complement prior interview-based studies by focusing less on journalists' identities and aspirations, and more on how they communicate with their audiences in practice.

We took an abductive approach to analyzing our qualitative archival data, as we were focused on an emerging and uncertain phenomenon which could be a useful site of surprise, doubt and discovery (Locke et al., 2008, Tavory & Timmermans, 2014, Behfar & Okhuysen, 2018). We had expected the news stories to have emerged primarily from survey data or aggregate labor force statistics, and were surprised by the overwhelming prevalence and centrality of a TikTok video in the articles. We were also surprised at journalists' framing of generic statements about work-life balance into an urgent social problem demanding the attention of business leaders and the public. These findings led us to view journalists' claims as a low-quality media narrative and to describe the role of social media in developing and supporting these claims.

Qualitative Findings: Core Claims and Journalistic Concerns about the 'Quiet Quitting' News Narrative

Our qualitative analysis illustrates how a dubious media narrative emerged from business press journalists' use of social media as an epistemic technology. The story drew heavily from a TikTok video as source content, inferring a historic rise in counterproductive work behaviors that seemed plausible when linked to uncertain but verifiable post-pandemic events (e.g. the entry of Gen Z into the workforce, pandemic-induced burnout and remote work uptake, and a labor market shortage). The lines between online entertainment content and offline behavior began to blur in

these accounts of a real-world trend of workers: increasingly psychologically distancing themselves from work, curbing discretionary effort, providing minimum viable performance, and redirecting time to non-work activities. Table 2 provides an overview of these claims with illustrative examples from the news articles we analyzed.

--Table 2 about here –

Dubious Evidence of 'Quiet Quitting'. Peer journalists raised several concerns about the accuracy of the 'quiet quitting' media narrative. They observed that many news stories treated viral entertainment content—particularly TikTok videos—as primary source material, even when such posts were often designed as satire or self-branding rather than factual reporting. Reliance on social media content rested on the underlying assumption that online posts directly mirror offline work attitudes and behaviors in real workplaces. In attempting to substantiate these claims, journalists noted that peers selectively interpreted Gallup engagement polling to fit the story, ignoring countervailing evidence from the same polling series (see Appendix C). Ultimately, several commentators suggested that the topic's continued visibility owed less to empirical verification than to the self-perpetuating cycle of media attention itself—where the sheer volume of prior coverage became justification for renewed reporting. For example, the first print article on "quiet quitting" appeared on August 12, 2022 and "social-media volume around the topic increased 14,000% during a two-week period beginning Aug. 17", 2022 [76]. While the initial "millions of views on TikTok" [1] may have been generated organically, the subsequent billions of views were likely accelerated by intense and self-perpetuating media attention to the story. Table 3 provides

an overview of these peer journalist critiques with illustrative examples from the news articles we analyzed.

--Table 3 about here –

Our own analysis of the evidence provided in these news articles led us to characterize claims about a historic rise in 'quiet quitting' as dubious. We coded articles for evidence using a keyword search developed from a careful read of all articles in the corpus. We were initially surprised by the lack of systematic evidence provided, and found that social media content (e.g. 'social media' or 'TikTok') was the most commonly (53.5%) cited source of evidence. The viral video coining the term was a 17-second TikTok video post by content creator Zaid Leppelin, in which he says he recently learned about the term "quiet quitting", defines the term, and makes a general statement about the importance of work-life balance. The video features his voice over short clips of New York City with a relaxing instrumental song playing in the background. See Appendix A for the full transcript of the video post.

Survey evidence (e.g. 'survey' or 'poll') was the second most common (21.8%) source of evidence provided for the claims. The online supplement provides a comprehensive overview of journalists' references to survey data. The majority (69.4%) of articles citing survey data mentioned the Gallup survey on employee engagement. Yet, as peer journalists had pointed out, Gallup's own reporting of their repeated cross-sectional survey data does not show any meaningful change in "actively disengaged" employees over two decades. We see two obvious patterns (Appendix C) in the Gallup data covering 2000-2023: 1) the percent of "actively disengaged" US employees has not meaningfully changed over time, and 2) the percentage of "engaged" employees

has not meaningfully changed over time, and was slightly higher during 2020-2023 than in any of the years before 2016. News articles citing Gallup's polling typically reported on survey responses at a single point in time, ignoring the longer time series data that contradict claims of rising counterproductive work behaviors.

Peer journalist critiques about the accuracy of the narrative did not slow the tide of articles reporting on 'quiet quitting' or efforts to coin new terms to launch a new narrative arc. As one writer reflected, sourcing new terminology from viral videos is a strategy for high article engagement since it provides "a formula that makes it catchy and hashtaggable on Instagram and TikTok, and allows it to be easily picked up by mainstream media" [195]. This mimicry was reflected in subsequent articles attempting to extend the narrative by introducing readers to new buzzwords describing a new workplace behavior. While new terms such as 'quiet constraining', 'loud layoffs', 'lazy girl jobs', and 'quiet firing' failed to garner the massive coverage of 'quiet quitting', we interpreted these as efforts to capitalize on reader attention to the original narrative, thereby reinforcing our skepticism of the original narrative:

> Coined on TikTok in May, the "Lazy Girl Job" follows "quiet quitting" in an ongoing anti-work discourse. Unlike quiet quitting, an anti-work trend in which employees stop exceeding their job descriptions, the lazy girl job title does it — and thousands of workers who have adopted it — a massive disservice by equating laziness with the desire for work-life balance. Whether remote, in-person, or a mix of the two, a lazy girl job offers flexible hours, adequate pay, and work-life balance. Self-proclaimed "lazy girls" want a boss who respects them, a company that cares about them, and a job they don't have to kill themselves over. [206]

> "Quiet constraining" is the latest business catchphrase, following on from "quiet quitting." It refers to the withholding of valuable information from coworkers or managers. An expert told Insider it could cause real issues and further encourage individualism… Connor Campbell, a business finance expert at NerdWallet, says failure to reveal a more efficient way to execute a task has the potential to hinder growth and cause conflict in the workplace…. Kahoot! recently surveyed 1,635 employees in the United States and found that 58% admitted to holding on to information that could benefit their coworkers. Just over three quarters of Gen Z workers, defined by Pew Research as those born after 1997, are the most likely to be guilty of "quiet constraining," the survey found. [111]

Implications for managerial control practices. Despite the dubious evidence underlying the 'quiet quitting' narrative, consultants were quick to prescribe solutions in the form of managerial control practices. Non-scientific experts such as consultants, career coaches, authors, and HR technology vendors were quoted in 23.4% of articles we analyzed. Many consultants predicted and prescribed coercive control practices aiming to observe and discipline workers. This included managerial recommendations to downsize their workforce, target the lowest performers, or adopt intrusive forms of digital surveillance to monitor the day-to-day activities of white-collar workers:

> If people who are coasting haven't been dismissed yet, that could be because the boss is storing a layer of fat that can easily be trimmed when it's time to downsize, says Leslie Tarnacki, senior vice president of global human resources at WorkForce Software. "We're kidding ourselves if we don't think we're headed toward a recession, and managers do like to have that cushion if they see that cuts may be coming down the road," she says. "They may have employees that are considered mediocre, but keeping them around for now makes having to deal with those cuts a little bit easier." [85]

> In the battle against "quiet quitting" and other obstacles to productivity in the workplace, companies are increasingly turning to an array of sophisticated tools to watch and analyze how employees do their jobs... Many of them include constant monitoring of nearly everything workers do on their devices. This technological shift is particularly jarring for white-collar workers who have tended to have greater leeway in their work practices than blue-collar workers who have to punch time clocks. [58]

Other consultants weighed in on how to tackle the problem through rational control efforts to appeal to self-interest by more effectively paying for performance. They counselled managers to improve pay-for-performance systems by ensuring that the metrics used to evaluate workers are adequately capturing the range of activities in their jobs. This managerial advice emphasized the need to reward measured performance and increase competition over valued rewards:

> Jay McDonald, an Atlanta-based executive coach and former CEO of several small companies, says the onus is on business leaders to set clear performance expectations. If employees are meeting them, that's what matters, not when or how long they work, he says. "You have a responsibility to have good metrics and measurements for knowing whether somebody's getting the job done or not," he says. [14]

> …performance reviews are making a comeback in the postpandemic workplace, with firms such as Goldman Sachs Group Inc., Meta Platforms Inc. and Boeing Co. redoubling efforts to identify their best and worst performers. Financial technology startup Ramp Business Corp., recently named Fast Company's most innovative company in North America, asks applicants for sales positions to disclose three years' worth of stack rankings to show they consistently surpass colleagues. Such measures are testing whether old-fashioned competition is an antidote to the contemporary affliction known as quiet quitting. For workers who have grown complacent, companies hope a rivalry is the motivational boost they need. [161]

