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Understanding Mental Well-Being in Contract-Based Employment: Job Insecurity and Quiet Quitting

(Memahami Kesejahteraan Mental dalam Kalangan Pekerja Lantikan Kontrak: Ketakterjaminan Kerja dan Quiet Quitting)

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ABSTRACT

Employee mental well-being has become a critical concern in contemporary organisations, especially as employment arrangements increasingly shift toward contract-based work. This paper examines how job insecurity affects the mental well-being of contract-based employees in Malaysia's public sector. The relationship is explained through quiet quitting, which is conceptualised as a coping strategy in response to job insecurity. This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design involving 174 contract-based employees in the Klang Valley public sector. Data were collected through a survey using purposive sampling and analysed using PLS-SEM. The findings show that job insecurity is negatively related to mental well-being and positively related to quiet quitting. In turn, quiet quitting is negatively related to mental well-being. Furthermore, quiet quitting acts as a mediating mechanism linking job insecurity to mental well-being, suggesting that employees who experience higher job insecurity are more likely to engage in quiet quitting, which is associated with a decline in mental well-being. By integrating quiet quitting as a coping strategy within a Conservation of Resource framework, this study shows how quiet quitting helps explain the relationship between job insecurity and lower mental well-being in the context of contract-based employment.

Keywords: Job insecurity; quiet quitting; mental well-being; contract-based employees; PLS-SEM

ABSTRAK

Kesejahteraan mental merupakan isu yang kritikal dalam organisasi masa kini terutama apabila bentuk pekerjaan semakin beralih kepada berasaskan kontrak. Kajian ini meneliti bagaimana ketakterjaminan kerja berkait dengan kesejahteraan mental dalam kalangan pekerja lantikan kontrak sektor awam di Malaysia. Hubungan tersebut dijelaskan melalui quiet quitting yang dikonseptualisasikan sebagai strategi daya tindak terhadap ketakterjaminan kerja. Kajian ini menggunakan reka bentuk kuantitatif keratan rentas melibatkan 174 pekerja lantikan kontrak yang bekerja dalam sektor awam di Lembah Klang. Data dikumpulkan melalui kaedah tinjauan menggunakan pensampelan bertujuan dan dianalisis menggunakan PLS-SEM. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa ketakterjaminan kerja mempunyai hubungan negatif dengan kesejahteraan mental hubungan positif dengan quiet quitting. Sementara itu, quiet quitting mempunyai hubungan negatif dengan kesejahteraan mental. Selain itu, quiet quitting bertindak sebagai mekanisme pengantara yang menghubungkan ketakterjaminan kerja dengan kesejahteraan mental, menunjukkan bahawa pekerja yang mengalami ketakterjaminan kerja yang lebih tinggi lebih cenderung untuk melakukan quiet quitting yang seterusnya dikaitkan dengan penurunan kesejahteraan mental. Dengan mengintegrasikan quiet quitting sebagai strategi daya tindak dalam kerangka Teori Pemuliharaan Sumber, kajian ini menunjukkan bagaimana quiet quitting membantu menjelaskan hubungan antara ketakterjaminan kerja dan kesejahteraan mental yang lebih rendah dalam konteks pekerjaan berasaskan kontrak.

Kata kunci: Ketakterjaminan kerja; quiet quitting, kesejahteraan mental; pekerja lantikan kontrak; PLS-SEM

INTRODUCTION

Employee mental well-being has become a main issue in contemporary organisations as the nature of work continues to change due to digitalisation, economic instability, and an increase in performance demands (Klug 2024). Mental well-being goes beyond the absence of psychological distress. It reflects a positive state of functioning that enables employees to cope with work demands, maintain emotional balance, and function effectively at work (Keyes 2002; Warr 2011). Growing evidence suggests that employee mental well-being is not only a moral or health-related issue but also a strategic organisational necessity and resource, which is closely associated with job performance, engagement, creativity, and long-term organisational sustainability (Harter et al. 2002; Robertson & Cooper 2011).

Furthermore, the increasing emphasis on employee mental well-being has been frequently challenged by the structural shift from permanent to contract-based employment. Contract-based employees experience heightened job insecurity due to time-limited contracts, uncertainty over renewal, limited career prospects, and limited access to employment benefits (Balz 2017; De Cuyper & De Witte 2007). Based on De Witte (1999) and Sverke et al. (2002), these conditions create prolonged psychological strain and weaken employees' sense of control and stability. As a result, mental well-being may decline, and employees may foster withdrawal-oriented responses, such as lower engagement and reduced discretionary effort (Cheng & Chan 2008; Jiang & Lavaysse 2018). These behavioural patterns resemble "quiet quitting," whereby employees remain formally employed but psychologically disengaged from their work (Klotz & Bolino 2022). As organisations increasingly rely on contract-based employees to carry out core functions, the decline in mental well-being not only affects individuals but also threatens service quality, organisational commitment, and overall adaptability (Sverke et al. 2019). In Malaysia's public sector, contract-based employment exists across various service schemes and occupational levels. The Public Service Commission Malaysia reported contract appointments across medical, semi-medical, management, professional and other public service positions between 2022 and 2024 (Suruhanjaya Perkhidmatan Awam Malaysia 2025). This context is important because the time-limited nature of contract employment may create continuing uncertainty over employment stability and career continuity, which represent important resources from the Conservation of Resources (COR) perspective.

