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From Toxicity to Emotional Numbness: Understanding Silent Flight among Gen Z through A Moral and Ethical Workplace Lens

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Abstract

Contemporary macro-workplace shifts- characterized by intensive performance pressures, algorithmic surveillance, and transactional approaches to human effort- increasingly incubate toxic work cultures. While traditional employee-turnover models view employee exit as a rational, utility-maximizing economic decision driven by job dissatisfaction, these frameworks fail to explain the emergence of "Silent Flight"- the abrupt, unannounced, and non-confrontational departure increasingly witnessed among Generation Z employees. Grounded in virtue ethics and care ethics, this conceptual study develops a novel framework explaining how toxic work cultures initiate a cascading psychological and ethical process that culminates in Silent Flight. We establish a multi-stage conceptual model detailing the pathway where toxic organizational cultures violate shared norms of fairness, causing perceived ethical climate violations. These violations accumulate into moral injury- an identity-threatening rupture in meaning. To survive this moral distress, employees engage in protective emotional flattening, developing Workplace Emotional Numbness (WEN) as a distinct psychological defense state. This numbness dissolves the relational, affective, and moral bonds anchoring organizational attachment, inevitably triggering Silent Flight. Furthermore, we position Gen Z identity as a strengthening moderator due to their heightened demand for authenticity, while authentic leadership and psychological safety act as critical buffers enabling moral repair. This framework shifts the corporate narrative from blaming generational fragility to diagnosing systemic institutional failure, demonstrating that employee retention is fundamentally an index of organizational morality. To prevent the irreversible collapse into emotional numbness, organizations must abandon superficial perks and focus on early-stage moral repair, relational

transparency, and human sustainability.

Keywords: Emotional Numbness; Ethical Climate; Gen Z; Moral Injury; Toxic Work Culture