

Research Paper

The Invisible Attrition: Toxic Leadership, Learning Potential and Quiet Quitting among Indian Millennials and Generation Z Employees

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ABSTRACT

Workplace disengagement among younger employees emerged as a structurally significant concern in contemporary Indian organizations. This study examined the relationship among toxic leadership, perceived learning potential of the workplace and quiet quitting behavioral tendencies among Millennial and Generation Z employees in the Indian private sector and investigated whether generational cohort membership produces meaningful differences in how these constructs are experienced. Using a quantitative cross-sectional design with a stratified sample of 250 private-sector employees, data were collected through three validated psychometric instruments and analysed using Pearson correlation, independent samples t-tests, and hierarchical multiple regression. Findings revealed statistically significant associations among all three variables. Toxic leadership emerged as the dominant predictor of quiet quitting, while perceived learning potential functioned as a meaningful protective resource. Generational cohorts differed significantly in toxic leadership and learning potential perceptions, yet demonstrated comparable quiet quitting tendencies, repositioning disengagement as an organizational rather than generational phenomenon.

Keywords: *Toxic Leadership, Quiet Quitting, Learning Potential of the Workplace, Millennial employees, Generation Z employees, Indian private sector, employee disengagement*

The contemporary organizational landscape is undergoing a period of profound and, in many ways, unprecedented transformation. Businesses are no longer simply navigating market pressures, technological disruption, or post – pandemic structural shifts; they are simultaneously contending with a quiet but consequential internal crisis: a growing and generationally charged rupture between how organizations are led and what employees, particularly younger cohorts, are willing to endure. At the heart of this crisis lies a convergence of three realities that are rapidly reshaping workplace culture globally – the persistence of toxic and destructive leadership behaviors, the suppression of workplace learning and development, and a new form of employee withdrawal known as “Quiet Quitting”. What distinguishes this moment from previous periods of organizational

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disruption is that the pressure is not coming only from the outside. The more decisive force is internal, and it is generational. Millennials and Generation Z, now form the most numerically dominant generational cohort in the global workforce but their presence alone does not tell the full story. What matters equally is the terms on which they have entered professional life, terms that are meaningfully different from those accepted by any generation before them. They arrive with a redefined psychological and social contract, one that centers purpose over compliance, reciprocity over hierarchy, and authentic respect over positional authority. When the generations who hold the majority of an organization's productive capacity and institutional future begin to withdraw their effort not loudly, not dramatically, but steadily and deliberately, the impact does not remain contained within individual teams or departments. It seeps into organizational culture itself, eroding the trust, engagement and collective momentum that no performance metric can easily restore.

The modern Indian workplace stands at a critical inflection point. Organizations across the country are navigating a peculiar paradox: on one hand, they are absorbing the largest cohort of young and digitally fluent workers in the nation's history; on the other, they are hemorrhaging engagement, loyalty and discretionary effort at an alarming rate. This is not merely an HR problem but a structural and cultural crisis, building at the intersection of how employees are led and how they are allowed to grow. India's workforce is undergoing a profound generational reshaping. Millennials constitute dominant segment of the organized workforce, occupying roles from entry level to mid management across industries. Generation – Z is rapidly entering the workforce and are projected to represent nearly 74% of the global workforce alongside Millennials by 2030 (Deloitte, 2025). In India specifically, the convergence of these two cohorts in the workplace is not just a matter of demography; it represents a seismic shift in workplace expectations, cultural values, and the psychological contract between employees and their employers. The Gallup State of the Global Workplace Reports (2023,2024) have documented that global workforce disengagement has been rising steadily from 59% in 2023 to 62% in 2024 with inadequate leadership, limited development opportunities, a hostile or toxic work environment, and the misalignment between well-being policies and employee needs consistently emerging as central contributing factors (Nogueiro M. S., 2025).

What is particularly significant about these trends is not just their scale, but the quality of the disengagement being observed. Organizations are witnessing a more insidious form of withdrawal: "Quiet Quitting" – a deliberate, silent withdrawal from any effort that exceeds the bare minimum of one's job description. The concept first surfaced in March 2022 through career coach Bryan Creely's viral TikTok post and rapidly entered scholarly discourse, situated within the broader paradigm of the great Resignation - not as its endpoint, but as its quieter, more enduring precursor (Scheyett, 2023). What makes this form of withdrawal particularly difficult for organizations to detect, and address is that it does not announce itself through resignation letters; it leaves nothing at all. While scholars have long recognized that chronic workplace stressors trigger self – protective psychological mechanisms wherein withdrawal becomes a coping strategy (Leiter, 2016). Recent scholarly inquiry challenges the assumptions that quiet quitting is synonymous with exhaustion, arguing instead it frequently represents something far more deliberate: a purposeful repositioning of effort and personal boundaries where employees have consciously decided what the workplace no longer deserves from them (Afi, 2025). Consistent with this view, (Nuryanti Taufik, 2024) found in their examination of Millennial and Gen-Z employees that quiet quitting behaviors are not indicative of laziness but rather constitute a reasoned

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response to boundary violations, burnout, the desire for autonomy and the prioritization of meaningful work, a finding that substantially repositions quiet quitting as an active, agentic response rather than a passive organizational casualty.