Finally, a few consultants recommended the use of normative control practices aimed at addressing workers' underlying concerns. Recommendations involved soliciting employee input and taking their perspective seriously in order to understand "what's really behind this crisis, and how can both managers and employees address job satisfaction in a more meaningful way?" [93]. In contrast to the other coercive and rational practices, the empathetic approach tended to be shared as more of a prescription for what managers should do and less of a prediction of what managers will likely do:

> Employees who are quietly quitting are also likely the ones who have been silently suffering in a psychologically unsafe environment," Grasso said…People are fulfilled by gaining new skills and experiences, having greater control over their jobs and feeling genuinely appreciated. "Employers need to offer opportunities for advancement and create a culture where people feel like they're encouraged to put work in perspective versus make work their entire lives… [9]

> But anyone thinking of quitting quietly should be careful about it. If a company notices that its workers are stealthily disengaging, it might take the enlightened view that it should increase pay and adopt a gentler managerial approach. It could equally decide to tighten job contracts, introduce more monitoring and eliminate the scope for individuals to go slower. [20]

To summarize, journalists' use of social media for story ideas launched the 'quiet quitting' narrative. The narrative was framed as a real-world workplace trend rather than entertainment content trending on TikTok. This blurred the lines between entertainment and news, as journalists repeatedly echoed claims of a historic rise in counterproductive work behaviors in the post-pandemic era, reinforced by self-perpetuating media coverage of the story. Our read of the claims,

as well as critiques by peer journalists, suggests that the narrative was made plausible by linking the claims to uncertain real-world events, misinterpreting survey evidence, and soliciting validating commentaries by consultants, career coaches, authors, and HR technology vendors interested in pitching solutions to disengagement to potential corporate clients. This obscured social media's role as the original source content, and recast trending TikTok entertainment as evidence of real-world historical trends supported by objective data and domain experts.

Having created a problem out of shaky evidence, the "quiet quitting" narrative then offered prescriptive recommendations to managers. Non-scientific experts, such as consultants, career coaches, authors, and HR technology vendors, were cited to provide solutions. Coercive and rational control practices were well represented in these prescriptions, with some references to more empathetic normative control practices. Given the widespread dissemination of the "quiet quitting" narrative to managerial audiences and the prescriptions embedded in it, a key question is whether this dubious social media narrative influences managerial control decisions. Therefore, we next turn to experimental studies to examine the potential causal effect of the "quiet quitting" social media narrative on managers' selection of coercive, rational, and normative control policies.

STUDIES 2-4: EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE OF THE CAUSAL EFFECT OF SOCIAL MEDIA NARRATIVES ON MANAGERIAL CONTROL PRACTICES

THEORY AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

A key question raised by our inductive study was whether exposure to the "quiet quitting" social media narrative, given its prescriptive recommendations for managers, would influence managers' selection of organizational control practices. Given the inherent causal nature of this question, we turned to controlled online experiments as a complementary method to our archival

study, as they enable a causal test (Wellman et al., 2023). Therefore, we examined the effect of the "quiet quitting" narrative on managerial control practices using a series of pre-registered vignette experiments.

How might social media narratives shape managerial control decisions? On the one hand, proponents of evidence-based management would suggest that managers should not fall prey to dubious social media narratives in their decision-making. From this perspective, managers should enact organizational practices that integrate local evidence, the best available research, and local stakeholder insights (Rousseau, 2006; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Reay, Berta, and Kohn 2009; Joseph and Gaba 2020; Stice-Lusvardi, Hinds and Valentine 2024). The quiet quitting narrative arose in the post-pandemic period following remote work uptake (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020, Kelly & Moen, 2021) that challenged traditional forms of managerial observation exercised through office space, affording workers unprecedented autonomy, with less "face time" pressure, and greater use of virtual communication technologies (Gonsalves, 2020, 2023a). At the same time, visual observation technologies (Anteby & Chan, 2018; Patil & Bernstein, 2022) and algorithmic technologies (Kellogg, Valentine, & Christin, 2020; Burrell & Fourcade, 2021) have raised possibilities for new forms of surveillance, monitoring, and control (Petriglieri, 2020). Amidst this new world of work, managers would ideally respond to these changes with evidence-based management—integrating the best available research, local organizational data, and practitioner judgment for managerial control decisions—thus hopefully discerning the questionable accuracy and applicability of the "quiet quitting" narrative to their local contexts.

On the other hand, there is ample evidence that managers often fall short of these lofty standards. Two mechanisms stand out in the literature as potential barriers to managers' evidence-based decision-making: 1) challenges in discerning the accuracy of managerial insights derived

from industry peers (accuracy discernment process), and 2) the tendency to overapply heuristics or stereotypes activated by broader managerial insights, especially when local performance information is absent or not salient (stereotyping process). On the first mechanism, although managers may attempt to discern problems and solutions adopted by their industry peers, their ability to make accurate inferences is limited by the fact that companies disclose selective, sanitized, and decontextualized accounts of their internal operations (Newman 2000; Pernell, Jung and Dobbin 2017; Gonsalves 2023b). In the present context, managers reading about 'quiet quitting' may not be able to discern the accuracy of the narrative due to a lack of contextual information about the employees and managers supposedly involved, and whether the resulting managerial control decisions were effective. As for the second mechanism, managers often default to heuristics in the absence of relevant local performance data. For example, we know that managers make employment decisions using group stereotypes when they lack objective metrics about worker performance (Correll and Benard 2006; Rissing and Castilla 2014; Tilcsik 2021). In our context, this process suggests that the "quiet quitting" narrative may activate and legitimate generalized assumptions about workers (e.g., they are opportunistic), offering a ready-made explanation for ambiguous behaviors when productivity data are not available, resulting in managers applying a stereotype of worker opportunism to inform their managerial control decisions.

Taken together, these lines of research suggest that managers might be susceptible to the dubious quiet quitting narrative due to challenges of a) discerning the accuracy of claims about what really happened in other organizations, and b) the tendency to rely on group stereotypes of commitment in the absence of local information (e.g. employee work engagement metrics inside their organization). Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses—H1 derived from our

qualitative study, and H2-H3 derived from the literature—which we test in three survey experiments.

Hypothesis 1: Exposure to the "quiet quitting" social media narrative, relative to a no-exposure control condition, will lead managers to select more coercive and rational control policies.

Hypothesis 2: An intervention that provides critical commentary questioning the accuracy of the "quiet quitting" social media narrative will attenuate the effect of exposure to the "quiet quitting" narrative on managers' selection of coercive and rational control policies.

Hypothesis 3: An intervention that provides positive local information about employee engagement will attenuate the effect of exposure to the "quiet quitting" social media narrative on managers' selection of coercive and rational control policies.

Study 2

Study 2 tested whether managers exposed to the "quiet quitting" social media narrative would increase their support for coercive and rational control policies relative to those who were not exposed to the narrative (Hypothesis 1).

Participants

We recruited 1,000 U.S. residents who were pre-screened as having managerial experience through Prolific, an established crowd-sourcing website where individuals complete research studies for compensation (see Tilcsik, 2021 and Wong et al., 2023 for similar recruitment strategy). Participants on Prolific are more diverse, attentive, and naïve to social science research relative to other platforms such as MTurk (Palan & Schitter, 2018; Peer, Brandimarte, Samat, & Acquisti, 2017). In line with our pre-registered exclusion criteria (https://aspredicted.org/BFD_1D3), we excluded individuals who failed an attention check (i.e., they incorrectly identified the treatment

article to which they were exposed) and individuals who scored more than three standard deviations from the mean on any of our central dependent variables. These exclusions resulted in a final analysis sample of 942 individuals with past managerial experience (see sample demographics for all studies in Table 4).

--Table 4 about here --

Procedure

We conducted a between-subjects experiment where participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: 1) exposure to the "quiet quitting" social media narrative (**treatment condition**), or 2) no exposure to the narrative (**control condition**). We instructed participants to take on the role of a manager at a hypothetical large public service-sector company who was tasked with the decision to adopt various managerial control practices. Participants were first presented with some general information about the company (industry, organization size, product development, fiscal year performance). Then, those in the **treatment condition** were exposed to an article about "quiet quitting" prior to completing the managerial decision-making task. This produced our dependent variables indicating their support for various managerial control policies (i.e., coercive, rational, and normative practices). We describe both the treatment and dependent variable in greater detail below. In contrast, those in the **control condition** completed the managerial decision-making task without having read the work disengagement article; in other words, these participants were *not exposed* to the "quiet quitting" article (i.e., work disengagement narrative) before responding to our dependent variables.