Job insecurity reflects employees' perceived threat of losing their job or uncertainty regarding the continuity of their employment and has been recognised as a significant psychological stressor (Elst et al. 2024). For contract-based employees, such uncertainty is not temporary or situational but structurally embedded within the employment relationship. This causes prolonged anticipatory stress for many contract employees and, over time, will ultimately harm employee well-being (Abdul Jalil et al. 2023). Guided by COR theory, job insecurity signals a potential loss of key resources, including career continuity, professional identity, income stability, and future planning capacity (Hobfoll 1989). The COR theory suggests that employees are inherently driven to acquire, retain and safeguard these resources. Therefore, persistent uncertainty surrounding contract renewal places employees in a defensive psychological state, even in the absence of immediate job loss (Jiang et al. 2023). Chronic exposure to such resource threats gradually depletes emotional and energetic resources, increasing vulnerability to anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and reduced mental well-being (Jiang et al. 2023).

When job security is threatened, employees are likely to adopt coping strategies to reduce possible loss of resources. In current workplaces, one more visible reaction is quiet quitting (Klotz & Bolino 2022). Quiet quitting is defined as a behavioural response in which employees limit their effort to formal job requirements and reduce discretionary or extra-role contributions (Kim & Sohn 2024). From the COR perspective, this behaviour is viewed as a coping strategy to conserve resources when employees experience resource threats such as job insecurity (Hobfoll et al. 2018). Contract-based employees facing uncertain future prospects may perceive additional effort as risky, especially when the reward is unclear or short-term in nature (Klug 2024).

COR theory provides a useful framework for understanding quiet quitting as a defensive resource-conservation strategy. When employees believe that continuing to invest effort, creativity or emotional labour is unlikely to provide equivalent returns, they might actively choose to withdraw to avoid further loss of resources (Hobfoll 1989; Jiang et al. 2023). Quiet quitting can thus be interpreted as a defensive response to ongoing job insecurity. However, although it might offer employees short-term protection against fatigue, long-term withdrawal does not insulate them from psychological harm (Halbesleben & Buckley 2004). Continued withdrawal may diminish the sense of purpose, reduce perceived competence at work and diminish the feeling of social connectedness in the workplace, which is fundamental to well-being (Kim & Sohn 2024). As a result, quiet quitting can ultimately undermine well-being rather than support it.

Even though job insecurity is well known for its negative impact on employee attitudes and mental health, some important gaps remain. Previous studies have presented job insecurity as a direct antecedent of subsequent outcomes, such as stress, burnout or dissatisfaction, without sufficiently examining the behavioural mechanisms through which insecurity influences well-being (Elst et al. 2024). Despite its increasing adoption in organisational discourse, quiet quitting remained largely conceptualised as a descriptive or composite construct, related to disengagement or low performance (Galanis et al. 2023). Quiet quitting's role as a coping strategy to job insecurity is less developed in theory and empirical examination. In addition, studies seldom consider how quiet quitting acts as an intervening framework explaining how employees navigate resource threats and how these approaches impact their well-being. Furthermore, contract-based employment research is relatively sparse; most studies focus on permanent employment experiencing organisational change or downsizing (Klug 2024).

Therefore, this study aims to fill the existing gaps by employing an integrated methodological framework that will examine the correlation of job insecurity, quiet quitting and mental well-being within contract-based employees in Malaysia's public sector. According to COR theory, this study conceptualises job insecurity as an ongoing resource threat, and quiet quitting as a defensive resource conservation strategy (Hobfoll 1989; Jiang et al. 2023). Mental well-being is framed as an important resource outcome demonstrating the cumulative effects of insecurity and quiet quitting. This study aims to strengthen the theoretical insight on employee coping mechanisms by focusing on contract-based employees within today's evolving labour market landscape, whilst providing organisation-focused practical insight about maintaining mental well-being.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

JOB INSECURITY AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

Under current work conditions, the growing reliance on contract-based employment has changed how employees experience job security, shifting the insecurity from a temporary experience to a persistent structural condition. Consequently, job insecurity has become a central concern in contemporary workplaces. De Witte (2005) defined job insecurity as the individual's subjective appraisal of uncertainty about maintaining employment. Importantly, job insecurity is not merely a contractual outcome, but a psychological experience shaped by uncertainty, limited control, and constrained access to organisational resources. This distinction is particularly significant in contract-based employment, where insecurity persists even in the absence of immediate job loss. This uncertainty triggers psychological stress which can negatively affect employees' commitment, job performance, and well-being (Jiang & Lavaysse 2018).

COR theory offers a useful guideline for better understanding why perceived job insecurity can harm mental well-being. This theory suggests that individuals strive to acquire, safeguard and maintain valuable resources. Psychological stress arises when these valuable resources are at risk, depleted or fail to be replenished after investment (Hobfoll 1989, 2001). Within this framework, employment is not simply a source of income but a carrier of multiple interrelated resources. This includes predictability, social status, future opportunities, and a sense of control (Hobfoll et al. 2018). For contract-based employees, the potential non-renewal of employment signals the possible simultaneous loss of several resource domains, intensifying stress appraisals and increasing vulnerability to resource-loss spirals.