Understanding why disengagement is manifesting with particular intensity among Millennials and Generation – Z employees require examining two upstream organizational conditions this research identifies as critical antecedents. The first is toxic leadership – a systemic and characterological pattern wherein those in authority consistently pursue self – serving agendas at the direct expense of follower well – being, organizational integrity and collective purpose. This destructive dynamic emerges from three mutually reinforcing forces: leaders psychologically disposed towards dominance and manipulation, followers rendered susceptible to such influence, and organizational environments that allow such behavior to thrive through weak accountability structures. Toxic leadership systematically erodes the conditions under which people can do meaningful work through intimidation, intellectual suppression, micromanagement, deliberate undermining of employee confidence, and active neglect of staff development (Sakina Nusarifa Tantri, 2024). When psychological safety collapses under toxic leadership, so does everything that depends on it. In the Indian organizational context, aggregate data reveal that average employee complaints rose from 222 in 2022 – 2023 to 244 in 2023 – 2024, while turnover rates climbed from 24% to 31%, indicating a workforce progressively less willing to endure the conditions it encounters (Heldi Sahputra, 2025).

Critically, toxic leadership operates through a particularly consequential mechanism: the active suppression of workplace learning. This brings us to the second upstream condition – the learning potential of the workplace. This refers not merely to formal training programs but to the broader cultural infrastructure within which employees feel encouraged and empowered to develop, question, experiment, reflect and grow. When the infrastructure is absent, when knowledge – sharing is discouraged and development conversations are replaced by surveillance, the workplace becomes intellectually and psychologically stagnant. For Millennials and Generation – Z, learning and development is not a peripheral aspiration but a foundational condition of professional engagement. Empirical evidence confirms that younger workers overwhelmingly prioritize growth and developmental support when evaluating employers, and that the perceived absence of these opportunities is among the most consistent predictors of disengagement (Nogueiro M. S., 2025). Research demonstrates that toxic leadership produces employee silence as a key mediating outcome directly undermining organizational learning by blocking the upward communication and knowledge exchange upon which genuine learning cultures depend (Watkins, 2003). When leaders create climates wherein employees fear sharing ideas or acknowledging mistakes, they structurally foreclose the developmental reciprocity that Millennials and Generation – Z consider a fundamental condition of fair exchange (Nogueiro M. S., 2025).

The expectation gap is equally well documented: while both cohorts express strong desires for managers who mentor, guide, and invest in their development, this expectation is met at a fraction of the rate at which it is held, creating a structural deficit between what younger employees need and what they actually receive (Caldwell, 2023). When learning potential is systematically suppressed, these employees do not simply accept this condition—they withdraw from it. Millennials tend toward gradual and progressive disengagement, while Generation Z demonstrates a sharper threshold, disengaging more rapidly and withdrawing

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discretionary effort the moment they perceive an absence of development reciprocity or values alignment (Ochis, 2024).

Learning and development are not a peripheral aspiration for Millennials and Gen – Z, it is a foundational condition of their professional engagement. Empirical evidence confirms that younger workers overwhelmingly prioritize growth, skill acquisition, and developmental support when evaluating both prospective and current employers, and that the perceived absence of these opportunities is one of the most consistent and statistically significant predictors of disengagement and exit intention among both generational cohorts (Nogueiro M. S., 2025). Research by (Maria Dolores Benitez - Márquez, 2022), drawing on a broad bibliometric review of Generation Z in the workplace, confirmed that Gen – Z employees are fundamentally motivated by finding roles that expand their skills and that they demonstrate a notably higher propensity to switch jobs when skill development opportunities are absent or inadequate. (Petchsawang, 2024), in their empirical study of Gen – Z employees in Vietnam, further confirmed that learning climate, alongside transformational leadership, is among the most statistically significant determinants of Gen – Z work engagement and that its absence is directly implicated in motivational withdrawal. Complementing these findings a multidimensional study in the Indian contexts by (Agrawal, 2025) demonstrated that Generation Z workers employed in Indian organizations prioritize organized, goal-oriented learning opportunities and that their creative performance and sustained engagement are contingent upon the availability of these developmental pathways, a finding of particular relevance to the present research's organizational setting. More broadly, (Dalain, 2023), in an organizational study examining the relationship between learning culture and employee engagement, found that organizational learning culture serves as one of the most powerful additive drivers of work engagement across cohorts and that its erosion is correspondingly among the most reliable predictors of disengagement, most acutely in environments where leadership concurrently fails to provide psychological safety and developmental support.

These differential pathways to disengagement remain underexplored in existing literature, particularly within the Indian organizational context, where hierarchical leadership cultures, limited psychological safety, and chronic underinvestment in employee development continue to characterize many workplaces. While scholarship has matured considerably, existing studies have largely treated these variables in isolation. No empirical study to date has simultaneously examined all three constructs: toxic leadership, perceived learning potential of the workplace, and quiet quitting within a single integrative framework, nor has research adequately applied generational distinctions to these specific variables within the Indian private sector context. This trivariate relationship and the manner in which it may operate differently across Millennial and Generation Z employees therefore constitutes a meaningful and empirically unaddressed research gap.

The organizational cost of this convergence is neither abstract nor distant. When toxic leadership and learning deficient environments co – exist, the compounded effect on younger employees is not simply reduced performance, it is a structural erosion of the psychological contract between employee and the employer that once broken is extremely difficult to restore (Zhong Xueyun, 2023). For Indian organizations navigating an increasingly generationally diverse workforce, the implications are particularly urgent. The cost of this detachment in terms of lost innovation, declining knowledge retention, eroding workplace culture and compounding attrition is a problem that can no longer be treated as

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peripheral. The study therefore positions itself at the intersection of these three underexplored forces, seeking to examine, through a deliberate generational lens, how toxic leadership and learning deficient workplace environments collectively drive quiet quitting among Millennial and Gen – Z employees in the Indian organizational context, and in doing so, to contribute empirically grounded knowledge to a gap that existing scholarship has identified but not adequately addressed.