Experimental Treatment. We developed a novel article stimulus as our treatment of exposure to the work disengagement narrative. Using the themes surfaced in our qualitative analysis, we created a news article in a business publication that described our *"quiet quitting"*

social media narrative—the idea that workers are psychologically distancing from work, curbing discretionary effort, providing minimum viable performance, and redirecting time to non-work activities due to generational differences, pandemic burnout, and a labor shortage, a phenomenon dubbed "quiet quitting." To further bolster the ecological validity of the study, we adapted our article stimulus using language from an existing Wall Street Journal article about "quiet quitting" from our sample of articles used in Study 1 (see online supplement for full article stimulus).

Dependent Variables. As part of the managerial decision-making task, participants were presented with the following managerial control policies and asked whether they would adopt those policies as a manager at the hypothetical technology company. We selected policies from the literature on managerial control, as well as practices that were prescribed by consultants in our qualitative analysis of articles on 'quiet quitting'. Consistent with Barley and Kunda (1992), we categorized practices as coercive, rational, or normative based on whether the underlying ideology was to 'observe and discipline', 'appeal to self-interest', or 'win hearts and minds', respectively.

Coercive Control Policy Adoption. Participants reported whether they would implement six coercive control policies (i.e., requiring employees to be physically present at the office, reducing employee discretion to work from home, installing surveillance software to monitor employee activities, increasing the frequency of formal employee performance reviews, firing bottom 10% of performers, observing more employee key performance indicators; 1 = *definitely no*, 7 = *definitely yes*; α = 0.82; M = 3.76, SD = 1.29).

Rational Control Policy Adoption. Participants reported whether they would implement five rational control policies (i.e., introducing performance bonuses for top performers, replacing a percentage of salary with a commission, linking salary increases with individual performance,

increasing pay-for-performance compensation, minimizing pay increases for the weakest performances; 1 = *definitely no*, 7 = *definitely yes* $\alpha = 0.69$; $M = 4.98$, $SD = 0.99$).

   Normative Control Policy Adoption. Participants reported whether they would implement five normative control policies (i.e., conducting employee engagement surveys, organizing town hall sessions to listen to employee feedback, having a senior executive conduct focus groups to hear employee concerns, communicating mission and purpose to employees, reassessing core values with employees; 1 = *definitely no*, 7 = *definitely yes*; $\alpha = 0.79$; $M = 5.$, $SD = 0.99$).

Results of Pre-registered Analyses

--Table 5 about here--

Managerial Control Policies

   We conducted independent samples t-tests to compare participants' adoption of coercive, rational, and normative control policies in the treatment ("quiet quitting" narrative exposure) and control (no narrative exposure) conditions. As predicted, managerial participants in the treatment condition who were exposed to the "quiet quitting" narrative increased their adoption of coercive and rational policies compared to those in the control condition, who were not exposed to the "quiet quitting" narrative. The results also revealed that those in the treatment condition decreased their adoption of normative practices compared to those in the control condition (see Table 5).

Supplemental Effect Size Analysis

   To better interpret the substantive magnitude of the effects, we created dichotomous measures of support for policy adoption, such that participants who selected 5 to 7 for that policy (indicating support for the policy above the neutral scale midpoint) were coded as adopting the policy (1) and participants who selected 1 to 4 for that policy (indicating opposition or neutral feelings toward the policy) were coded as not adopting the policy (0). We then conducted three

separate logistic mixed effects models, regressing these dichotomous explicit support measures for coercive, rational, and normative control policies on the work disengagement narrative treatment dummy and including random-intercepts by participant and policy number.

Consistent with our preregistered findings, we found that the treatment condition increased the odds of adopting coercive control policies (b = 0.27, SE = 0.13, Wald Z = 2.10, p = .036, OR = 1.32), and rational control policies, (b = 0.73, SE = 0.12, Wald Z = 6.24, p < .001, OR = 2.08, but decreased the odds of adopting normative control policies (b = -0.48, SE = 0.15, Wald Z = -3.10, p = .002, OR = 0.62). These effects translate to a 32% and 108% increase in likelihood of adopting coercive and rational control policies, respectively, and a 38% decrease in likelihood of adopting normative control policies.

Discussion

Study 2 found that exposure to the "quiet quitting" social media narrative had a causal effect on managers' selection of coercive and rational control policies. Managerial participants who were exposed to the "quiet quitting" narrative increased their support for organizational practices that observe and discipline employees (e.g., requiring employees to be physically present at the office or installing surveillance software to monitor employee activities) or appeal to their self-interest (e.g., introducing performance bonuses for top performers or linking salary increases with individual performance). We also observed that the "quiet quitting" treatment condition led to a decrease in the selection of normative control policies relative to the control condition. Collectively, these results provide support for Hypothesis 1 (see supplemental online materials [SOM] for additional robustness checks, which show our treatment effects for each individual control policy).

Given its dubious nature, it is concerning that exposure to the "quiet quitting" social media narrative causally influenced managerial control decisions. As such, we were interested in whether two interventions, designed to address theoretically informed barriers to evidence-based managerial decision-making, might attenuate the effect of the "quiet quitting" narrative on managerial control decisions. Recall that our theoretical intuition was that social media narratives might influence managerial control decisions because 1) managers may not be able to discern the accuracy of the narrative, and 2) the narrative may activate negative generalized stereotypes of workers as opportunistic, which are applied by managers in the absence of local information (e.g., employee work engagement metrics inside their organization). As such, we designed two interventions aimed at disrupting these two potential mechanisms of the effect of the "quiet quitting" narrative on managerial control decisions. The first was a critical commentary intervention that presented several arguments challenging managers' perceptions of the accuracy of the quiet quitting narrative (Study 3). The second was a local information intervention that provided managerial participants with information about the strong commitment of workers in the specific organization, aimed at reducing managers' use of generalized worker stereotypes in their decision-making processes (Study 4). We examined whether these interventions would attenuate the effect of the "quiet quitting" narrative on managerial control decisions, thus testing both Hypotheses 2 and 3.

Study 3

Study 3 tested whether providing critical commentary following exposure to the "quiet quitting" narrative treatment would attenuate its effect on our dependent variables relative to the control condition (Hypothesis 2). Specifically, we again randomly assigned participants to the same control and "quiet quitting" treatment conditions as in Study 2, but we also included two

additional critical commentary conditions in which participants were presented with either a condensed or more elaborated critical commentary. Our pre-registered hypothesis was that the control, condensed critical commentary, and elaborated critical commentary conditions would all reduce support for coercive and rational control policies relative to the "quiet quitting" treatment condition.

Participants and Procedure

We recruited 1,187 U.S. residents who were pre-screened as having managerial experience again through Prolific. In line with our pre-registered exclusion criteria (https://aspredicted.org/g59cq9.pdf), we excluded participants who failed an instructional manipulation check (i.e., they incorrectly reported the topic of the article they read) and participants who had outlying scores (i.e., more than three standard deviations from the mean) on one of our main dependent variables. These exclusions resulted in a final analysis sample of 1,096 individuals with past managerial experience (see Table 4 for full sample demographics).

Participants completed the same procedure as in Study 2, except we added two new critical commentary conditions in addition to the original "quiet quitting" treatment and control conditions. In both these critical commentary conditions, participants were first exposed to the "quiet quitting" treatment article and then provided with additional information modeled after real journalist arguments from the archival Study 1 that questioned the accuracy of the quiet quitting narrative. Specifically, participants in the **elaborated critical commentary condition** were told:

> Despite the media attention to 'quiet quitting', critics point out several reasons why it can be problematic:
>
> 1. Although we might think quiet quitting reflects workers being deceptive, self-interested, and opportunistic, another possibility is that they are reasonably responding to

a workplace environment that requires them to engage in certain behaviors to protect their own wellbeing.

2. Employer behaviors can become self-fulfilling. If employers treat their workers like they are untrustworthy, employees may be more likely to behave in untrustworthy ways.

3. It's not clear whether online examples of 'quiet quitting' in social media actually reflect offline real-world behavior of employees in their workplaces. What is happening in social media might not be happening in your workplace.

Meanwhile, participants in the **condensed critical commentary condition** were only given the first argument in the elaborated critical commentary condition.

After exposure to either the control, "quiet quitting" treatment, "quiet quitting" treatment + condensed critical commentary, or "quiet quitting" treatment + elaborated critical commentary conditions, participants were asked to respond to the same dependent measures as in Study 2.

Measures

Participants responded to the same measures of coercive ($\alpha = 0.73$, $M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.28$), rational ($\alpha = 0.68$, $M = 5.06$, $SD = 0.98$), and normative control practices ($\alpha = 0.85$, $M = 5.67$, $SD = 1.05$), and support for remote work ($\alpha = 0.92$, $M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.56$).

Results

Our pre-registered analysis plan was to regress each dependent variable on condition dummies for the control, condensed critical commentary, and elaborated critical commentary conditions (with the "quiet quitting" treatment condition as the non-included referent). Table 6 reports descriptive statistics for all dependent measures by experimental condition.

