

## Beyond the Hustle: A Systematic Literature Review and Conceptual Synthesis of Generation Z's Workplace Psychology, Sociology, and Mental Health

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### Abstract

Generation Z (born 1995–2010) has increased in numbers in the global workforce, and organisations need to adapt their organisation's culture and practices. This systematic literature review and conceptual synthesis of 55 peer-reviewed empirical studies from 2020 to 2025 examines the interactions between Gen Z's expectations for work, psychological well-being, mental health, and organisational culture.

Ultimately, the synthesis reveals that Gen Z's needs for autonomy, flexibility, meaningful work, alignment with values, and psychological safety are in contrast to the rigid, transactional organisation they have long known. I introduce the Gen Z Institutional Friction Model as a model of how high intentions for exit, quiet quitting, and deliberate detachment can be rational responses to the fragility of the economy, algorithms, mismatches of values, or lack of support. I provide theoretical contributions and practical implications for human resource management and organisational development.

**Keywords:** Generation Z, Institutional Friction, Psychological Safety, Algorithmic Anxiety, Quiet Quitting, Employee Retention, Work-Life Balance, Remote Onboarding, Employer Branding

### Introduction

Generation Z has brought a new set of challenges to organisational sociology and human resource management. Gen Z was born between 1995 and 2010 and has grown up through years of multiple crises, including the economic crisis, climate anxiety, the COVID-19 pandemic, and rapid technological change. These experiences have produced a generation that values mental health, personal freedom, morality, autonomy, and meaningful impact above loyalty and tenure (Deloitte, 2024; Resolution Foundation, 2025).

Early scholarship often referred to Gen Z as “digital natives,” but more recent studies (2002-2053) point to deeper components of Gen Z, such as awareness of the fragility of the traditional employment social contract, a preference for flexible work options, and less tolerance for misaligned values or toxic cultures. This presents both opportunities and risks for employers. Gen Z brings creativity, digital fluency, and

social awareness, but many find themselves suffering from high turnover, quiet quitting, and perceived lack of commitment.

Despite this growing interest, the literature is fragmentary, with many studies relying on student samples or narrow variables. This paper addresses this gap through a systematic review of 55 studies and the generation of the Gen Z Institutional Friction Model.

### **Methodology: Systematic Literature Review Process**

This study adopted a systematic literature review strategy to ensure rigor, transparency, and reproducibility, in accordance with Tranfield et al. (2003) and PRISMA guidelines. A review protocol was prepared for this study specifying the research question, method of search, criteria for inclusion/exclusion, and methods for collecting the data.

Using the following keywords (Generation Z) and “Gen Z” in combination with a workplace-related keyword, we searched Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and EBSCO using the following combinations of (“Generation Z” OR “Gen Z”) and peer-reviewed studies from 2020 to 2025. Of 312 primary records, 55 high-quality studies were identified after a rigorous review process.

The data were entered into an Excel table presenting year, industry, country, variables, problems, and gaps. Results were grouped into Structural Drivers (compensation, flexibility, culture, CSR, employer branding) and Psychological Mediators (job satisfaction, burnout, psychological safety, algorithmic anxiety). We evaluated the quality of the research using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) to obtain an independent synthesis.

### **Literature Review**

The systematic review of 55 empirical studies reveals consistent patterns in Gen Z’s workplace expectations, challenges, and adaptive behaviors. The findings are organized into four major themes.

### **The Erosion of the Transactional Psychological Contract**

The psychological contract that was negotiated long-term for job security and advancement has fallen out of favour. Generation Z is shifting to a model of networked trust in which they are committed only to those who are fair, who share their values, and who give them opportunities to grow (Zahra et al., 2025; Singh et al., 2025; Putri et al., 2022).

Studies of the banking and finance sectors in Malaysia and Indonesia show that Gen Z job-hoppers have been attracted to the lack of stability in their workplace, low salary, and lack of career progression (Zahra et al., 2025). Hospitality studies in Australia and Pakistan show that poor working conditions, irregular hours, and low wages increase job-hopping among Gen Z hospitality workers. Studies of the public sector and contact centers show similar disconnects between Gen Z’s preference for fast growth and the bureaucratic or stressful work environment of the traditional bureaucratic or high-pressure work environment. In general, the literature suggests that Gen Z sees

work as an exchange over the short to medium-term rather than a lifelong commitment.

### **Work-Life Balance, Flexibility, and the Mental Health Paradox**

Flexibility and work/life balance are the highest priorities for Gen Z in all of the studies. GenZ employees are frequently willing to leave or opt out of jobs that do not allow them flexible hours, flexibility to work from home/accountable office locations, or recovery time (Sari et al., 2024; Al-Sulaiti et al., 2025; Nguyen, 2025).