METHODOLOGY

Aim of the Study:

The study aims to examine the relationships among toxic leadership, perceived learning potential of the workplace and quiet quitting tendencies among Millennial and Generation Z employees in the Indian working sector and to investigate whether generational cohort membership accounts for meaningful differences in how these variables are experienced and expressed.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine the relationship between Toxic Leadership and perceived Learning Potential of the Workplace among Millennial and Generation Z employees in the Indian working sector.
2. To examine the relationship between Toxic Leadership and Quiet Quitting behaviour among Millennial and Generation Z employees in the Indian working sector.
3. To examine the relationship between perceived Learning Potential of the Workplace and Quiet Quitting behaviour among Millennial and Generation Z employees in the Indian working sector.
4. To examine the cohort difference of Millennials and Generation – Z employees in perceptions of Toxic Leadership at Workplace.
5. To examine the cohort difference of Millennials and Generation – Z employees in perceptions of Workplace Learning Potential.
6. To examine the cohort difference of Millennials and Generation – Z employees in Quiet Quitting Tendencies.
7. To examine the collective predictive influence of Toxic Leadership and perceived Learning Potential at Workplace on Quiet Quitting among employees.
8. To examine Generational Cohort as an Incremental Predictor of Quiet Quitting Behaviour Tendencies.

Hypothesis of the Study:

- **H1:** There is a statistical significant relationship between Toxic Leadership and Learning Potential of the Workplace among Millennials and Generation – Z employees.
- **H2:** There is a statistical significant relationship between Toxic Leadership and Quiet Quitting Behaviour among Millennials and Generation – Z employees.
- **H3:** There is a statistical significant relationship between Learning Potential of the Workplace and Quiet Quitting Behaviour among Millennials and Generation – Z employees.
- **H4:** There is a statistical significant difference between Millennial and Generation – Z employees in their perceptions of Toxic Leadership.
- **H5:** There is a statistical significant difference between Millennial and Generation – Z employees in their perceptions of Workplace Learning Potential.

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- **H6:** There is a statical significant difference between Millennials and Generation – Z employees in their Quiet Quitting Behavioural tendencies.
- **H7:** Toxic Leadership and perceived Learning Potential of the Workplace significantly predict quiet quitting behavioural tendencies among Millennials and Generation – Z employees when considered jointly.
- **H8:** Generational cohort account for a statistically significant amount of incremental variance on quiet quitting behavioural tendencies beyond the variance explained by toxic leadership and perceived learning potential of the workplace.

Research Design:

The present study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey-based design. A quantitative approach was deemed most appropriate given the study's primary purpose of examining relationships, group differences, and predictive associations among three well-defined organizational constructs: toxic leadership, perceived learning potential of the workplace, and quiet quitting behavioural tendencies. This methodology allows constructs to be operationalized through validated psychometric instruments and subjected to inferential statistical analyses capable of detecting the magnitude, direction, and significance of associations under investigation. A cross-sectional design was selected as data collection occurred at a single point in time, consistent with the study's focus on current perceptions and their associations rather than developmental change over time. This design is widely employed in organizational behaviour research examining employee disengagement and leadership perceptions (Zhong Xueyun, 2023); (Nogueiro M. S., 2025), and offers practical advantages in terms of accessibility, efficiency, and representativeness within the constraints of a primary data study.

Variables:

Independent Variables (IV):

- **Toxic Leadership:** Toxic leadership constitutes the first independent variable in this study. It refers to a persistent and characterological pattern of leader behaviour marked by self-serving conduct, hostility toward subordinates, intellectual suppression, narcissism, authoritarian control, and unpredictability behaviours that systematically erode employee well-being, psychological safety, and organizational functioning (Demerouti, 2007); (Schmidt, 2008). In the present study, toxic leadership was operationalized using a validated psychometric scale and measured at the individual employee level through subordinate perception, consistent with established practice in the toxic leadership literature (Arif, 2017); (Ivana Milosevic, 2020).
- **Learning Potential of the Workplace:** The perceived learning potential of the workplace constitutes the second independent variable. This construct refers to the degree to which employees perceive their organizational environment as affording meaningful opportunities for work-based learning across four core dimensions: learning through reflection, learning through experimentation, learning from colleagues, and learning from the supervisor (Irina Nikolova, 2014). It is conceptually distinct from formal training programs and instead captures the informal, contextually embedded learning infrastructure that enables employees to develop, question, experiment, and grow through the course of their daily work. In the present study, this variable was measured using a validated multi-dimensional instrument designed specifically for cross-occupational applicability.

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Dependent Variables (DV):

- **Quiet Quitting Behaviour:** Quiet quitting behavioural tendencies constitute the dependent variable. Quiet quitting is defined as a deliberate reduction in discretionary effort and organizational commitment, wherein employees consciously restrict their engagement to the minimum requirements of their role without formally disengaging or resigning (Anand & Ray, 2023); (Caldwell, 2023). It is distinct from absenteeism, turnover intention, or formal workplace deviance, and is instead characterized by a measured withdrawal of effort, enthusiasm, and above-and-beyond contribution. This variable was operationalized using the quiet quitting subscale of a validated Indian-context instrument (Anand & Ray, 2023), with only the quiet quitting items utilized in this study.

Inclusion Criteria:

- The participant must have been born between 1981 and 2004, encompassing the Millennial (born 1981–1996) and Generation Z (born 1997–2004, up to age 20–43 at the time of data collection) generational cohorts as defined by established demographic boundaries (Deloitte, 2025).
- The participant must have been between 20 and 43 years of age at the time of participation.
- The participant must have been currently employed in an organization at the time of data collection.
- The participant must have been engaged in full-time, part-time, or contractual employment within the Indian private sector.
- The participant must have had a minimum of six months of organizational tenure, sufficient to have formed meaningful perceptions of their direct supervisor's leadership style and their workplace's learning environment.