Empirical evidence consistently shows that perceived job insecurity adversely affects employees' well-being outcomes. Meta-analytic and longitudinal studies have linked job insecurity to poorer mental health, lower well-being, and increased emotional strain across occupational contexts (De Witte et al. 2016; Pires 2025; Sverke et al. 2002). However, most of this literature has focused on general or permanent workforces, often treating insecurity as a situational stressor rather than a structural employment condition. This limits theoretical precision, as contract-based employees experience insecurity as a persistent feature of their employment relationship rather than a deviation from stability. From a COR perspective, this persistence is critical. Sustained resource threat requires continuous self-regulation and vigilance, gradually depleting the psychological and emotional resources that underpin positive mental well-being.

Mental well-being in this sense extends beyond the absence of distress to encompass positive functioning, emotional balance, and a sense of meaning and autonomy in one's work life. Job insecurity undermines these elements by perpetuating uncertainty and constraining employees' ability to plan, invest, and derive fulfilment from work. Accordingly, perceived job insecurity is expected to impair employees' mental well-being. Therefore, this study proposes the hypothesis below:

H_1 Perceived job insecurity relates negatively to employees' mental well-being.

JOB INSECURITY AND QUIET QUITTING

Although past studies have consistently emphasised the harmful effects of job insecurity on mental well-being, less attention has been paid to the behavioural mechanisms through which insecurity unfolds. Recently, quiet quitting has increasingly been used to describe employees who deliberately restrict their work effort to formal job requirements, accompanied by the withdrawal of discretionary contributions (Kim & Sohn 2024; Klotz & Bolino 2022). Although quiet quitting first gained attention through public discourse, recent studies have clarified it as a measurable behavioural tendency aligned with established concepts of withdrawal and disengagement (Galanis et al. 2023). Quiet quitting can be conceptualised as a form of employee behaviour because it is manifested through deliberate decisions to limit work contributions while remaining employed. Specifically, employees engage in quiet quitting by performing only essential job duties, withdrawing discretionary effort, and refraining from extra-role activities such as after-hours work or additional tasks (Atiq et al. 2025; Patel et al. 2025; Samnani & Robertson 2025). Thus, although quiet quitting may involve psychological disengagement, it is behaviourally expressed through observable and intentional reductions in work effort and contribution. Importantly, framing quiet quitting solely as a generational or attitudinal phenomenon risks overlooking its deeper structural and psychological antecedents.

COR theory offers a theoretically grounded explanation of why job insecurity may trigger quiet quitting. When employees perceive their employment as insecure, they face a heightened risk of resource loss and an uncertain return on continued resource investment. Under such conditions, COR theory predicts a shift towards defensive coping strategies to conserve remaining resources (Hobfoll 2001). Quiet quitting can thus be interpreted as a resource-conservation response, where employees reduce discretionary effort, emotional investment, and extra-role behaviour to limit further depletion of time, energy, and self-regulatory capacity.

This interpretation is consistent with prior evidence by Jiang and Lavaysse (2018) and Sverke et al. (2019), which shows that job insecurity undermines employees' performance, reduces organisational citizenship behaviour, and diminishes work engagement. However, rather than conceptualising these outcomes as a lack of motivation, COR theory suggests that such behaviours can be seen as adaptive responses to the threat of resource loss. In contract-based employment, where insecurity is structurally embedded in the employment arrangement and future rewards are uncertain,

the logic of conserving effort becomes particularly salient. Going beyond formal job duties or role is less likely to translate into long-term security or career advancement, weakening the incentive to invest beyond minimum role requirements. Therefore, this study conceptualises quiet quitting as a behavioural response rather than an attitude, while recognising its conceptual relationship with withdrawal and disengagement.

H_2 Perceived job insecurity is positively related to quiet quitting.

QUIET QUITTING AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

Although quiet quitting may reduce immediate exposure to work demands, its implications for mental well-being are more complex. From a short-term perspective, limiting effort may mitigate the strain by reducing workload and emotional labour. However, COR theory suggests that resource-conservation strategies can carry longer-term costs when they undermine access to resource gains (Hobfoll et al. 2018). When employees consistently withdraw discretionary effort, they may gradually lose key psychosocial resources such as competence, self-worth, social connectedness, and perceived agency, resources that are central to maintaining positive mental well-being (Bakker & Demerouti 2007).

Work disengagement and quiet quitting are closely related forms of psychological withdrawal in which employees restrict their effort to core job requirements without leaving the organisation. Past research conceptualises disengagement as the physical, cognitive, and emotional withdrawal from work roles, often emerging when work loses its meaning or becomes psychologically unsafe (Kahn 1990; Schaufeli et al. 2002). Quiet quitting can therefore be understood as a contemporary manifestation of this established construct, reframed within current discourse as intentional limit-setting and reduced discretionary contribution in response to burnout, changing work values, and perceived imbalances the in employee–employer relationship (Gallup 2023; Maslach et al. 2001; Serenko 2023).