The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced those expectations. Gen Z has tapped the corporate mind to discuss mental health, but it has not tapped the awareness gap. Most studies have revealed high levels of burnout, anxiety, and stress because of the “always-on” digital culture, job insecurity, and unrealistic performance expectations. When assistance seems too superficial (e.g., wellness apps without structure change), Gen Z workers are quick to lash out by pacing back and pushing the boundaries, behaviors often understood by management as lacking motivation or entitlement (Wang et al., 2023; Gupta, 2024).

### **Employer Branding, Talent Attraction, and Retention Challenges**

Recent work on employer branding and talent management has revealed a disconnect between Gen Z's expectations and the organisation's reality. Gen Z wants to work for companies that have strong CSR, authentic values, job opportunities, and inclusive cultures. But, many companies continue to use outdated and tacky strategies to brand their company to Gen Z (Rahman et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2023; Hussain et al., 2024). Onboarding is one of the most neglected and critical areas. In India, South Africa, Romania, and Indonesia, many studies suggest that traditional onboarding programs, focused on administrative compliance, do not address Gen Z's need to know their roles quickly, to get frequent feedback, to mentor young people, or to be introduced to their culture. Many new hires leave within the first three-to- six months.

### **Gen Z Remote Onboarding Trends and Technology-Related Challenges**

The prevalence of remote and hybrid work has also led to a different type of onboarding. Gen Z wants a digital-first, flexible, and personalised remote onboarding experience that includes interactive platforms, games, and self-paced learning. But, remote workers experience challenges with social integration, cultural transfer, and psychological safety in virtual environments (Al-Sulaiti et al., 2025).

A major theme of recent studies is algorithmic anxiety, the psychological strain caused by digital over-examples and unclear artificial intelligence's ability to do its job. Gen Z is tech-savvy, but it is a struggle to work with when it is used for surveillance rather than empowerment (Mind-Set Safety Management, 2026).

### **Global Variations in Gen Z Workplace Behavior: A Cross-Cultural Comparison**

While Generation Z shares many common traits globally, the reviewed literature reveals important contextual variations shaped by economic development, cultural norms, labor market conditions, and technological infrastructure.

### Common Global Patterns

Across regions, Gen Z consistently prioritizes:

Work-life balance and flexibility

Mental health support and psychological safety

Ethical alignment and corporate social responsibility

Frequent feedback and rapid career growth

Rejection of hustle culture and presenteeism

These shared preferences appear in studies from North America, Europe, and Asia, indicating a genuine generational shift rather than purely cultural phenomena.

### Regional Differences

**North America (USA)** In the USA, Gen Z is a strong proponent of diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI), social justice and mental health. These studies reveal that American Gen Z is more vocal about workplace rights and is much more likely to express criticisms about their organizations. They expect higher salaries and higher values for their jobs (Smith et al., 2021).

**Europe (Germany, Portugal, Sweden, Romania, Spain)** Studies focusing on Europe emphasize the need for work-life balance, strong protections against the work force, and doubt about overwork. Generation Z in Sweden and Portugal expect genuine sustainability and meaningful work. They are also more open to slower and more balanced career progressions than their Asian counterparts (Rahman et al., 2023; Todorova et al., 2021).

**East and Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, China)** Asian studies show that many Gen Z students are under tremendous pressure from competition and high expectations of their parents. In these countries, Gen Z is often more practical and adept at job-hopping, and very concerned about financial and job stability, and sometimes even cares less about flexibility and mental health supports. "Quiet quitting" is a popular practice in China and Vietnam due to their tense work environments (Wang et al., 2023; Nguyen, 2025; Sari et al., 2024).

**South Asia (India, Pakistan)** Gen Z in India and Pakistan struggle between traditional, hierarchical family and society expectations and contemporary global workplace values. Gen Z is driven by financial independence, career advancement, and rejecting the "hustle" culture. CSR initiatives and modern workplace amenities like coffee shops, gyms, and cafes are essential in today's competitive job market (Gupta, 2024; Hussain et al., 2024).

**Other Regions (Australia, Mexico)** Australia-related research focuses on the benefits of balance in life and work enjoyment, while Mexican-related research focuses on the benefits of hybrid work for family integration and work-life harmony (Al-Sulaiti et al., 2025).

### Key Influencing Factors

**Economic context:** Financial stability and job security in emerging economies are more significant than in developed nations.