Exclusion Criteria:

- The participant was a self-employed individual, freelancer, or independent contractor without an organizational reporting structure, as the study's constructs particularly toxic leadership and workplace learning potential require the presence of a defined supervisory relationship and organizational context.
- The participant was employed in the public sector, government organization, or not-for-profit entity, as the study is specifically scoped to the Indian private sector.
- The participant did not meet the age criteria of 20 to 43 years.
- The participant provided incomplete responses, defined as failing to complete more than 10% of any single scale's items.
- The participant was on a career break, sabbatical, or extended leave at the time of participation and therefore did not have an active supervisory relationship.

Sample and Sampling Technique:

The final sample comprised 250 employed individuals from the Indian private sector, equally representing Millennial (born 1981–1996) and Generation Z (born 1997–2004) cohorts, with 125 participants per stratum. The sample size was determined adequate for Pearson correlation, independent samples t-tests, and hierarchical multiple regression at a medium effect size and .05 significance level. A combination of stratified random sampling and snowball sampling was employed. Stratified random sampling served as the primary technique, ensuring proportional generational representation and reducing sampling bias. Snowball sampling supplemented recruitment given the practical challenges of accessing a

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dispersed private-sector population. Initial participants meeting the inclusion criteria were invited to refer eligible colleagues within their professional networks. To mitigate network homogeneity, recruitment was initiated from multiple independent starting points across varied industries, job functions, and organizational sizes, ensuring reasonable sample diversity.

Procedure:

Data were collected through a structured self-administered online survey distributed via Google Forms, selected for its accessibility and suitability for reaching geographically dispersed employees across India. Prior to full deployment, the instrument was piloted with 15 eligible participants to assess clarity and face validity, resulting in minor instructional adjustments while all validated scale items were retained unchanged. The final survey comprised four sequential sections: an informed consent statement, sociodemographic and employment information, the three psychometric instruments administered in fixed order, and a closing debriefing statement. The survey was distributed through professional networking platforms, employee groups, and personal referral networks over approximately four weeks. All responses were collected anonymously with no personally identifying information requested. Responses were subsequently screened for completeness and eligibility, and a final usable sample of 250 was retained for statistical analysis.

Description of Scales:

- **Toxic Leader Scale (Schmidt, 2008):** The Toxic Leadership Scale was developed by (Schmidt, 2008) through systematic qualitative and quantitative inquiry across military and civilian settings, provides a multidimensional measure of destructive leadership as perceived by subordinates. The 15-item scale comprises five dimensions: self-promotion, abusive supervision, unpredictability, narcissism, and authoritarian leadership, with three items per dimension. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating greater toxic leadership. The instrument demonstrates excellent psychometric properties, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .88 to .93 across dimensions and .90 for the overall scale. Confirmatory factor analysis supported the five-factor structure, and the scale has been widely validated in organizational research contexts globally.
- **Learning Potential of the Workplace Scale (Irina Nikolova, 2014):** The Learning Potential of the Workplace (LPW) Scale was developed and validated by (Irina Nikolova, 2014) through rigorous psychometric testing with 1,013 Dutch wage earners, measures informal and interactional learning opportunities in workplaces. The 12-item instrument comprises four theoretically derived dimensions: learning through reflection, learning through experimentation, learning from colleagues, and learning from the supervisor, with three items per dimension. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Not Applicable at All to 5 = Completely Applicable), with higher scores indicating greater learning potential. The scale demonstrates excellent reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .83 to .91. Confirmatory factor analysis supported the four-factor structure with factor loadings ranging from .63 to .93, and measurement invariance was confirmed across independent subsamples.

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- **Quiet Quitting Scale (Anand & Ray, 2023):** The Quiet Quitting (QQ) Scale was developed and validated by (Anand & Ray, 2023) through systematic scale development incorporating qualitative interviews and psychometric validation with 264 Indian employees, measures individual-level work disengagement and deliberate withdrawal of discretionary effort. For this study, only the quiet quitting subscale was utilized, comprising seven items assessing behaviours including working to bare minimum, avoiding unpaid effort, lacking meeting interest, and absence of passion for beyond-minimum contribution. Items are scored on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating greater quiet quitting tendencies. The subscale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .829). Exploratory factor analysis confirmed unidimensional structure with all items loading above .50, and nomological validity was established through significant associations with theoretically related outcomes.

Statistical Measures:

All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). Data were first screened for normality, outliers, and missing values prior to analysis. Descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were computed to characterize the sample and summarize responses across the three scales.

- **Pearson Product Moment Correlation:** Pearson correlation was employed to examine the strength and direction of linear relationships among toxic leadership, learning potential, and quiet quitting. It was selected because all three constructs are operationalized as continuous composite scores from validated Likert-type scales, and the correlation coefficient (r) provides a standardized index of bivariate association magnitude and direction.
- **Independency Samples T – Test:** The independent samples t-test was employed to compare mean-level differences between Millennial and Generation Z employees across the three study variables. This parametric test is appropriate for comparing continuous variables between two independent, mutually exclusive groups. Cohen's d was computed to supplement significance testing with effect size information, consistent with APA-7 reporting standards.
- **Hierarchical Multiple Regression:** Hierarchical multiple regression was employed to evaluate the combined and incremental predictive contributions of toxic leadership, learning potential, and generational cohort on quiet quitting. Organizational predictors were entered in Model 1, followed by generational cohort in Model 2. The increment in explained variance (ΔR^2) and associated F-change statistic assessed incremental predictive validity beyond organizational conditions.