Importantly, prior research on disengagement provides a strong theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding quiet quitting. Disengagement has consistently been associated with reduced meaning at work, emotional detachment, and lower levels of well-being, particularly when it acts as a coping response to adverse or insecure conditions rather than an autonomous choice (Kahn 1990; Knight et al. 2017). Recent quiet quitting research similarly identifies disengagement and emotional withdrawal as key features of the phenomenon, suggesting that it may function as a coping response to work-related stress and dissatisfaction (Bernuzzi et al. 2025). In this sense, quiet quitting driven by insecurity may initially offer short-term psychological relief but is unlikely to sustain mental well-being over time, as reduced mastery experiences, feedback, and social affirmation gradually reinforce detachment and erode positive functioning.

H_3 Quiet quitting relates is negatively related to employees' mental well-being.

THE MEDIATING ROLE OF QUIET QUITTING

From the standpoint of COR theory, the impact of job insecurity on mental well-being does not occur immediately but unfolds through behavioural coping processes (Hobfoll 1989, 2001). When contract-based employees experience uncertainty regarding job continuity, they tend to adopt resource-protective strategies. According to Transactional Stress and Coping theory, individuals respond to perceived threats by engaging in behavioural efforts to manage or reduce strain (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). In the workplace, such coping strategies may take the form of withdrawal behaviours, including reducing effort and psychological disengagement (Bernuzzi et al. 2025; Podsakoff et al. 2007). Therefore, quiet quitting can serve as a resource-protective strategy in response to job insecurity.

Although this strategy may initially reduce resource expenditure, it can unintentionally restrict access to important resource gains such as social support, recognition, feedback, and developmental opportunities. COR theory highlights that reduced access to resource gains may contribute to loss spirals, ultimately reducing psychological well-being (Hobfoll et al. 2018). Empirical research by De Witte et al. (2016) and Jiang and Lavaysse (2018) further demonstrates that behavioural withdrawal serves as a key mechanism linking insecurity to adverse well-being outcomes.

By considering quiet quitting as a mediator, this framework extends prior research, which has largely treated job insecurity and well-being as a direct relationship. It recognises employees' active coping efforts while acknowledging the structural constraints embedded in insecure employment contexts. In contract-based employment, where insecurity is persistent rather than temporary, quiet quitting represents a particularly important pathway through which perceived job insecurity may translate into a decline in mental well-being.

H_4 Quiet quitting serves as a mediator between perceived job insecurity and employees' mental well-being.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The present study seeks to investigate the link between job insecurity and mental well-being through quiet quitting among contract-based employees in Malaysia's public sector. Figure 1 below shows the conceptual framework for the present study.

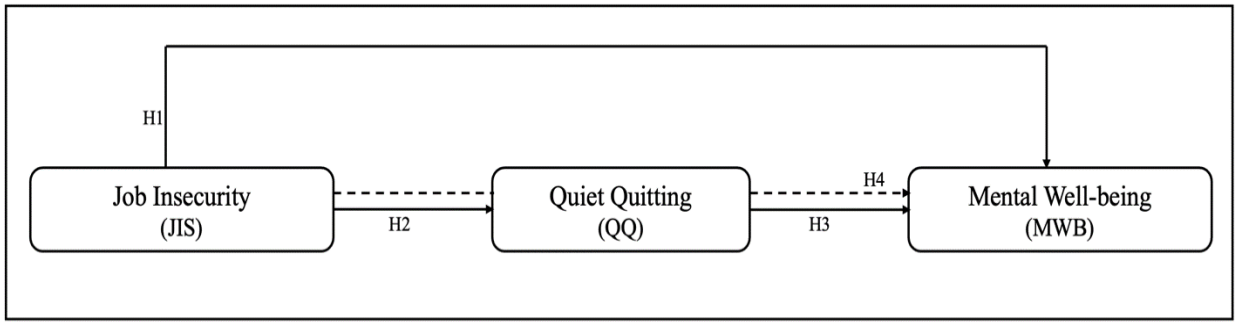

FIGURE 1. Conceptual framework

METHODOLOGY

SAMPLING AND PROCEDURE

The present research was undertaken using a quantitative approach with the intention of testing the developed hypotheses in line with the objectives. A purposive sampling technique under the non-probability sampling approach was adopted. Purposive sampling was chosen because the study targeted participants with specific criteria that need to be met, making it appropriate when respondents are selected based on characteristics relevant to the research objectives (Etikan et al. 2016). The sample comprised contract-based employees from Malaysia's public sector based in Klang Valley who have been employed for more than one year. Respondents not meeting these criteria were excluded. The population was focused on the Klang Valley since most government agencies are located in the area (Perbadanan Putrajaya 2023). G*Power 3.1 was used to determine the minimum sample size required for this study. The software indicated that the minimum required sample size is 107 respondents. However, to strengthen the reliability of the analysis and minimise the risk of missing data, 174 responses were collected (Hair et al. 2017). Data were gathered in this study using a self-administered questionnaire distributed via an online platform, such as Google Forms. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential before completing the questionnaire. These measures also helped reduce possible common method bias associated with self-reported data.

A majority of the respondents were male (64%), with females comprising 36%. In terms of age, 8% of respondents were between 18 and 24 years, followed by 25–34 (60%), 35–44 (30%), and 45–54 (2%). Regarding organisational positions, most participants (74%) were executives, followed by professionals (19%) and non-executives (7%). Lastly, for service tenure, the majority had been employed for 1–2 years (79%), followed by 3–4 years (11%), 5–6 years (7%), and more than 6 years (3%).

MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENTS

A structured questionnaire was developed to cover the three variables: job insecurity, mental well-being, and quiet quitting. For job insecurity and quiet quitting, a five-point Likert scale was adopted (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). For mental well-being, a different five-point Likert scale was used (1 = never to 5 = very often). The measurement of job insecurity items was adapted from Borg and Elizur (1992) and comprised 11 items, such as "In my opinion, my workplace is insecure in every aspect" and "The lack of job security at my workplace make me feel nervous." Next, the item for mental well-being was the short seven-item version of the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale. Lastly, the quiet quitting items were adapted from Galanis et al. (2023) and consisted of nine items, such as "If a colleague can do some of my work, then I let him/her do it" and "I take as many breaks as I can."

DATA ANALYSIS

PLS-SEM was applied in this study using SmartPLS 4.0 software for measurement model and structural model analysis. PLS-SEM is considered suitable because it allows the analysis of complex models even with relatively small sample sizes (Chin et al. 2003). The analysis was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved the measurement model to confirm the relationship between measurement items and their corresponding constructs. According to Tenenhaus et al. (2005), the second phase is the evaluation of the structural model to examine the relationships among the constructs. Hypotheses concerning both direct and mediating effects were tested based on the structural model results. The analysis utilised four SmartPLS procedures, including the PLS algorithm, blindfolding, bootstrapping, and PLS-predict.

MEASUREMENT MODEL ASSESSMENT

The reflective measurement model was assessed using three evaluation criteria: internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Composite reliability (CR) was implemented to evaluate internal consistency, while convergent validity was assessed through indicator loadings and average variance extracted (AVE). As summarised in Table 1, the loadings for all indicators were above the cut-off value of 0.708 suggested by Hair et al. (2014). Indicators with insufficient loadings were removed when necessary. However, if the constructs achieved the required AVE threshold (0.50), some indicators with loadings below 0.708 were retained. After item deletion, all constructs achieved CR values greater than 0.70 and AVE values above 0.50, as recommended by Hair et al. (2014). Accordingly, this study deleted no indicators since all measurements satisfied the recommended criteria. Therefore, the constructs satisfy the requirements for reliability and convergent validity.

TABLE 1. Measurement model validation

Construct	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Job Insecurity (JIS)	0.930	0.931	0.589
Mental Well-being (MWB)	0.883	0.887	0.588
Quiet Quitting (QQ)	0.911	0.914	0.585

According to Henseler et al. (2015), this study also establishes discriminant validity through the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio assessment. The recommended HTMT threshold is below 0.90. The findings from the HTMT analysis, summarised in Table 2, confirm that discriminant validity of the measurement instrument for each study variable was achieved, as the correlation ratios between constructs were below the 0.90 threshold.

TABLE 2. Discriminant validity via HTMT

Construct	JIS	MWB	QQ
Job Insecurity (JIS)			
Mental Well-being (MWB)	0.576		
Quiet Quitting (QQ)	0.633	0.582	

STRUCTURAL MODEL ASSESSMENT

After confirming reliability and validity, the proposed hypotheses were tested using the structural model. The first stage in evaluating the structural model involved assessing potential lateral collinearity among the predictor variables. According to Hair et al. (2017), this assessment is conducted using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), with values less than 5.0 considered acceptable. The analysis revealed that all VIF values for the predictor constructs were less than the recommended limit, showing that collinearity was not an issue in this study (Hair et al. 2017).

TABLE 3. Common Method Bias Assessment using VIF

Construct	VIF
Job Insecurity (JIS)	1.43
Mental Well-being (MWB)	1.07
Quiet Quitting (QQ)	1.32

Common method bias was assessed using the full collinearity VIF approach (Kock 2015). As shown in Table 3 above, all VIF values ranged from 1.00 to 1.52, which were below the recommended threshold of 3.3. Therefore, common method bias was not considered a major concern in this study.

The analysis examined three direct relationships and one mediating effect among the constructs, with all hypotheses supported. The significance of the relationships was examined using the bootstrapping procedure in SmartPLS, which generated t-statistics for each path. As reported in Table 4, all hypotheses yielded t-values equal to or greater than 1.645, confirming statistical significance at the 5% threshold. The findings demonstrate that job insecurity significantly reduces mental well-being (path coefficient = -0.331 and p-value <.001). Additionally, job insecurity shows a statistically significant positive relationship with quiet quitting ($\beta = 0.586$, $p < .001$). Quiet quitting, in turn, has a statistically significant negative relationship with mental well-being ($\beta = -0.335$, $p < .001$).

The results of the mediation test indicate a statistically significant indirect effect (path coefficient = -0.196 and p-value <.001). As the confidence interval excludes zero, the mediation effect is supported. The results indicate that quiet quitting serves as a contributing factor in explaining how job insecurity affects mental well-being. Therefore, the mediating effect is supported empirically.