Pre-registered analyses

Coercive Control Practices. Directly replicating our findings from Study 2, we found that participants in the control condition were less supportive of coercive control practices than those in the "quiet quitting" treatment condition, $b = -0.27$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(1092) = -2.42$, $p = .016$,

95% *CI* = [-0.48, -0.05], again supporting Hypothesis 1. However, contrary to our pre-registered predictions, we did not find that participants in either the condensed, *b* = -0.13, *SE* = 0.11, *t*(1092) = -1.18, *p* = .239, 95% *CI* = [-0.34, 0.09], or elaborated critical commentary conditions, *b* = -0.13, *SE* = 0.11, *t*(1092) = -1.15, *p* = .249, 95% *CI* = [-0.34, 0.09], were significantly less supportive of coercive control practices than those in the "quiet quitting" treatment condition. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Rational Control Practices. Directly replicating our findings from Study 2, we found that participants in the control condition were less supportive of rational control practices than those in the "quiet quitting" treatment condition, *b* = -0.21, *SE* = 0.08, *t*(1092) = -2.54, *p* = .011, 95% *CI* = [-0.48, -0.05]. However, contrary to our pre-registered predictions, we did not find that participants in either the condensed, *b* = -0.01, *SE* = 0.08, *t*(1092) = -0.11, *p* = .916, 95% *CI* = [-0.17, 0.15], or elaborated critical commentary conditions, *b* = -0.06, *SE* = 0.08, *t*(1092) = -0.73, *p* = .464, 95% *CI* = [-0.22, 0.10], were significantly less supportive of coercive control practices than those in the "quiet quitting" treatment condition. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Additional Analyses

We also explored the effect of our manipulations on selection normative control practices, albeit without a formal hypothesis. We were also interested in an initial exploration into a potential mechanism of our effects: the application of a generalized stereotype of workers as opportunistic (i.e., perceived worker opportunism).

Normative Control Practices. Unlike in Study 2, we did not observe a significant difference in the selection of normative control practices between participants in the "quiet quitting" treatment condition and either the control, *b* = 0.08, *SE* = 0.09, *t*(1092) = -0.94, *p* =

.348, 95% *CI* = [-0.09, 0.26], elaborated critical commentary, *b* = 0.04, *SE* = 0.09, *t*(1092) =

0.50, *p* = .615, 95% *CI* = [-0.13, 0.22], or condensed critical commentary conditions, *b* = 0.03,

SE = 0.09, *t*(1092) = 0.35, *p* = .723, 95% *CI* = [-0.14, 0.21].

Perceived Worker Opportunism. We found that participants in the control condition

perceived workers as less opportunistic than those in the "quiet quitting" treatment condition, *b* =

-0.87, *SE* = 0.11, *t*(1092) = -7.69, *p* < .001, 95% *CI* = [-1.09, -0.65]. However, we did not find

that participants in either the condensed, *b* = -0.09, *SE* = 0.11, *t*(1092) = -0.76, *p* = .450, 95% *CI*

= [-0.31, 0.14], or elaborated critical commentary conditions, *b* = -0.14, *SE* = 0.11, *t*(1092) = -

1.27, *p* = .204, 95% *CI* = [-0.36, 0.08], perceived workers as significantly less opportunistic than

those in the "quiet quitting" treatment condition.

Discussion

Study 3 directly replicated the effects of the "quiet quitting" treatment (versus control)

observed in Study 2, thus supporting Hypothesis 1. However, we did not find any evidence that

our intervention of providing critical commentary (i.e., arguments used by journalists observed in

archival Study 1 that questioned the accuracy of the quiet quitting narrative) had any effect on

mitigating the impact of the "quiet quitting" treatment. Participants who were presented with

additional critical commentary countering their exposure to the "quiet quitting" narrative did not

significantly differ in their support for coercive and rational control practices from participants

who were only exposed to the "quiet quitting" treatment. Therefore, these results provide no

support for Hypothesis 2.

Although these findings did not align with our predictions, they show the persistent

influence of the "quiet quitting" treatment and its robustness even in the face of explicit arguments

questioning the narrative's accuracy. These results also suggest that managers' (in)ability to discern the accuracy of the "quiet quitting" narrative is perhaps not as relevant a mechanism for why the "quiet quitting" narrative influences managerial control decisions; even when explicitly provided arguments questioning the narrative's accuracy, managerial control decisions were still influenced by the social media narrative.

These patterns of results suggest that the "quiet quitting" narrative may activate hegemonic, difficult-to-counteract generalized assumptions about workers (e.g., stereotypes of workers as opportunistic) that are widely applied to inform managerial decision-making. Indeed, this was supported by our additional analysis on perceived worker opportunism, which found that participants perceived workers as more opportunistic in the treatment (relative to control) condition and that neither of the critical commentary conditions (despite explicitly questioning the accuracy of the "quiet quitting" narrative) were successful at attenuating these heightened perceptions of worker opportunism caused by exposure to the narrative. We also found via mediation analyses that these perceptions of worker opportunism statistically explained the effect of the "quiet quitting" narrative on the selection of coercive and rational control policies, results for which we present in the SOM. Study 4 extends on this exploration of stereotypic perceptions of worker opportunism as a mechanism by examining whether an intervention providing local information about the strong commitment of workers in the specific organization would reduce managers' use of generalized stereotypes of workers as opportunistic in their decision-making processes, thus attenuating the effect of the "quiet quitting" narrative on selection of coercive and rational control policies.

Study 4

Study 4 tested whether an intervention providing local information about positive employee engagement amongst the specific employees of the target organization (versus no information control) would attenuate the effect of the "quiet quitting" narrative on managers' selection of coercive and rational control policies by reducing the application of generalized stereotypes of workers as opportunistic (Hypothesis 4).

Participants

We recruited 1,201 U.S. residents who were pre-screened as having managerial experience again through Prolific.[1] In line with our pre-registered exclusion criteria, we excluded participants who failed an instructional manipulation check (i.e., they incorrectly reported the topic of the article they read) and participants who had outlying scores (i.e., more than three standard deviations from the mean) on one of our main dependent variables. These exclusions resulted in a final analysis sample of 1,129 individuals with past managerial experience (see Table 4 for study demographics).

Experimental Procedure

Participants were exposed to the same experimental manipulation of "quiet quitting" treatment versus control as in Studies 2 and 3. However, in this study, we crossed the "quiet quitting" manipulation with a positive employee engagement information versus no engagement information control manipulation, as follows.

Manipulation: Positive Engagement Information versus Control

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[1] As pre-registered, we used an iterative data collection procedure, screening and replacing participants who were flagged as having suspicious IP address activity suggestive of data farm activity (Georgeac, 2025). Specifically, participants with non-US IP address, proxy use, inconsistent geolocation, datacenter usage, and suspicious domains (indicated by ip2location.io package; Georgeac, 2025) were excluded and then replaced until 1200 participants were reached. No data analysis occurred before this replacement procedure was completed.

Participants were randomly assigned to either positive information about employee engagement at Lancorp (i.e., the fictional organizational setting of the managerial decision-making task) or no engagement information. We adapted a managerial email simulation task from Kiker and Motowidlo (1999), in which participants were asked to play the role of a manager responding to a series of email tasks in their inbox. In the **positive engagement condition**, one of these tasks was an email from the company's CEO reporting the results of the latest Employee Engagement Survey, which was described as managers' ratings of employee engagement on their teams. Participants were presented with the summary statistics (i.e., mean) of managers' ratings of their employees on nine survey questions adapted from established employee engagement scales (e.g., "My employees work with intensity on the job" and "My employees devote a lot of energy to their jobs"). All of the items had very high ratings from the managers (i.e., ranging from 4.85 to 4.98 out of 5). The email message concluded with the statement, "Overall, the manager survey found that Lancorp employees are extremely engaged in their work and consistently demonstrate commitment to their teams and the organization." (see Appendix for full manipulation text). Participants were then asked in a free-response question to summarize their impression of engagement amongst Lancorp employees. Participants in the **control condition** were not presented with any of this information before responding to the dependent measures.

Dependent Variables

Participants responded to the same measures of coercive ($\alpha = 0.81$, $M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.41$), rational ($\alpha = 0.76$, $M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.09$), and normative control practices ($\alpha = 0.80$, $M = 5.49$, $SD = 1.09$) as well as worker opportunism ($\alpha = 0.94$, $M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.34$) as in Study 3.

Results

We were interested in whether the positive employee engagement (versus no information control) condition would moderate (i.e., attenuate) the effect of the "quiet quitting" treatment (versus control) on our dependent measures. As such, we regressed each of our dependent variables on positive engagement dummy (1 = positive engagement information, 0 = no engagement information), "quiet quitting" treatment dummy (1 = treatment, 0 = control), and their two-way interaction (see Table 7 for descriptive statistics for all dependent measures across condition).