Ethical Considerations:

The present study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, the Declaration of Helsinki, and the American Psychological Association's guidelines for research with human participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, with informed consent obtained prior to data collection through a detailed consent statement presented at the survey's outset. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Complete anonymity was maintained throughout, as no personally identifying information was collected at any stage. All responses were stored in a password-protected digital environment accessible solely to the primary researcher and used exclusively for academic purposes. Survey items pertaining to toxic leadership and quiet quitting were framed as perceptual rather than evaluative,

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ensuring no harm to participants or third parties. No incentives were offered for participation. The survey required approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete, and all data will be retained and disposed of in accordance with institutional data management requirements.

RESULT

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Toxic Leadership, Learning Potential at Workplace and Quiet Quitting Behaviour among Millennials and Generation – Z employees

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gender	250	10	20	15.08	5.009
Generation	250	100	200	150.00	50.100
TL- Total	250	15	75	40.82	14.143
LP - Total	250	11	55	38.82	7.486
QQ- Total	250	7	35	18.09	5.798
Valid N (listwise)	250				

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics across the full sample of 250 private-sector employees. Toxic leadership scores ranged from 15 to 75 ($M = 40.82$, $SD = 14.143$), reflecting considerable variability in supervisory toxicity perceptions, with the sample mean falling in the moderate range. Learning potential scores ranged from 11 to 55 ($M = 38.82$, $SD = 7.486$), indicating moderate-to-favourable developmental environment perceptions with meaningful individual variation. Quiet quitting behavioural tendency scores ranged from 7 to 35 ($M = 18.09$, $SD = 5.798$), placing the sample average in the moderate range of discretionary effort withdrawal. The variability observed across all three constructs confirms that the sample distribution is adequate to support meaningful correlational, comparative, and predictive statistical analysis.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix for Toxic Leadership, Learning Potential of the Workplace and Quiet Quitting Behaviour

Pearson Correlation Matrix

		TL- Total	LP - Total	QQ- Total
TL- Total	Pearson Correlation	1	-.396**	.523**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	250	250	250
LP - Total	Pearson Correlation	-.396**	1	-.292**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	250	250	250
QQ- Total	Pearson Correlation	.523**	-.292**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	250	250	250

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 2 presents Pearson correlation coefficients among the three study variables, all significant at the .01 level. Toxic leadership demonstrated a statistically significant negative association with perceived learning potential ($r = -.396$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher supervisory toxicity was associated with diminished workplace developmental capacity.

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Toxic leadership showed the strongest bivariate association with quiet quitting ($r = .523, p < .01$), confirming that greater toxic supervisory exposure predicted markedly higher discretionary effort withdrawal. Perceived learning potential demonstrated a statistically significant negative relationship with quiet quitting ($r = -.292, p < .01$), indicating that stronger developmental environments were associated with reduced withdrawal tendencies. All three associations aligned with theoretical expectations, supporting the bivariate hypotheses of the present study.

Table 3.1: Group Statistics and Independent Samples T – test Results for Toxic leadership, Learning Potential and Quiet Quitting Behaviour by Generational Cohort
Group Statistics

	Generation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
TL- Total	Generation - Z	125	38.03	15.988	1.430
	Millennials	125	43.60	11.419	1.021
LP - Total	Generation - Z	125	40.91	8.123	.727
	Millennials	125	36.74	6.145	.550
QQ- Total	Generation - Z	125	18.37	6.821	.610
	Millennials	125	17.81	4.563	.408

Table 3.1 presents descriptive group statistics for both generational cohorts, each comprising 125 participants. Millennial employees reported higher mean toxic leadership scores ($M = 43.60, SD = 11.419$) compared to Generation Z ($M = 38.03, SD = 15.988$), with greater within-group variability observed among the latter. Generation Z reported higher perceived learning potential ($M = 40.91, SD = 8.123$) relative to Millennials ($M = 36.74, SD = 6.145$). Quiet quitting behavioral tendency means were closely proximate across cohorts Generation Z ($M = 18.37, SD = 6.821$) and Millennials ($M = 17.81, SD = 4.563$) with a negligible mean difference of 0.56 points, though Generation Z exhibited greater within-group heterogeneity in this variable.

Table 3.2: Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances and T - test for Equality of Means Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
TL- Total	Equal variances assumed	21.532	.000	-3.168	248	.002
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.168	224.388	.002
LP - Total	Equal variances assumed	15.277	.000	4.584	248	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			4.584	230.910	.000
QQ- Total	Equal variances assumed	22.531	.000	.763	248	.446
	Equal variances not assumed			.763	216.457	.446

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Table 3.2 presents Levene's test results and corresponding t-test statistics. Levene's test indicated significant variance inequality across all three variables — toxic leadership ($F = 21.532, p < .001$), learning potential ($F = 15.277, p < .001$), and quiet quitting ($F = 22.531, p < .001$) — necessitating interpretation of equal variances not assumed values throughout. Toxic leadership perceptions differed significantly between cohorts, $t(224.39) = -3.168, p = .002$. Perceived learning potential also differed significantly, $t(230.91) = 4.584, p < .001$. Quiet quitting behavioural tendencies, however, did not differ significantly between Millennials and Generation Z, $t(216.46) = .763, p = .446$, indicating comparable levels of discretionary effort withdrawal across both generational groups.