Cultural factors: Collectivist cultures (many Asian countries) are more pragmatic, while individualistic cultures (USA, some parts of Europe) are more self-expressive, and more concerned with personal values.

Labor Market Conditions: High youth unemployment or intense competition in the job market fuel job-hopping behaviors.

Technological Infrastructure: Countries with high digital infrastructures have higher expectations about remote work and transparency in algorithm design.

### **Implications of Global Variation**

There is a difference between the two approaches, which shows that while the elements of the Gen Z Institutional Friction Model remain generally applicable, the nature and extent of friction vary dramatically. Multinational organisations will need to vary their strategies rather than take a one-size-fits-all approach.

Having the comparison performed around the world helps us generalise our findings while also recognising some significant differences between how Gen Z interacts with different types of institutions.

### **Asia-Focused Comparison of Gen Z Workplace Behavior**

Asia is one of the most dynamic and diverse regions for Gen Z workforce participation. The studies from East, Southeast, and South Asia show similarities as well as differences at the country-level due to rapid economic growth, cultural values, intense competition, and varying levels of technological progress.

### **Common Asian Patterns**

Across Asian contexts, Gen Z exhibits:

Moderate career-hopping attitude.

High sensitivity to financial stability and growing demand for work-life balance.

She doesn't accept extreme hustle culture and has to deal with unrealistic expectations of herself and her family.

Prefer to work in modern, technological environments where there are clear paths to the next stage in career.

Attention is growing on mental health, but the rate of disclosure is low because of stigma.

### **Country/ Sub-Regional Variations**

**Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam)** In Indonesia (the most represented country in the review), Gen Z respondents value work-life balance, flexibility, and a culture that respects personal boundaries (Sari et al., 2024; Putri et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2025). In Malaysia, the top reasons for retention are financial rewards, job security, and training opportunities, particularly in the banking and FMCG industries (Yusoff et al., 2025; Zahra et al., 2025). In Vietnam, Gen Z research indicates "quiet quitting" in response to toxic workplaces and an unhealthy work-life balance (Nguyen, 2025).

These countries are also turning away from collectivism and in favour of individualism, especially among urban and educated Gen Z.

**East Asia (China)** Chinese workplace research emphasizes the intense pressure and the “quiet quitting” phenomenon as a form of passive resistance to overwork culture (Wang et al., 2023). Chinese Gen Z appears more cautious about facing employers face-to-face because of cultural and economic factors, but disengages when faced with excess demands, poor leadership, or insatiable work.

**South Asia (India and Pakistan)** Gen Z in India, for example, seems to strongly reject “hustle culture” and workplace misogyny, whereas others appreciate meaningful work and the ability to balance family and work (Gupta, 2024). There is not a great balance between work demands of traditional workers and GenZ’s desire for flexibility and mental health. In Pakistan, research in banking, IT, healthcare, and hospitality has shown a strong focus on the employer branding, fair compensation, career advancement, and authentic leadership (Hussain et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2023; Raza et al., 2023). The Pakistani Gen Z is particularly sensitive to the company’s reputation and ethical practices.

#### **Key Influencing Factors in Asia**

**Economic Competition:** High youth population and intense competition on the job market drive pragmatic, short-term career strategies.

**Family and Society Pressure:** The expectations of the family about financial success and social status tend to conflict with the personal need for balance and fulfillment.

**Technological Leapfrogging:** Rapid adoption of digital technology in the workplace prompts high expectations of modern work places, but also exposure to algorithmic management.

**Cultural Collectivism vs Individualism:** The traditional collectivist values coexist with the increasingly individualist views of young urban professionals.

#### **Implications for the Institutional Friction Model**

As mentioned above, the tensions around money and career advancement are exacerbated in the Value Alignment and Flexibility dimensions in Asia. Algorithmic anxiety is an issue that is particularly pronounced in countries where digital monitoring is widespread. Organisations in Asia may need to focus on competitive pay and rapid growth, as well as cultivating a culture of mental health and flexibility. This Asia-focused analysis shows that while the core elements of the Gen Z Institutional Friction Model hold across the region, the relative weight of each component will vary depending on local economic and cultural realities. Multinational companies are therefore advised to develop strategies based on regional realities, rather than a global framework.

#### **Identified Research Gaps**

The review highlights several persistent gaps in the literature:

Scarcity of longitudinal studies tracking Gen Z's career progression beyond early years.

Limited cross-cultural comparisons, with heavy concentration in emerging Asian economies.

Insufficient exploration of algorithmic management's long-term impact on mental health.

Lack of mixed-methods and qualitative studies capturing nuanced lived experiences.