TABLE 4. Structural path analysis

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	JIS→MWB	-0.331	4.671	<.001	Supported
H2	JIS→QQ	0.586	12.232	<.001	Supported
H3	QQ→MWB	-0.335	4.907	<.001	Supported
H4	JIS→QQ→MWB	-0.196	4.414	<.001	Supported

Indicator: JIS = Job insecurity; QQ = Quiet quitting; MWB = Mental well-being

In PLS-SEM, the coefficient of determination (R^2) represents the extent to which predictor constructs explain the variance in the endogenous construct (Hair et al. 2014). The R^2 value for mental well-being is 0.351, which indicates that 35.1% of its variance is explained by job insecurity and quiet quitting. Similarly, the R^2 value for quiet quitting is 0.343, meaning that 34.3% of its variance is explained by job insecurity. Following the recommendation of Hair et al. (2014), these R^2 values indicate a moderate level of explanatory power.

Table 5 below shows the assessment of collinearity and effect size. The VIF values for all structural paths in this study were less than the recommended threshold (<5.0). This suggests that the predictor constructs do not excessively correlate with one another and that the path coefficients can be interpreted reliably. In terms of effect size (f^2), job insecurity exerts a strong influence on quiet quitting, indicating that job insecurity is a strong predictor of withdrawal behaviour among contract-based employees. However, both job insecurity and quiet quitting exert comparatively small effects on mental well-being. Nevertheless, these effects remain important, suggesting that both constructs contribute to changes in mental well-being even though the impact is weaker.

TABLE 5. Collinearity (VIF) and Effect Size (f^2)

Relationship	f^2	Effect Size	VIF
JIS → MWB	0.111	Small	1.522
JIS → QQ	0.522	Large	1.000
QQ → MWB	0.113	Small	1.522

Indicator: JIS = Job insecurity; QQ = Quiet quitting; MWB = Mental well-being

TABLE 6. PLS-predict

Item	PLS RMSE	LM RMSE	PLS-LM	Q^2 predict
QQ1	0.975	0.998	-0.023	0.253
QQ2	0.936	0.980	-0.044	0.187
QQ3	0.913	0.949	-0.036	0.171
QQ4	0.681	0.730	-0.049	0.185
QQ5	0.849	0.890	-0.041	0.222
QQ6	0.948	0.993	-0.045	0.147
QQ7	0.729	0.764	-0.035	0.188
QQ8	0.761	0.798	-0.037	0.173
QQ9	0.819	0.860	-0.041	0.190
MWB1	1.025	1.077	-0.052	0.209
MWB2	1.073	1.129	-0.056	0.117
MWB3	1.001	1.039	-0.038	0.139
MWB4	0.861	0.890	-0.029	0.114
MWB5	0.839	0.890	-0.051	0.162
MWB6	0.893	0.899	-0.006	0.172
MWB7	0.788	0.805	-0.017	0.160

Indicator: QQ = Quiet Quitting; MWB = Mental Well-being

Lastly, as shown in Table 6 above, the Q^2 predict values for all indicators are greater than zero, demonstrating predictive relevance for quiet quitting and mental well-being. On top of that, the RMSE values obtained from PLS were lower than those from the LM model across all indicators. This suggests that the PLS model has high predictive power since it outperforms the linear model in predicting the observed values (Hair et al. 2017).

DISCUSSION

The current study investigates the influence of job insecurity among contract-based employees on mental well-being through quiet quitting. The results revealed that all proposed hypotheses were supported. The findings show the importance of understanding behavioural coping mechanisms in explaining how job insecurity influences mental well-being among contract-based employees.

H_1 PERCEIVED JOB INSECURITY RELATES NEGATIVELY TO EMPLOYEES' MENTAL WELL-BEING.

The supported negative relationship indicates that job insecurity is psychologically harmful for contract-based employees, which aligns with the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. COR theory proposes that individuals experience psychological strain when valued resources such as income continuity, predictability, autonomy, and social status are threatened or anticipated to be lost (Hobfoll et al. 2018). Since contract-based employment is inherently time-bound, employees are particularly exposed to such chronic resource threats, making job insecurity both a salient and persistent stressor.

This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that job insecurity is a significant stressor associated with poorer mental well-being, including increased anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and reduced psychological functioning across different work contexts (De Witte et al. 2016; Jiang & Lavaysse 2018; Lastad et al. 2025; Sverke et al. 2002). This study extends these findings by showing that job insecurity is also linked to lower mental well-being among contract-based employees in Malaysia's public sector. For these employees, job insecurity is a continuing concern because their contracts are time-limited, rather than a temporary issue due to organisational changes.

Recent empirical research further reveals that job insecurity adversely affects mental well-being, including heightened anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and reduced psychological functioning. Meta-analytic and large-scale review studies confirm that job insecurity acts as a significant stressor, exerting sustained detrimental implications on employee well-being across occupational contexts (Jiang & Lavaysse 2018; Lastad et al. 2025). These findings reinforce the robustness of the job insecurity and mental well-being relationship beyond short-term or situational effects.

Within the Malaysian context, studies focusing on precarious and non-standard employment further corroborate these findings. Research shows that job insecurity among contract and temporary workers is significantly related to lower well-being and operates through intervening mechanisms such as disrupted work–life balance, impaired coping capacity, and reduced psychological functioning (Abdul Jalil et al. 2023). Together, these findings support H1 and affirm the relevance of COR theory in explaining well-being outcomes among contract employees.

H_2 PERCEIVED JOB INSECURITY IS POSITIVELY RELATED TO QUIET QUITTING.