Table 3.3 Mean Difference, Standard Error and 95% Confidence Interval Independent Samples Test

		t-test for Equality of Means			
		Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
				Lower	Upper
TL- Total	Equal variances assumed	-5.568	1.757	-9.029	-2.107
	Equal variances not assumed	-5.568	1.757	-9.031	-2.105
LP - Total	Equal variances assumed	4.176	.911	2.382	5.970
	Equal variances not assumed	4.176	.911	2.381	5.971
QQ- Total	Equal variances assumed	.560	.734	-.886	2.006
	Equal variances not assumed	.560	.734	-.887	2.007

Table 3.3 presents mean differences, standard errors, and 95% confidence intervals supplementing the t-test results. For toxic leadership, the mean difference of -5.568 ($SE = 1.757$), with a confidence interval of $[-9.031, -2.105]$, confirms with 95% confidence that Millennials reported meaningfully higher supervisory toxicity perceptions, as the interval excludes zero entirely. For learning potential, the mean difference of 4.176 ($SE = 0.911$), with a confidence interval of $[2.381, 5.971]$, confirms Generation Z's significantly higher developmental environment perceptions. For quiet quitting, the mean difference of 0.560 ($SE = 0.734$), with a confidence interval of $[-0.887, 2.007]$, spans zero, confirming the absence of a statistically meaningful generational difference in discretionary effort withdrawal tendencies.

Table 4.1: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.531 ^a	.282	.276	4.933
2	.561 ^b	.314	.306	4.831

a. Predictors: (Constant), TL- Total, LP - Total

b. Predictors: (Constant), TL- Total, LP - Total, Generation

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Table 4.1 presents the hierarchical regression model summary. Model 1, comprising toxic leadership and perceived learning potential, yielded $R = .531$, $R^2 = .282$, and adjusted $R^2 = .276$, indicating that the two organizational predictors jointly explained 28.2% of variance in quiet quitting. The minimal difference between R^2 and adjusted R^2 confirms the model's explanatory efficiency is not attributable to predictor inflation. Model 2, incorporating generational cohort as an additional predictor, produced $R = .561$, $R^2 = .314$, and adjusted $R^2 = .306$, explaining 31.4% of variance. The increment of $\Delta R^2 = .032$, alongside a reduction in the standard error of estimate from 4.933 to 4.831, indicates that generational cohort contributed meaningful predictive information beyond the two organizational variables.

Table 4.2: Anova
ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2358.990	2	1179.495	48.466	.000 ^b
	Residual	6011.074	247	24.336		
	Total	8370.064	249			
2	Regression	2629.929	3	876.643	37.570	.000 ^c
	Residual	5740.135	246	23.334		
	Total	8370.064	249			

a. Dependent Variable: QQ – Total

b. Predictors: (Constant), TL – Total, LP – Total

c. Predictors: (Constant), TL – Total, LP – Total, Generation

Table 4.2 presents the ANOVA results evaluating overall model significance. Model 1 produced a statistically significant regression, $F(2, 247) = 48.466$, $p < .001$, with a regression sum of squares of 2358.990 and a residual mean square of 24.336, confirming that toxic leadership and learning potential together explained significantly more variance in quiet quitting than chance alone. Model 2 similarly achieved statistical significance, $F(3, 246) = 37.570$, $p < .001$, with the regression sum of squares increasing to 2629.929. The residual mean square decreased from 24.336 to 23.334 following the addition of generational cohort, indicating improved model precision. Both models demonstrated robust overall fit, supporting the combined predictive utility of the study's variables.

Table 4.3: Coefficients
Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	13.066	2.357		5.544	.000
	LP - Total	-.079	.045	-.101	-1.728	.085
	TL- Total	.198	.024	.482	8.216	.000
2	(Constant)	17.364	2.630		6.603	.000
	LP - Total	-.113	.046	-.146	-2.482	.014
	TL- Total	.206	.024	.502	8.685	.000
	Generation	-.022	.006	-.188	-3.408	.001

a. Dependent Variable: QQ- Total

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Table 4.3 presents unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients for both models. In Model 1, toxic leadership was the sole statistically significant predictor ($\beta = .482$, $B = .198$, $p < .001$), while perceived learning potential did not reach significance ($\beta = -.101$, $p = .085$). In Model 2, following generational cohort entry, toxic leadership retained its dominant predictive contribution ($\beta = .502$, $p < .001$). Perceived learning potential became statistically significant ($\beta = -.146$, $p = .014$), suggesting generational cohort had previously masked its independent contribution. Generational cohort emerged as a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -.188$, $p = .001$), with Millennial membership associated with higher quiet quitting tendencies after controlling for both organizational predictors.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the relationships among toxic leadership, perceived learning potential of the workplace and quiet quitting behavioural tendencies among Millennial and Generation Z employees in the Indian private sector, investigating whether generational cohort membership produces meaningful differences in how these constructs are experienced and expressed. The findings offer substantive empirical contributions to organizational behaviour research, characterized by notable absence of trivariate, generationally comparative investigation within the Indian context.

The correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant negative association between toxic leadership and perceived learning potential ($r = -.396$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher perceptions of toxic supervisory behaviour were associated with meaningfully lower assessments of the workplace's capacity to support reflection, experimentation, peer-based learning, and supervisor-guided development. This finding aligns with established empirical evidence demonstrating that toxic leadership produces employee silence as a key organizational outcome, severing the channels of upward communication and knowledge exchange upon which meaningful learning cultures depend (Arif, 2017). When subordinates are consistently discouraged through intimidation, unpredictability, or fear of retaliation from raising questions or sharing observations, the reflective and experimental dimensions of workplace learning are not merely reduced but structurally foreclosed (Irina Nikolova, 2014). Research by (Talat Islam, 2024) similarly demonstrated that abusive supervision is a robust predictor of knowledge-hiding behaviour, positioning toxic leaders as active suppressors of the informational and developmental ecosystem that sustains organizational learning. Within the Indian private sector context, where hierarchical power dynamics, high power distance, and cultural deference to authority characterize many workplaces, the learning-suppressive effects of toxic leadership may be particularly pronounced. The moderate magnitude of this association ($r = -.396$) suggests that while toxic leadership is a meaningful predictor of reduced learning potential, other organizational variables including peer culture, organizational structure, and individual learning orientation likely account for remaining variance, consistent with conceptualizations of workplace learning potential as a multi-source construct shaped by supervisory, collegial, and task-based dimensions.