Under-examination of intra-generational diversity (socioeconomic, gender, and ethnic differences).

These gaps underscore the need for more comprehensive, longitudinal, and globally representative research on Gen Z in the workplace.

#### 4. Conceptual Synthesis: The Gen Z Institutional Friction Model

One major contribution of this systematic review was the development of the Gen Z Institutional Friction Model, a novel, integral framework for explaining the behaviours of Generation Z in the workplace. The model draws upon the information from the 55 reviews to develop a coherent structure that goes beyond superficial generational stereotypes toward a deeper understanding of the systemic misalignments driving the current workforce.

#### Theoretical Foundations

The Gen Z Institutional Friction Model is built upon four foundational theories while extending them to address the unique socio-technological context of this generation:

**Psychological Contract Theory** (Rousseau, 1995) discusses the shift from long-term relational contracts to short-term conditional transactions.

**Person-Environment Fit Theory** (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) emphasises the negative effects of misfit between individual values/needs and organisational characteristics.

**Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model** (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017): A friction occurs when the job demand is greater than the resources available to the employee, which may lead to burnout or withdrawal.

**Social Exchange Theory** (Blau, 1964) explains decreased commitment among organizations if they perceive the reciprocity to be unbalanced.

Three core Assumptions of the Model:

Gen Z possesses a distinct set of psychological and sociological needs shaped by their formative experiences.

Traditional organizational structures were designed for previous generations and often fail to meet these needs.

The resulting **institutional friction** produces predictable adaptive behaviors (e.g., quiet quitting, job hopping, boundary-setting) that are rational rather than deviant.

#### Six Dimensions of Institutional Friction

The model identifies six interconnected dimensions where friction commonly occurs:

**Performance and Evaluation Systems** Gen Z seeks clear, impact-oriented, and growth-focused evaluation. Traditional time-based presenteeism and subjective visibility metrics create frustration and disengagement.

**Organizational Structure and Communication** Preference for transparent, networked, and relatively flat structures clashes with rigid hierarchies and infrequent top-down communication.

**Psychological Safety and Mental Health Support** Gen Z requires authentic, systemic psychological safety. Superficial wellness programs without real cultural change breed cynicism and emotional exhaustion.

**Work Arrangements and Flexibility** Strong desire for autonomy over time, location, and method of work conflicts with rigid schedules and mandatory office attendance.

**Value Congruence and Purpose Alignment** Deep need for ethical alignment, social impact, and authenticity. Organizations perceived as inauthentic experience sharp drops in loyalty and engagement.

**Technology and Algorithmic Management** While technologically proficient, Gen Z experiences significant stress from surveillance, opaque algorithms, and constant connectivity — a phenomenon termed **algorithmic anxiety**.

Table 1. The Gen Z Institutional Friction Model (Enhanced)

Dimension	Gen Z Core Need	Traditional Organizational Reality	Friction Level	Common Behavioral Outcomes
Performance Evaluation	Output & impact-driven	& Presenteeism visibility	& High	Quiet quitting, minimum viable effort
Structure & Communication	Transparent, frequent feedback	Hierarchical, formal, slow	High	Distrust, reduced voice
Psychological Safety	Genuine support & recovery	Superficial perks, always-on culture	Very High	Burnout, boundary-setting, disclosure gap
Work Flexibility	Autonomy & integration	& Rigid location & time requirements	High	Job hopping, portfolio careers
Value & Ethical Alignment	Purpose, authenticity, CSR	Profit-first, symbolic gestures	High	Conditional commitment, ethical exit
Technology Algorithmic	& Empowerment transparency	& Surveillance opaque decision-	& Emerging High	Algorithmic anxiety,

Dimension	Gen Z Need	Core Traditional Organizational Reality	Friction Level	Common Behavioral Outcomes
Mgmt.		making		resistance to adoption

### Propositions

**P1:** More cumulative institutional friction across dimensions predicts higher intentions of Generation Z employees to leave and strategic disengagement.

**P2:** The psychosocial safety factor and the congruence of values act as moderators that buffer other dimensions of friction.

**P3:** Algorithmic anxiety is a distinct and becoming more potent source of friction among Gen Zers than it was for previous generations.

**P4:** Organisations that reduce friction through targeted reforms will experience higher levels of engagement, innovation, and retention from Gen Z talent.

### Practical Utility and Future Development

The model can be used as a diagnostic tool (allowing organisations to identify friction points) and as a guide for intervention. The model will encourage HR staff to move from a reactive retention strategy to one of proactive friction reduction.