Pre-registered Analyses

Coercive Control Policies. Contrary to our prediction, the results did not reveal a significant two-way interaction between positive engagement and "quiet quitting" treatment dummies, $b = -0.24$, $SE = 0.16$, $t(1125) = -1.51$, $p = .131$, 95% $CI = [-0.51, 0.11]$. Despite this, we remained interested in decomposing the interaction to explore the effect of "quiet quitting" treatment (versus control) on the endorsement of coercive control policies within both positive engagement and no engagement information conditions. These simple effect analyses revealed that "quiet quitting" treatment (versus control) had a marginally significant causal effect on increasing endorsement of coercive control policies in the positive engagement condition, $b = 0.22$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(1125) = 1.91$, $p = .056$, 95% $CI = [-0.006, 0.44]$, and a significant causal effect in the no engagement information condition, $b = 0.46$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(1125) = 4.19$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = [0.24, 0.67]$.

Rational Control Policies. Contrary to our prediction, the results did not reveal a significant two-way interaction between positive engagement and "quiet quitting" treatment dummies, $b = -0.10$, $SE = 0.12$, $t(1125) = -0.83$, $p = .404$, 95% $CI = [-0.35, 0.14]$. Despite this, we remained interested in decomposing the interaction to explore the effect of "quiet quitting" treatment (versus control) on the endorsement of rational control policies within both positive

engagement and no engagement information conditions. These simple effect analyses revealed that "quiet quitting" treatment (versus control) had a significant causal effect on increasing endorsement of coercive control policies in both the positive engagement, $b = 0.30$, $SE = 0.09$, $t(1125) = 3.35$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = [0.12, 0.48]$, and no engagement information conditions, $b = 0.40$, $SE = 0.09$, $t(1125) = 4.72$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = [0.24, 0.57]$.

Additional Analyses

Again, as in Study 3, we were interested in examining the effects of condition on the selection of normative control practices and perceived worker opportunism.

Normative Control Policies. The results did not reveal a significant two-way interaction between positive engagement and "quiet quitting" treatment dummies, $b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.13$, $t(1125) = 0.51$, $p = .613$, 95% $CI = [-0.32, 0.19]$. As such, we examined the main effects of the positive engagement information and "quiet quitting" treatment manipulations on normative control. We found that positive engagement information led to significantly less selection of normative control policies relative to no positive engagement information, $b = -0.44$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(1127) = -6.88$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = [-0.57, -0.32]$, whereas the "quiet quitting" treatment did not lead to significantly different levels of selection of normative control policies relative to control, $b = -0.05$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(1127) = -0.75$, $p = .453$, 95% $CI = [-0.18, 0.08]$.

Perceived Worker Opportunism. In line with our theoretical expectations, the results revealed a significant two-way interaction between positive engagement and "quiet quitting" treatment dummies, $b = -0.58$, $SE = 0.15$, $t(1125) = -3.95$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = [-0.87, -0.29]$. That is, the effect of the "quiet quitting" treatment on perceived worker opportunism was significantly attenuated when participants were presented with positive employee engagement information compared to when they were not. Decomposing this interaction revealed that

although the "quiet quitting" treatment (versus control) had a significant causal effect on increasing perceptions of worker opportunism in both the positive engagement, $b = 0.42$, $SE = 0.11$, $t(1125) = 3.93$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = [0.21, 0.63]$, and no engagement information conditions, $b = 1.00$, $SE = 0.10$, $t(1125) = 9.84$, $p < .001$, 95% $CI = [0.80, 1.20]$, this effect was significantly weaker when participants were exposed to positive employee engagement information.

Discussion

Study 4 again found that exposure to the "quiet quitting" social media narrative led to greater selection of coercive and rational control policies, thus supporting Hypothesis 1. However, we did not observe direct evidence for Hypothesis 3; exposing participants to a local information intervention did not significantly attenuate the effect of the "quiet quitting" narrative on their selection of coercive and rational control practices. That said, we did observe that telling managers that Lancorp employees were highly committed attenuated the effect of the "quiet quitting" narrative on perceptions of Lancorp employees as opportunistic. In other words, such local information did attenuate the application of generalized stereotypes of workers as opportunistic to Lancorp employees, although not completely. Participants presented with this positive local information still stereotyped Lancorp employees as more opportunistic when exposed to the "quiet quitting" narrative, but to a lesser degree. These attenuated perceptions of worker opportunism further related to reduced selection of coercive and rational control practices (as observed in moderated mediation analyses presented in the SOM).

Taken together, these findings again demonstrated the robust effect of the "quiet quitting" social media narrative on managerial control decisions, with some mixed evidence that its impact may be explained by the application of generalized stereotypes of workers as opportunistic.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our analysis shows how the "quiet quitting" story gained traction in the business press and became linked to prescriptions favoring rational and coercive control. We trace how the narrative was constructed through journalists' reliance on social media as an epistemic technology for generating social knowledge about work, organizations and employment. In our account, the narrative was borne of soft entertainment content and transformed into hard news when linked to real-world events, selectively interpreted survey evidence, and commentary from consultants, career coaches, and HR technology vendors offering managerial solutions. We cannot definitively adjudicate whether counterproductive work behaviors rose in the post-pandemic period. However, based on a systematic review of the evidence cited in the coverage, we conclude that these claims are at best anecdotal and at worst highly misleading. We suggest that the media narrative about Gen Z workers leading a rise in counterproductive work behaviors—based on viral TikTok videos—may be less of an empirically accurate description of post-pandemic changes in real workplace behaviors, and more of an appeal to the fantasies of white-collar readers, the anxieties of managers, and the engagement pressures of a digital media ecosystem.

Our findings indicate that a social media narrative can have consequences for the exercise of managerial control. Across our survey experiments, managers exposed to the "quiet quitting" narrative increased their selection of coercive control practices aimed at "observing and disciplining" (e.g., return-to-office mandates, digital surveillance) and rational practices aimed at

"appealing to self-interest" (e.g., pay-for-performance incentives). At the same time, exposure did not increase the likelihood that managers selected normative practices aimed at "winning hearts and minds" (e.g., employee surveys, reassessing core values). The narrative activated stereotypes of workers as opportunistic, and the effects proved persistent even when we introduced two interventions intended to promote evidence-based decision making—critical commentary questioning the narrative's accuracy and company-specific indicators of strong employee engagement.

Theoretical Contributions to the Literature on Managerial Control

We contribute to the literature on worker autonomy and managerial control (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Bernstein, 2017; Gill, 2019) by identifying media narratives as an undertheorized factor shaping managers' selection of control practices. This core theoretical contribution advances our understanding of managerial control in several ways.

First, whereas classical work on control depicts gradual shifts in managerial ideologies that occur over long historical periods or 'longwaves' (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Abrahamson & Eisenman, 2008; Bodrožić & Adler, 2018), we show how sudden changes in media narratives— arising from viral social media content—may also affect managerial ideologies and control practices. These findings complicate our temporal understanding of managerial control, indicating that even within multi-decade longwave periods, there may more heterogeneity than recognized. Managers in our survey experiments did not cleanly advocate for one particular managerial ideology, but instead chose a combination of rational, normative, and coercive practices, a mix that was influenced by exposure to the dubious social media narrative we tested. This suggests that managers today may default to an eclectic mix of control practices institutionalized in prior eras,

which they adjust based on the increasingly fragmented and polarized information environment they encounter.

Second, our focus on media narratives highlights the undertheorized role of journalists as key institutional entrepreneurs in the cultural production of managerial control. Prior studies have focused on the role of influential business leaders, business schools and consulting firms as the key actors facilitating the process of managerial sensemaking in times of change (Khurana, 2002; Dobbin, 2009; Fourcade & Khurana, 2013; Cobb, 2016; Bodrožić & Adler, 2018; Jung & Shin, 2019; Fligstein & Goldstein 2022). This work has generally portrayed the business press as a passive conduit through which these key institutional actors disseminate ideas about work and employment. We instead identify journalists as active change agents in their own right—operating independently of these actors and at times influencing them. Rather than serving as mere messengers, we have highlighted the critical role of journalists in deciding what is newsworthy, constructing narratives and amplifying them in ways that are consequential for how managers perceive employees. Our case study of 'quiet quitting' suggests that the cultural construction of newsworthiness reflects the incentives of an era's media landscape, with the current digital media landscape shaped by competition from online content creators, declining revenues and jobs in traditional newsrooms, and web engagement metrics resulting in sourcing of story ideas from social media (Willnat, Weaver, & Wilhoit, 2024).