The moderate magnitude of this association ($r = -.396$) warrants consideration. It suggests that while toxic leadership is a meaningful and significant predictor of reduced perceived learning potential, the relationship is not deterministic. Other organizational variables including peer culture, organizational structure, access to formal learning infrastructure, and individual learning orientation likely account for the remaining variance. This interpretation is consistent with (Irina Nikolova, 2014) conceptualization of workplace learning potential as a multi-source construct shaped by supervisory, collegial, and task-based dimensions,

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meaning that even in the presence of toxic leadership, collegial learning relationships may partially buffer the deterioration of the overall learning environment. Nevertheless, the direction and significance of the association confirm that toxic leadership represents a structurally meaningful threat to workplace learning culture a finding with direct implications for how Indian organizations conceptualize the developmental consequences of tolerating destructive supervisory behaviour.

The strongest bivariate association in the present study was observed between toxic leadership and quiet quitting behavioural tendencies ($r = .523, p < .01$), a moderate-to-strong positive relationship indicating that employees who reported higher exposure to toxic supervisory behaviours also reported markedly greater tendencies toward discretionary effort withdrawal. This finding is among the most robust in the correlation matrix and carries considerable theoretical and practical weight. The strongest bivariate association was observed between toxic leadership and quiet quitting behavioral tendencies ($r = .523, p < .01$), representing a moderate-to-strong positive relationship. This finding is precisely what Conservation of Resources Theory would predict: individuals respond to chronic depletion of valued psychological, relational, or developmental resources by withdrawing investment from the domains responsible for that depletion (Hobfoll, 2011). Toxic leadership constitutes one of the most resource-depleting conditions employees encounter in organizational life. When the supervisory relationship becomes a source of threat and psychological drain rather than guidance and developmental reciprocity, employees engage in rational conservation responses by reducing output to the minimum required to avoid formal resignation consequences while preventing further resource loss. This finding aligns with empirical evidence identifying toxic management behaviours and absence of psychological safety as foremost organizational stressors triggering burnout and quiet quitting intention in the Indian private sector (Heldi Sahputra, 2025), and confirms that toxic work environments function as primary drivers of quiet quitting across younger generational cohorts (Nogueiro M. S., 2025). For Millennials and Generation Z who enter professional life with relational psychological contracts premised on purpose, respect, and developmental reciprocity, toxic leadership constitutes not merely dissatisfaction but a fundamental breach of the terms under which they agreed to contribute. The behavioural response to such breach is withdrawal, deliberate and calibrated to the level at which further investment no longer makes rational sense (Caldwell, 2023).

The statistically significant negative relationship between perceived learning potential and quiet quitting ($r = -.292, p < .01$) indicates that employees perceiving stronger developmental opportunities, peer collaboration, supervisor guidance, and reflective learning space reported lower levels of quiet quitting. While weaker in magnitude than the toxic leadership-quiet quitting relationship, this finding demonstrates that developmental opportunity functions as a critical job resource that reduces psychological costs of demands, sustains motivational engagement, and counteracts depletion processes leading to burnout and withdrawal (Demerouti, 2007). When learning potential is perceived as high, employees experience their organizational environment as invested in their growth, reinforcing social exchange calculus favouring continued discretionary contribution. This resonates with empirical literature establishing that Generation Z employees demonstrate notably higher propensity to disengage when skill development opportunities are perceived as inadequate (Maria Dolores Benitez - Márquez, 2022), and that learning climate is among the most statistically significant determinants of Generation Z work engagement (Petchsawang, 2024).

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Independent samples t-tests revealed statistically significant generational differences in perceptions of toxic leadership and learning potential, yet demonstrated no significant difference in quiet quitting tendencies. Millennials reported significantly higher toxic leadership perceptions ($M = 43.60$) compared to Generation Z ($M = 38.03$), $t(224.39) = -3.168$, $p = .002$. This finding, contrary to directional hypotheses, may reflect that Millennials, being further advanced in careers with accumulated exposure to supervisory relationships across longer organizational histories, have encountered wider range and greater cumulative volume of toxic supervisory behaviours. Additionally, Millennials' psychological contracts, formed in organizational environments carrying stronger residual norms of deference and loyalty, may mean violations by toxic supervisors are experienced as more deeply felt. Generation Z reported significantly higher learning potential perceptions ($M = 40.91$) compared to Millennials ($M = 36.74$), $t(230.91) = 4.584$, $p < .001$. As digital natives accustomed to diverse, informal, technology-mediated learning modalities, Generation Z may assess organizational learning environments more favourably, while Millennials, having encountered gaps between organizational rhetoric around development and its reality over longer tenures, may have developed more critical appraisals reflecting professional disillusionment.

Critically, no statistically significant difference emerged between cohorts in quiet quitting behavioural tendencies, $t(216.46) = .763$, $p = .446$, with mean scores separated by negligible margin of 0.56 points and 95% confidence interval spanning zero. This null finding is theoretically instructive: it suggests propensity toward discretionary effort withdrawal may be more substantially explained by organizational conditions employees encounter than by generational lens through which they interpret those conditions. Hierarchical regression analysis demonstrated that toxic leadership and learning potential jointly accounted for 28.2% of variance in quiet quitting ($R^2 = .282$, $F(2,247) = 48.466$, $p < .001$), with toxic leadership emerging as statistically significant positive predictor ($\beta = .482$, $p < .001$). Learning potential did not reach significance in Model 1 ($\beta = -.101$, $p = .085$), reflecting shared variance with toxic leadership. The entry of generational cohort in Model 2 produced statistically significant increment in explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .032$, $p < .001$), with full model accounting for 31.4% of variance. Importantly, learning potential became statistically significant negative predictor in Model 2 ($\beta = -.146$, $p = .014$), suggesting generational cohort functioned as suppressor variable masking learning potential's unique predictive contribution. Generational cohort itself emerged as statistically significant negative predictor ($\beta = -.188$, $p = .001$), with Millennial cohort membership associated with higher quiet quitting tendencies after controlling for organizational conditions.