Theoretically, this model can represent the intersection of generational research on workforces and contemporary issues of digital transformation and mental health at work. Future empirical work will check the validity of this model by means of structural equation models, longitudinal studies, and cross-cultural studies.

This revised Gen Z Institutional Friction Model is the concept supposing that the empirical literature informs both theory and practice.

### Discussion

Results from the 55 studies reveal that Generation Z's behaviour at work was not rebellion against the past but adaptation to the workplace of the 21st century. We have developed our own Gen Z Institutional Friction Model to account for this variation in different global contexts.

The phenomenon of the psychological contract isn't unique to any region. Gen Z in West-based countries (i.e., USA) is louder about what they want from DEI, social impact, and mental health support, while Asian Gen Z in more competitive countries like China, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia tend to hang in there, job-hopping or quitting quietly as a means to make it through families, economic struggles, and difficult work environments (Wang et al., 2023; Gupta, 2024; Zahra et al., 2025; Nguyen, 2025).

To a great extent, the work-life balance is a globally recognised priority, and in the post-pandemic world, people in the current generation don't want to compromise. There are some exceptions to this trend: while European Gen Z is a group more protected from the workplace and more likely to find balance within their culture,

Asian Gen Z is often caught between collective values and the young individualism they want to maintain. Financial stability and rapid career growth are common frictions in South and Southeast Asia, while in more developed countries, value convergence and purpose play an important role.

Especially, in the context of Gen Z, who have long been socially adept at technology, the rise of algorithmic anxiety is one of the main causes of stress for them. This is particularly true in Asia, where the pace of digital change has outpaced cultural adaptation to the use of technology more transparently.

### **Practical Implications for HRM**

The Institutional Friction Model has clear actionable implications. Organizations should conduct regular “friction audits” across the six identified dimensions. Priority interventions include:

- Redesigning performance systems toward output and impact rather than presenteeism.
- Implementing genuine flexibility policies and clear work-life boundaries.
- Strengthening authentic leadership and frequent feedback mechanisms.
- Developing comprehensive, Gen Z-centric onboarding programs (both in-person and remote).
- Ensuring value congruence through transparent CSR and ethical practices.
- Involving employees in the design and governance of AI tools.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

The Gen Z Institutional Friction Model expands on generational workforce theory by integrating structural, psychological, technological and cultural factors. It explains why the same needs result in different behaviour across environments, which is more sophisticated than the simple generational or only cultural explanations.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Even with its strengths, this review is not without limitations. Most studies in this review are cross-sectional and mostly from emerging Asian countries (Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia, Vietnam). There are few studies from developed Western countries and little longitudinal research on the career development of Gen Z over time. Many of the studies are based on self-report data which may be subject to social desirability bias.

### **Future Research Directions**

- Several important avenues emerge for future scholarship:
- Longitudinal studies of Gen Z populations beyond the early years of their careers.
- Cross-cultural comparative research to investigate how institutional and economic contexts moderate friction.
- Validation and refinement of the Gen Z Institutional Friction Model.
- Long-term impact of algorithmic management and collaboration between AI and humans on mental health.

Mixed methods studies of within-generational variation (e.g., by socioeconomic status, gender, or ethnicity).

Intervention research evaluating HRM reforms that reduce friction at the institution.

### Conclusion

Generation Z's entry into the workforce does not represent just a demographic change, but a fundamental change to the nature of the social contract between employer and worker. This review of 55 studies reveals that high turnover, quiet quitting, flexibility, and a focus on mental health and values alignment are adaptations to the realities of economic uncertainty, technological advancement, and changing expectations.

In this paper, we present the Gen Z Institutional Friction Model, a diagnostic and intervention tool that can help organizations assess where they currently stand and where improvements can be made. When organisations address frictions in the areas of performance, leadership, flexibility, value alignment, and technology governance, employers can turn potential disadvantages into a competitive advantage in the acquisition, engagement, and retention of talent.

Regional differences – including the intense economic and cultural pressures experienced in Asia compared with more individualistic expressions in Western countries emphasise the need for tailored, individual solutions, not one-size-fits-all solutions. Organisations that can adapt the employment social contract to meet Gen Z's needs will see increased retention and innovation as well as create more humane and sustainable workplaces for the coming generations. The future of work is being written by Generation Z.

The solution may not be “fixing” Generation Z, but rather modernising organisations to accommodate a new workforce. The most successful businesses will be those that listen, adapt, and co-create it with them. Those who bridge these divides in the business world will be well-positioned to capitalise on a competitive and dynamic global talent market. Those who see Gen Z not as a problem to be solved, but as a generation actively altering the future of work, will succeed.

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