The positive association between job insecurity and quiet quitting suggests that contract-based employees experiencing higher levels of job insecurity are more likely to reduce extra effort and psychologically withdraw from their roles. Through the lens of COR theory, this behaviour reflects a resource-protection strategy, where individuals limit their investment of time, energy, and emotional resources when future returns appear uncertain or unreliable (Hobfoll et al. 2018).

Recent COR-based studies support this behavioural pathway, showing that workplace stressors, especially uncertainty-related stressors such as job insecurity, are strongly linked to psychological withdrawal, disengagement, and effort minimisation behaviours (Jiang & Lavaysse 2018; Sverke et al. 2002; Sverke et al. 2019). The results point to the fact that quiet quitting is not purely an attitudinal deficit but a rational coping response to perceived resource threats. The present study extends previous findings by showing that such responses can be reflected in quiet quitting, where employees continue to perform their formal roles but reduce discretionary effort. This is particularly relevant to contract-based employment, as uncertainty about contract renewal may reduce employees' willingness to invest resources beyond their formal job requirements.

Moreover, emerging conceptual and empirical work on quiet quitting emphasises that the construct overlaps with, yet remains distinct from, disengagement and withdrawal. Contemporary scholars describe quiet quitting as a spectrum of "silent" adaptive responses to deteriorating employment exchanges, especially in contexts characterised by insecurity and limited reciprocity (Galanis et al. 2023; Podsakoff et al. 2007; Serenko 2023). Thus, the present findings align with current interpretations that quiet quitting represents contextual adaptation rather than simple indolence, thereby supporting H2. However, although quiet quitting may serve as a coping strategy for conserving resources, continued withdrawal and reduced discretionary effort may also carry negative implications for work responsibility and service quality.

H_3 QUIET QUITTING RELATES NEGATIVELY TO EMPLOYEES' MENTAL WELL-BEING.

The supported negative relationship indicates that quiet quitting is not psychologically neutral. Although reducing effort may temporarily alleviate demands, sustained withdrawal can also diminish opportunities for resource gain, such as meaning, competence development, social connection, and accomplishment. According to COR theory, the absence of gain cycles can ultimately intensify strain and undermine well-being (Hobfoll et al. 2018).

Recent research on disengagement and withdrawal consistently highlights that prolonged reductions in work involvement are linked to adverse individual outcomes, including lower mental well-being, reduced vitality, and emotional exhaustion (Bernuzzi et al. 2025). This pattern may be particularly relevant among younger workers and those in less secure employment arrangements, who may be more vulnerable to uncertain working conditions. Previous studies have shown that unfavourable work conditions and limited access to decent work are associated with poorer employee well-being and other negative work-related outcomes (De Witte et al. 2016; Rahim et al. 2024; Yahya & Md Hatta 2025). This study extends this reasoning to quiet quitting by showing that restricting discretionary effort may conserve resources in the short term but also restricts opportunities to gain resources through meaningful involvement, competence development, feedback, and workplace relationships.

Empirical studies that explicitly examined quiet quitting further demonstrate its negative association with employee functioning and well-being outcomes. While withdrawal may serve as short-term self-protection, it often leads to longer-term psychological costs by reducing meaningful engagement and perceived purpose at work (Klotz & Bolino 2022). These findings support H3 and demonstrate the twofold nature of quiet quitting, as both a coping response and a source of diminished well-being.

H_4 QUIET QUITTING SERVES AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN PERCEIVED JOB INSECURITY AND EMPLOYEES' MENTAL WELL-BEING.

The supported mediation clarifies how job insecurity translates into poorer mental well-being. Specifically, job insecurity triggers withdrawal-based coping in the form of quiet quitting, which subsequently undermines well-being. This mechanism is strongly aligned with recent integrative reviews of job insecurity research. These reviews identify

behavioural withdrawal and disengagement as key explanatory pathways linking insecurity to adverse psychological outcomes within stress-and-resources frameworks, including COR theory (Hobfoll et al. 2018; Jiang & Lavaysse 2018).

Evidence from precarious employment contexts further supports this mechanism. Studies show that job insecurity affects well-being indirectly through intermediate processes that disrupt daily functioning, effort regulation, and resource management, reinforcing the notion that insecurity reshapes behaviour before manifesting as reduced well-being (Abdul Jalil et al. 2023; Cheng & Chan 2008). This is also consistent with recent studies showing that job insecurity is associated with the decline of well-being and negative work-related outcomes, including lower work engagement and greater disengagement (Pires 2025; Tumelo & Donald 2025; Urbanaviciute et al. 2024). The present study extends these findings by showing that quiet quitting helps explain the relationship between job insecurity and mental well-being. Thus, H4 is supported and contributes to a more comprehensive insight into the insecurity and well-being relationship.

Taken together, the results show a coherent mechanism in which job insecurity initiates a resource-loss threat that encourages quiet quitting as a protective response. In turn, quiet quitting then contributes to reduced well-being. This integrated model is particularly meaningful for contract-based employees, since their employment arrangements structurally limit predictability and stability. In this context, the presence of job insecurity increases the vulnerability to resource loss, making withdrawal-based behaviour such as quiet quitting more likely to undermine mental well-being.