By linking media narratives to managerial control practices, we also advance our understanding of how social media shapes decision making inside organizations. While much of the research on media coverage has traditionally focused on external investor and stock market reactions (Pollock & Rindova, 2003; Kennedy, 2008; Zavyalova et al, 2012), a growing body of research has begun to examine internal dynamics, with employees and managers reacting to social

media content posted by customers and peers (Toubiana and Zietsma 2017; Etter, Ravasi, & Colleoni, 2019; Karunakaran, Orlikowski, & Scott, 2022; Rothbard et al., 2022). Our study suggests that social media content does not need to be firm-specific to influence internal decision making. Our survey experiments show that media narratives may affect managers' selection of normative, coercive and normative control, even when knowledge claims are not about a particular firm, and when internal organizational metrics are countervailing. Thus, we suggest that social media may influence internal management decision making in ways that are broader and less firm-specific than previously theorized.

Our supplemental survey experiment is not without limitations. While it provides suggestive causal evidence that media narratives may affect managerial decision making, the methodology comes at a cost to external validity. For example, while our respondents had managerial experience and our experimental materials were developed from real news articles, respondents selected managerial control practices in a simulated scenario. In an ideal experiment, we would provide the stimulus to managers through an in-depth training, and then measure how their management practices changed in the year following this experiment. However, given our findings, such a field experiment may be ethically objectionable. Alternatively, researchers could try to survey managers about their exposure to the work disengagement narrative and recreate the life history of management policies adopted at their organization (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006; Dobbin, Kim, & Kalev, 2011; Dobbin, Schrage, & Kalev, 2015). However, life history studies best capture organization-level and field-level factors, rather than individual-level factors. In our case of an individual-level exposure (e.g. to a media narrative), it would be difficult to identify the specific decision-makers responsible for adoption of managerial practices. Given the empirical

challenges of alternative designs, we view our survey experiment as a suggestive but promising initial demonstration of the causal effect of the social media narrative on managerial control.

Finally, and most urgently, we stress that organizational scholars must be skeptical of media claims using social media trends as evidence. At the time of writing, we have seen several scholarly calls for research examining the rise of "quiet quitting" and the "anti-work movement" based on the gap between our scholarship and media reporting. Some scholars are beginning to develop instruments to measure new constructs related to these developments, with the intention of improving the relevance of organizational research and understanding our disruptive post-pandemic era. We have mixed feelings about these developments. On one hand, rigorous scientific studies are sorely needed, as we have shown that journalists are quick to fill the epistemological void, drawing on anecdote and selectively quoted TikTok videos in the absence of rigorous scholarly evidence. As we have shown, the use of social media as inspiration for news stories threatens accuracy since viral videos are often created with the explicit goal of monetizing attention rather than depicting reality. On the other hand, studying "hot topics" comes with its own risks (O'Mahony & Cohen, 2022; Dencker et al., 2023). In particular, our findings caution researchers studying emerging phenomenon to exercise skepticism and to actively interrogate core claims advanced by media narratives. Research that blindly accepts the premise of media claims risks further legitimating hegemonic narratives—pervasive, status-quo-preserving stories that become uncontested, even in the face of countervailing evidence (Ewick & Silbey, 1995; Padavic, Ely, & Reid 2020). Our analysis of "quiet quitting" fits this description and suggests researchers must examine how such narratives arise and with what evidence, rather than prematurely seeking explanations for a phenomenon with shaky epistemic foundations.

Journalists, citizens, and managers increasingly face challenges in adjudicating between rhetoric and reality in the current digital media landscape. We have presented this as a growing problem of collective sensemaking reflecting embedded assumptions of epistemic technologies used to generate knowledge about work, employment and organizations. This increasing social *media* construction of reality can very quickly crystallize into taken-for-granted beliefs that are unquestioned and ultimately become self-fulfilling (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Our findings highlight the value of careful evaluation of evidence for claims that originate in viral social media content, alongside continued efforts to produce scientific, generalizable evidence about workplace behavior.

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Figure 1: Articles on "Quiet Quitting" in Major News and Business Sources
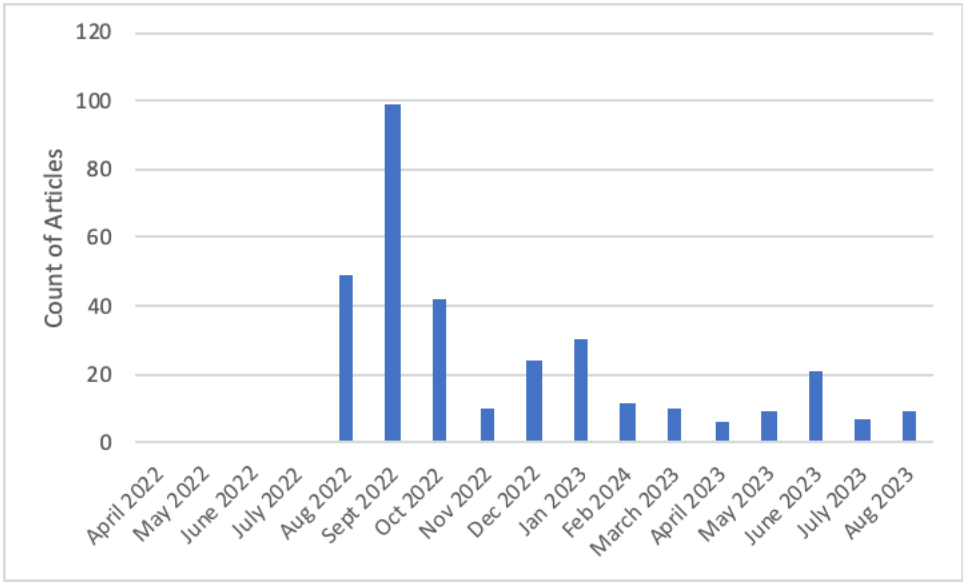
Table 1: Overview of Studies

Studies	Method	Sample	Contribution
Study 1	Qualitative Analysis of Archival Data	Articles on 'quiet quitting' in major news and business sources (N=170)	- Identify 'quiet quitting' as a dubious social media narrative - Generate hypotheses about effects of the narrative on managerial control decisions (H1)
Study 2	Survey Experiment	Prolific manager sample (N=942)	- Test the causal effect of the 'quiet quitting' narrative on managerial control decisions (H1)
Study 3	Survey Experiment	Prolific manager sample (N=1,096)	- Test an intervention designed to encourage evidence-based decision making by providing critical commentary on the accuracy of the narrative (H2) - Provide evidence of worker opportunism mechanism via mediation
Study 4	Survey Experiment	Prolific manager sample (N=1,129)	- Test an intervention designed to encourage evidence-based decision making by providing company-specific indicators of high employee engagement (H3) - Provide evidence of worker opportunism mechanism via mediation

Table 2: Illustrative Quotes Describing Claims in the 'Quiet Quitting' News Narrative

Aggregate Dimensions	Conceptual Categories	Illustrative Quotes
	Psychological distancing oneself from work	Quiet quitting is a mindset many workers are adopting to meet their job requirements but not go beyond. No pulling late nights, no weekend calls and no pushing yourself too hard during business hours. [33]

| Claiming widespread historical rise of counter-productive work behaviors | | Adopting this 'quiet quitting' <u>mindset</u> really just means that you are <u>establishing a boundary</u> that helps you to do your job when you are paid to do it -- and then you can leave that, and <u>go home and be a human with your family</u>. [27]

As workers grow more vocal about finding fulfilling jobs that they can mostly perform from 9 to 5—a practice that has been called "quiet quitting" or <u>"anti-hustle"</u>—many job seekers are scrutinizing job postings for commonly used phrases they view as red flags for potential overwork. Among friends and in Twitter chatter and Reddit forums online, workers trade opinions, thoughts and warning signs about job postings. Some say that <u>"we're like a family" can read as code for being subject to verbal abuse</u>, and descriptions touting <u>perks like free meals and on-site entertainment can signal bosses will expect employees to be in the office long after the sun goes down</u>. [53] |
| | *Curbing discretionary effort* | Even before <u>the pandemic ushered in phrases</u> like the Great Resignation and quiet quitting, burnout among the most dedicated employees was an issue. But <u>in the last few years, employees across industries suffered a remarkable decline in morale, and are quitting, retiring, changing jobs or scaling back</u>. [92]

In essence, <u>quiet quitting is doing your job as it's written</u> — and <u>maintaining firm boundaries</u> otherwise. That means <u>no overtime</u> and <u>prioritizing the bare minimum requirements</u>. [25]

For decades, unions have pushed strict requirements for time at a job under so-called "work-to-rule." Quiet quitting likely existed in jobs outside of unions before the pandemic, but COVID-19's abrupt and radical shift to working outside the office has exacerbated and broadened the practice, experts say. [49] |