The most striking pattern across findings is the consistent primacy of toxic leadership as the single most powerful predictor of quiet quitting behavioural tendencies. With bivariate correlation of $r = .523$ and standardized regression coefficient of $\beta = .502$ in final model, toxic leadership accounts for more variance in discretionary effort withdrawal than any other variable examined. This is substantive, statistically robust, and theoretically coherent, positioning destructive supervisory behaviour as central organizational pathology driving employee disengagement in the Indian private sector. What makes this finding particularly consequential is its consistency across both generational cohorts. Despite significant mean-level differences in perceptions of toxic leadership and learning potential, quiet quitting behavioural tendencies were statistically indistinguishable between cohorts. This convergence decisively refutes prevailing narratives positioning quiet quitting as generational problem or symptom of supposed work ethic deficits. The findings

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categorically demonstrate that quiet quitting is not generational defect but organizational response, what happens when social exchange contract becomes so imbalanced that continued discretionary contribution no longer makes rational sense. Both Millennials and Generation Z engage in this behaviour at comparable levels when exposed to comparable organizational conditions, underscoring that the problem lies not in employees but in environments they navigate. The behavioural threshold for quiet quitting is not fundamentally generational but situational, reached when organizational environment becomes sufficiently toxic, sufficiently depleted of developmental value, or sufficiently imbalanced in exchange dynamics that continued investment feels irrational. The incremental contribution of generational cohort (3.2% additional variance) confirms that generational identity matters as contextual modifier rather than primary cause, shaping how employees interpret organizational conditions and accumulate disillusionment but not fundamentally altering that toxic leadership drives quiet quitting and learning potential partially mitigates it. The solution to quiet quitting lies not in managing generational sensitivities but in eliminating organizational conditions that make withdrawal the only rational course of action available to employees who possess agency but have lost trust.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary organizational landscape stands at a critical juncture where traditional assumptions governing employee-employer relationships are being fundamentally rewritten by the convergence of generational expectation and organizational reality. The present study has systematically examined the relationships among toxic leadership, perceived learning potential of the workplace, and quiet quitting behavioural tendencies within the Indian private sector, through a deliberate generational lens. The findings position quiet quitting as neither a generational disposition nor an individual failing, but an organizationally produced response to violated psychological contracts, suppressed developmental opportunity, and chronic resource depletion. Toxic leadership emerged as the most powerful predictor of discretionary effort withdrawal across both cohorts, with its learning-suppressive consequences compounding the disengagement effect. Critically, despite meaningful generational differences in how Millennials and Generation Z perceive their organizational environments, both cohorts disengaged at statistically equivalent rates under equivalent adverse conditions decisively reframing quiet quitting as a rational organizational response rather than a generational character flaw. This study contributes the first empirically grounded, trivariate examination of these constructs within a generationally comparative Indian private-sector framework. The evidence is unambiguous: organizations committed to sustaining employee engagement must direct their interventions toward eliminating destructive leadership and cultivating authentic developmental cultures, not toward managing generational sensitivities.

Limitations

Several methodological limitations merit acknowledgment. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. All associations among toxic leadership, learning potential, and quiet quitting are correlational, and the possibility of reverse causation wherein pre-existing disengagement shapes perceptions of supervisory toxicity and learning quality cannot be excluded without longitudinal data. Second, exclusive reliance on self-report measures introduces the potential for common method bias. Although validated psychometric instruments were employed, the absence of supervisor ratings, behavioural observations, or organizational records limits triangulation across multiple evidence sources. Third, the sample is drawn entirely from the Indian private sector, constraining generalizability to

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public sector organizations, multinational contexts, or cultures with substantially different power distance or collectivist orientations. Finally, the supplementary use of snowball sampling, despite efforts to initiate recruitment from multiple independent starting points, may have introduced network homogeneity and self-selection bias, potentially limiting the sample's representativeness of the broader Indian Millennial and Generation Z employee population. Future research employing longitudinal, multi-source, and probability-based designs would substantially strengthen the evidence base established here.

Implications

The findings carry substantive implications across human resource management, leadership development, and organizational culture. For HR practitioners, the study demonstrates that quiet quitting is driven by organizational conditions rather than generational character, necessitating a diagnostic reorientation toward supervisory quality and structural accountability rather than engagement surveys or cohort-specific interventions. Retention strategies must prioritize the identification and removal of toxic leaders, as the data confirm that tolerating destructive supervisory behaviour fundamentally undermines engagement regardless of generational cohort. From a leadership development perspective, selection and appraisal frameworks must explicitly assess and penalize the behavioural dimensions of toxic leadership, abusive supervision, narcissism, authoritarianism, unpredictability, and self-promotion treating these not as developmental gaps but as organizational risk factors. From a learning and development standpoint, organizations must extend investment beyond formal training programs toward the everyday informal learning infrastructure of work itself ensuring that roles permit reflection and experimentation, that supervisors actively guide subordinate development, and that organizational norms support the psychological safety upon which genuine workplace learning depends. Cultural coherence between stated developmental values and lived supervisory experience is essential.

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Conflict of Interest

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