Within the Malaysian public sector, these findings suggest that employment uncertainty may influence contract-based employees not only psychologically but also behaviourally, as employees may limit additional work effort to manage perceived resource loss. This highlights the importance of employment stability in supporting both the mental well-being and work contribution of contract-based employees.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The present study offers new insight into the literature on job insecurity and well-being. First, it extends COR theory by conceptualising quiet quitting as a resource-protection mechanism rather than a purely attitudinal or motivational deficit. By positioning quiet quitting as an outcome of perceived resource threat, the study clarifies why withdrawal-based behaviours emerge under insecure employment conditions and situates quiet quitting within established stress and coping frameworks. The theoretical contribution therefore lies not in treating quiet quitting as entirely separate from established withdrawal-related behaviours, but in explaining its role as a resource-conservation response through which job insecurity may influence employees' mental well-being.

Secondly, the study advances contract-based employment scholarship by foregrounding contract-based employees as a distinct group for whom job insecurity is structurally embedded rather than temporary. In doing so, it extends the applicability of established organisational theories to non-standard employment settings, which remain undertheorised despite their growing prevalence in modern labour markets. Finally, the findings highlight the psychological costs associated with withdrawal-based coping. Although quiet quitting may initially appear to be an adaptive and protective response to job insecurity, its adverse effects on mental well-being highlight disruptions in resource gain cycles, thereby enriching COR theory's account of loss and gain dynamics in contemporary workplaces.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

From a practical perspective, the results indicate that quiet quitting should be interpreted as a warning signal rather than solely a performance problem. Reduced discretionary effort may reflect employees' attempts to conserve limited resources in the face of uncertainty. Managerial responses that emphasise punishment or surveillance may exacerbate resource loss, whereas supportive interventions are more likely to restore trust and engagement. Practical implications may include providing clear information about contract renewal criteria and expected timelines, conducting regular supervisor check-ins to discuss work concerns and provide feedback, ensuring equitable task allocation and recognition between contract and permanent employees, and providing access to training, employability development, and mental health resources. At the policy level, the study highlights the importance of embedding well-being protections for contract employees within sustainable workforce-management practices.

LIMITATIONS

The present study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, because the study employed a cross-sectional design, it restricts causal interpretations of the relationships between variables and limits the ability to capture the dynamic resource loss and gain processes proposed by COR theory. Second, since the study relies on participants' self-assessments, it may lead to common method bias and socially desirable responses, particularly for quiet quitting, which may be subject to interpretive ambiguity. Third, the context-specific nature of the sample may constrain generalisability, as contract-employment conditions and regulatory frameworks vary across industries and institutional environments. Lastly, the

conceptual boundaries of quiet quitting remain evolving and may overlap with related constructs such as disengagement or psychological withdrawal. Consequently, measurement choices may influence the observed relationships.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Subsequent research may adopt longitudinal or diary-based designs to investigate the temporal sequencing of job insecurity, quiet quitting, and psychological well-being, while distinguishing short-term resource conservation from longer-term psychological costs. The use of multiple sources or behavioural performance data, including supervisor evaluations and objective productivity indicators, would further strengthen construct validity and reduce reliance on self-report measures. Comparative studies examining contract and permanent employees could help determine whether the proposed mechanisms are unique to non-standard employment or operate similarly across employment types. Future work could also test additional boundary conditions aligned with COR theory, such as employability, job control, leader–member exchange, psychological safety, and perceived labour market alternatives. Finally, intervention-based research is needed to evaluate whether organisational support-enhancing initiatives, including supervisor support training, transparency practices, and career development pathways, can effectively reduce quiet quitting and improve psychological well-being in insecure employment contexts.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study expands existing knowledge of employee well-being in insecure employment by offering a theory-driven explanation of how job insecurity undermines the mental well-being of contract-based employees in Malaysia's public sector. Based on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, the findings demonstrate that job insecurity functions as a salient resource threat for contract-based employees. This insecurity reduces valued resources such as stability, predictability, control, and future orientation, which weakens the overall psychological functioning of the employees.

Importantly, this study also goes beyond simple direct-effect explanations by identifying quiet quitting as a key behavioural mechanism connecting job insecurity to the decline of mental well-being. The results show that employees facing greater job insecurity tend to reduce their discretionary effort, reflecting quiet quitting behaviour. Consistent with COR theory, quiet quitting serves as a defensive resource-conservation strategy, reflecting employees' attempts to protect their remaining emotional and energetic resources under conditions of uncertainty. This shows that job insecurity not only shapes the psychological outcomes but also influences behavioural regulation at work.

However, while reducing effort can provide short-term self-protection by limiting emotional and energetic investment, it also restricts access to important resource gains such as career development, competence enhancement, meaning at work, and social connection. Over time, the disruption of resource gains can contribute to poorer mental well-being. Therefore, even when quiet quitting acts as an adaptive coping response, it carries psychological costs. Taken all together, the findings highlight the dynamic interplay between resource threat, coping behaviour, and well-being. This reinforces the need to address job insecurity as a critical determinant of employee mental health and organisational sustainability, not only as an employment condition. Proactive organisational efforts to reduce uncertainty and restore resource gains are essential to safeguarding the mental well-being of contract-based employees in contemporary work contexts.

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