	Providing minimum viable effort	The idea is loosely defined, incorporating everything from high-achieving employees taking their foot off the gas at work to <u>workers</u> <u>only putting in enough effort to avoid getting canned</u>. [88]
		It's basically when your workday is over, you are done with work, and when your workday is going on, <u>you do what you were asked to do and what you are being paid to do</u>," Kate, a corporate IT worker in her early 30s, told Insider. "So it really is just doing your job. It seems that everyone is upset that people are not wanting to do jobs that are not their jobs as much as they used to. [46]
		Quiet quitting looks to many like a reasonable retreat from the round-the-clock hustle culture. But to others, quiet quitting represents disengaged employees sandbagging and <u>shirking all but the minimum effort, not expecting — or not caring — that their employers might fire them for it.</u> [35]
	Redirecting time to non-work activities	<u>Instead of working overtime for their main employer, some people are putting hours in for another</u> — and making a bit more money. [73]
		They were mounting a secret resistance — not by quitting their jobs altogether but by quietly dialing it back at work. They wanted to <u>save some time and energy for the things that mattered to them most: their family, their friends, their hobbies.</u> [39]
		Companies have also brought rebellions on themselves by outsourcing jobs and limiting employment security. This has given younger workers the <u>incentive to develop a "side hustle"</u>, dividing their time between working to pay the bills and creative projects in which they are passionately engaged. <u>That makes them more likely to quit quietly</u> and to devote more time and energy to their own ideas. [20]
		Quiet quitting is only the latest symptom of a general problem that plagues Gen Z: apathy. The idea of caring is no longer considered cool, and <u>a dangerous</u>

Linking social media content to uncertain real-world events	*Entry of Gen Z in the workplace*	combination of laziness and entitlement has left Gen Z wholly unprepared for work. Quiet quitting isn't caused by the hardworking employer but the indifferent employed. [91]
		I sympathize with what young workers are up against. Beside the pandemic, they've had to face economic pressures from rising costs of living, college loan paybacks and an uncertain economy, among other challenges. They have plenty to complain about. And employers aren't happy with growing levels of employee disengagement, meaning discontent, in America's Generation Z, also known as "Zoomers" — now entering the workforce — and their elders in the Millennial generation and Generation X. [21]
		And yet in 2022, young people find themselves facing mounting difficulties: debt, high inflation and lack of social mobility. In 2022, total student loan debt stands at US$1.75 trillion, or an average US$28,950 per borrower. More than half of students leave college with debt. With many Americans being priced out of the housing market, social mobility is declining. According to a Pew survey last year, 68 per cent of Americans think the young generation will be worse off than their parents. All things considered, when being hardworking is not enough to get ahead, quiet quitting seems to be a logical coping strategy. [55]
	Pandemic-induced burnout and remote work uptake	During the pandemic, a lot of people worked from home and continue to work from home now, and the lines between work and home were really blurred. So, it didn't feel like a big deal to stay on for a few more hours to finish a project, or to answer work emails on the weekend. But after a while, if you're putting in 80 hours a week when you're really only supposed to be putting in 40, it really has the power to take a toll on your body and your mental health. [32]
		But work has become more stressful for many following the pandemic, the switch to remote working, and a wave of resignations. There are severe staffing shortages in transport and other industries, intensifying the pressures on those who remain. [20]

		There is a large portion of the workforce that <u>went above and beyond, over the course of time, but</u> <u>particularly during the pandemic</u>, and received absolutely no reward for that — and maybe actually lost something in the process," Gross said. "So if there is no incentive to exceed expectations, you should never expect people to go above and beyond. [25]
	Labor shortage	So here comes quiet quitting, <u>enabled by an economy that's going gangbusters</u>. You can do less and less these days <u>before a supervisor even considers a reprimand; chances are, she couldn't easily dig up a replacement for you.</u> Instead of making the effort to decide what you truly want out of work -- and life -- and setting off to find it, you can just loaf along, watching the clock, bragging to your friends about how cleverly you're hoodwinking the boss. [68] … people got the power and it's not certain they'll ever give it up again—and the best employers recognize that and act accordingly. Of course, a worldwide economic downturn—thanks, Vladimir Putin and Jerome Powell—might change the rules of engagement with employers. But for now, <u>there's no end in sight, precisely because of developments like the Great Resignation and the labor shortages that ensued.</u> [96] <u>Employees are afraid the job market is tightening</u>: About 23% of employees report being laid off or someone they know being laid off this year. Meanwhile, in July, 31% of job seekers thought it was easy to get a job, but this dropped to 26% in September. Now, 47% of employees say that <u>concerns about the recession are making them less likely to quit their job</u>. [103]

Table 3: Illustrative Quotes Describing Journalistic Critiques about the Accuracy of the Social Media Narrative

Aggregate Dimensions	Conceptual Categories	Illustrative Quotes
Journalists' concerns about the 'Quiet Quitting' news narrative	*Viral entertainment content as source material*	The buzzword seems to have first surfaced in a July TikTok post. In the words of user @zaidleppelin, "You're not outright quitting your job but you're quitting the idea of going above and beyond. You're still performing your duties but you're no longer subscribing to the hustle culture mentality that work has to be your life." That post went viral, drawing nearly a half-million likes. Responses bubbled over with a sense of shared resentment -- and newspaper columnists spilled ink all summer trying to decipher the phenomenon. [31] Quiet quitting supposedly began with a TikTok video that suggested young professionals today are becoming less interested in going the extra mile at work — and that should be OK. The video went viral. And since then, quiet quitting has exploded into a national debate on everything from Generation Z laziness to corporate indifference. The Wall Street Journal labeled it "not taking your job too seriously" and quoted a 24-year-old engineer who explained quiet quitting on a TikTok video: "You're quitting on the idea of going above and beyond. ... You're no longer subscribing to the hustle-culture mentality that work has to be your life." This was rebuked by many successful business leaders, including Arianna Huffington, who wrote that quiet quitting was a step toward "quitting on life." [24] From Barbiecore to revenge travel, social media trends gave us a clear picture of the forces reshaping the economy. The unemployment rate has hovered at 3.7 percent for months. But it is the TikTok-famous "quiet quitting" and live-tweeted resignations that really explained what was going on in America's job market in 2022, a moment of renewed worker power and remarkable upheaval. [120]

| | *Assumption that online entertainment content reflects offline behavior* | Think of quiet quitting as the third iteration of dubious pandemic work-related fads… <u>These trends don't describe real behavior, but employees' fantasies</u>. As with all spurious trends, the definition is impossibly broad. <u>Quiet quitting is also something we're talking about more than we're actually carrying out.</u> [89]

A boss tries to give her employee, Veronica, a stack of papers to work on overnight. "Respectfully, Susan, I'd rather spend time with my family," Veronica replies. Then, she declines a 6:30 pm Zoom meeting; it's outside of her working hours. <u>Veronica and Susan aren't real. They're characters played by 30-year-old content creator Sarai Soto, whose TikToks on quiet quitting, acting your wage, and asserting boundaries at work have racked up millions of likes and views.</u> "People just really feel seen, they feel heard, they feel like someone's standing up for them," Soto told Insider. "I can't tell you how many messages I receive of people being like, okay, I know your content is funny and provides this comedic relief, but I'm telling you, although it's exaggerated, I've been through those exact same scenarios." [51]

<u>Its growing popularity on TikTok shows</u> how millennial and Gen Z <u>workers are pushing back</u> on the expectation that they should go above and beyond what they are paid to do. [9] |
| | *Validating with weak or countervailing survey evidence* | Do a quick google search of "quiet quitting," and you'll find a number of articles pushing the narrative of a lazy workforce. <u>Most are backed by a recent Gallup report</u>, warning fearful employers that "quiet quitters make up at least 50% of the U.S. workforce," and the trend "could get worse." According to Gallup, the number of disengaged workers rose to 18% in 2022 - the highest it's been in nearly a decade. This information alone has leaders across the country worried about the consequences a disengaged workforce could have on their company's productivity. <u>The problem with this statistic is that it lacks context.</u> Between 2018 and 2020, employee engagement increased from 34% to 36%. In 2022, it barely declined at |

		32% - and <u>from a quick look at Gallup's report, you can see that this number is still higher than any year prior to 2014.</u> [106]
		<u>The number of engaged workers dipped by two percentage points to 32%, while actively disengaged rose by the same amount to 18%, according to a post on Gallup's website.</u> What may be more disquieting are the remaining 50%, which Gallup describes as "people who do the minimum required and are psychologically detached from their job." The deterioration in engagement "was especially related to clarity of expectations, opportunities to learn and grow, feeling cared about, and a connection to the organization's mission or purpose - signaling a growing disconnect between employees and their employers," according to the post. [49]

<u>Workplace engagement has been pretty stable for years.</u> Polling organization Gallup has been tracking it for over two decades, during which time the percentage of "actively disengaged" employees has held largely steady, at between 13% and 20% of employees. The percentage of engaged employees has also been stable for decades, at around 30% of employees. While Gallup recently rebranded the middle - the people who are neither engaged nor disengaged - as "quiet quitters," that seems like a leap. Lots of people neither love nor hate their jobs, and they're not quitters. [113] |
| | *Justifying newsworthiness by mere presence of prior media attention* | Although the concept itself is not new, <u>the term seems to have struck a unique chord with the reading public.</u> After it appeared in a few viral videos on TikTok last month, <u>it was picked up by the mainstream media and spread like wildfire</u> from there. [60]

<u>Stories on the concept are showing up everywhere, from The Washington Post and The New York Times to The Wall Street Journal. It's a frequent Twitter and TikTok theme. Quiet quitting is "taking social media by storm,"</u> noted the Post's Taylor Telford, and it doesn't stop at the water's edge. In Great Britain's Spectator, Stephen Daisley writes that it means doing "whatever is asked of you provided it's lawful, reasonable and within your contract. Do not one thing more than that." [68] |

| | | The term "quiet quitting" has gone viral. What began as a TikTok trend has worked its way into workplaces across the country. Chances are you've read about it, either as the idea that people are underperforming at work or that they are simply trying to maintain a work-life balance. [158] |

Table 4. Demographics across experimental studies

	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4
Total *N*	1000	1187	1201
Exclusion Criteria			
Attention check	37	73	63
Outlier check	21	12	10
Analysis *N*	942	1096	1129
Race/Ethnicity			
White	754	753	830
Black	73	197	85
Asian	42	59	86
Hispanic/Latine	47	59	85
Native American/Alaskan Native	2	8	8
Other race	23	20	35
No response	1	0	0
Gender			
Male	464	546	567
Female	467	538	549
Non-binary/other	11	12	13
Mean Age (SD)	44.16 (13.56)	41.95 (12.65)	45.25 (13.06)
Current Manager	50.5%	57.1%	50.3%
Years of Managerial Tenure (SD)	8.75 (8.69)	7.53 (7.09)	8.87 (8.45)

Table 5. Results for Managerial Control Policy Adoption [N=942]

Dependent Measure	Treatment Condition	Control Condition	t-test	df	p	Cohen's d	Mean Difference 95% CI
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)					
Coercive Control Policies	3.84 (1.37)	3.67 (1.20)	2.03	924.14	.043	0.13	.004, 0.26
Rational Control Policies	5.17 (1.02)	4.80 (0.93)	5.85	940	<.001	0.38	0.25, 0.51
Normative Control Policies	5.48 (1.08)	5.70 (0.95)	3.38	925.31	.001	0.22	0.09, 0.35

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Measures by Condition [N=1.096]

	"Quiet Quitting" Treatment	Control	Critical Commentary (Elaborated)	Critical Commentary (Condensed)
Coercive	4.39 (1.32)	**4.12 (1.20)**	4.26 (1.33)	4.26 (1.28)
Rational	5.13 (0.97)	**4.92 (1.00)**	5.07 (0.96)	5.12 (0.98)
Normative	5.63 (0.99)	5.71 (1.04)	5.67 (1.10)	5.66 (1.06)
Opportunism	3.94 (1.32)	**3.06 (1.36)**	3.79 (1.28)	3.85 (1.33)

Note. Cells in **bold** indicate significant differences from the "quiet quitting" treatment condition, which served as the referent condition in our pre-registered analyses.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Measures by Condition [N=1,129]

|	No Local Information		Positive Local Information	
	"Quiet Quitting" Treatment	Control	"Quiet Quitting" Treatment	Control
Coercive	4.17 (1.35)	3.71 (1.29)	3.06 (1.37)	2.84 (1.27)
Rational	5.18 (1.00)	4.78 (1.00)	4.53 (1.10)	4.23 (1.04)
Normative	5.65 (0.99)	5.71 (1.01)	5.24 (1.16)	5.23 (1.15)
Opportunism	3.72 (1.28)	2.72 (1.12)	2.55 (1.29)	2.13 (1.26)

Appendix A: Viral TikTok Video Posted by User zaidleppelin on July 25, 2022

Video Title: On quiet quitting #workreform
Video music: I thought you wanted to dance – ruby
Video length: 17 seconds
Video Screenshot:

00:02 / 00:17   Speed

zaidleppelin
zaid leppelin · 2022-7-25

Follow

On quiet quitting #workreform

♫ i thought you wanted to dance - ruby
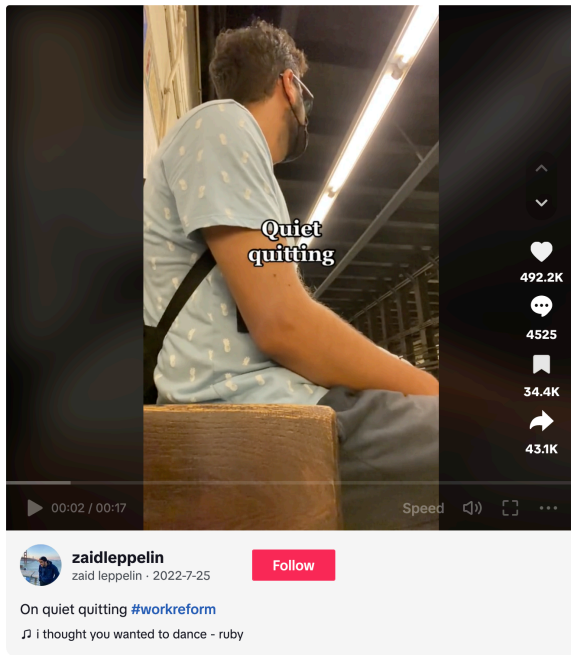
Full Audio Transcription:
"I recently learned about this term called quiet quitting where you're not outright quitting your job but you're quitting the idea of going above and beyond. You're still performing your duties but you're no longer subscribing to the hustle culture mentality that work has to be your life. The reality is it's not. And your worth as a person is not defined by your labor."
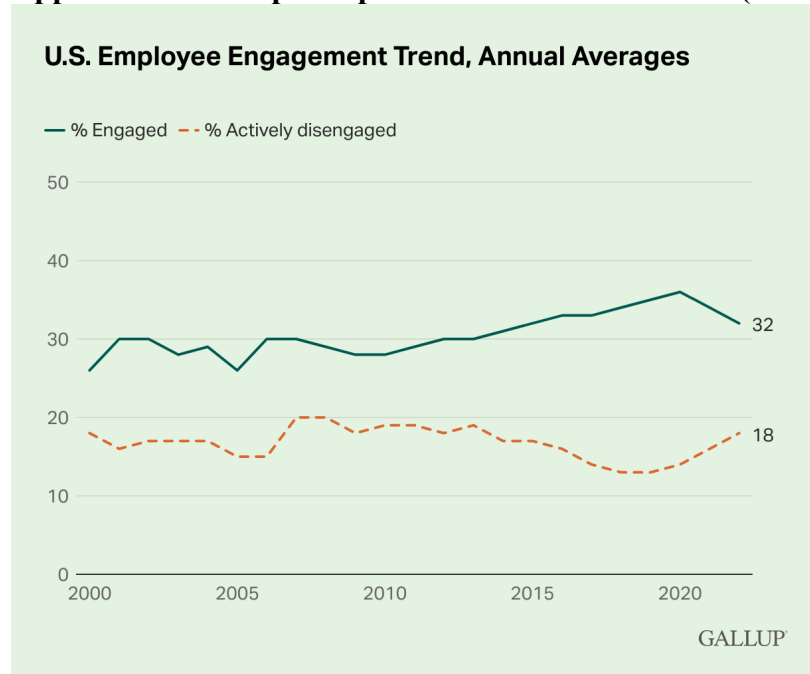
Retrieved from https://www.tiktok.com/@zaidleppelin/video/7124414185282391342?lang=en

Appendix B: Gallup's Employee Engagement 12 Item Measure
"1. I know what is expected of me at work.; 2. I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.; 3. At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day. 4. In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work. 5. My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person. 6. There is someone at work who encourages my development. 7. At work, my opinions seem to count. 8. The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important. 9. My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work. 10. I have a best friend at work. 11. In the last six months, someone at work

has talked to me about my progress; 12. This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow." (Gallup 2021, 2022, 2023).

Appendix C: Gallup's Reported Measure Over Time (2000-2023)

U.S. Employee Engagement Trend, Annual Averages

— % Engaged – - % Actively disengaged

Retrieved from: https://www.gallup.com/workplace/468233/employee-engagement-needs-rebound-2023.aspx

Online Supplement: Experimental Materials; Polls Cited by Journalists
https://osf.io/rpczj/?view_only=c7835f8226084399b66d2aaace31f7cf