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Constructing Employee Engagement Among Generation Z Employees: A Phenomenological Study In The Organizational Context

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Abstract: Employee engagement has become a critical issue in human resource management, particularly with the growing dominance of Generation Z in the workforce. Unlike previous generations, Generation Z places greater emphasis on meaningful work, career development, supportive relationships, and psychological well-being. However, existing studies are largely dominated by quantitative approaches, offering limited insight into how Generation Z employees construct employee engagement through their lived experiences. This study aims to explore the construction of employee engagement among Generation Z employees using a qualitative approach with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with purposively selected Generation Z employees and analyzed by identifying key themes from participants' experiences. The findings reveal that employee engagement is constructed through recognition, trust, supportive interpersonal relationships, participatory leadership, opportunities for growth, work autonomy, and meaningful work. Rather than reflecting unconditional organizational loyalty, employee engagement is understood as a dynamic reciprocal relationship that is continuously shaped by employees' work experiences. This study contributes to the employee engagement literature by providing a phenomenological perspective that positions employees' subjective experiences at the center of analysis and offers practical implications for developing human resource management strategies that align with the characteristics of Generation Z.

Keyword: Employee Engagement, Generation Z, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Human Resource Management, Meaningful Work.

INTRODUCTION

Changes in the workforce composition indicate that Generation Z is beginning to dominate various organizational sectors. This generation, born between 1997 and 2012, grew up in the digital age and therefore has characteristics, expectations, and work behaviors that differ from those of previous generations (Dimock, 2019). They tend to prioritize flexibility, learning opportunities, meaningful work, and an organizational culture that supports psychological well-being and work-life balance (Schroth, 2019). Therefore, organizations need to understand the factors that shape employee engagement among Generation Z.

Employee engagement is a crucial concept in human resource management because it is linked to productivity, commitment, innovation, and the sustainability of organizational performance. Employees with high levels of employee engagement demonstrate enthusiasm, dedication, and emotional involvement that drive optimal contributions to the organization (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Research also indicates that employee engagement has a positive impact on performance, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, and employee retention (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Conversely, low employee engagement is associated with increased turnover intentions, low motivation, and decreased productivity (Saks, 2022).

Nevertheless, employee engagement remains a challenge for many organizations. A report from Gallup (2024) indicates that only a small fraction of workers truly feels engaged in their work. This issue is becoming increasingly critical as Generation Z is projected to become the largest segment of the workforce. If organizations fail to foster employee engagement from the outset, the risks of high employee turnover, low loyalty, and rising recruitment costs will grow significantly.

Unlike previous generations, Generation Z's employee engagement is not solely influenced by compensation or job security. They place greater value on meaningful work, positive interpersonal relationships, opportunities for growth, supportive leadership, and alignment of personal values with the organization's values (Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015). Furthermore, they tend to change jobs if their psychological needs and career development are not met (Schroth, 2019). This situation underscores the importance of understanding how Generation Z perceives employee engagement.

Numerous studies on employee engagement have been conducted, but most still use a quantitative approach to examine relationships with variables such as leadership, job satisfaction, organizational culture, workplace well-being, and turnover intention (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Other studies have also highlighted the role of the work environment, organizational support, and human resource management practices in enhancing employee engagement (Saks, 2022).

However, several research gaps remain. First, most studies view employee engagement as a construct measured through psychometric indicators, thus failing to provide an in-depth portrayal of the work experience. Second, research on Generation Z is still dominated by survey-based approaches, so subjective experiences and the process of meaning-making have not been extensively examined. Third, phenomenological research specifically addressing the construction of employee engagement among Generation Z employees in Indonesia remains limited.

Based on these gaps, this study employs a phenomenological approach to understand employee engagement through the lived experiences of Generation Z employees. This approach allows researchers to explore individuals' perceptions, values, and interpretations of their work experiences in greater depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, employee engagement is understood as a meaning-making process that emerges through the interaction between the individual and the organizational environment.

The novelty of this study lies in two aspects. First, the study shifts the focus of employee engagement research from a quantitative approach to a phenomenological approach that places employees' subjective experiences at the center of the analysis. Second, this study constructs the meaning of employee engagement based on the perspectives of Generation Z employees within the context of organizations in Indonesia, thereby providing a more contextual understanding.

Based on this background, this study aims to uncover how Generation Z employees construct the meaning of employee engagement based on their life experiences. This study also identifies the factors that shape work engagement and explains their impact on the individual's relationship with the organization. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the study of employee engagement through a phenomenological perspective, while practically, the results

are expected to serve as input for organizations in designing human resource management strategies tailored to the characteristics of Generation Z.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to gain an in-depth understanding of how Generation Z employees construct the meaning of employee engagement based on their life experiences within an organizational context. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it focuses on exploring individuals' subjective experiences and their interpretations of the reality they directly experience, thereby enabling the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the essence of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Specifically, this study adopts Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The IPA approach views individual experiences as not merely described but also interpreted through a process of reflection between participants and the researcher. Thus, the study does not merely identify the level of employee engagement but seeks to understand how employee engagement is interpreted, shaped, and influenced by both personal experiences and the organizational environment (Smith et al., 2022). This approach is considered relevant because employee engagement is a subjective psychological phenomenon influenced by the social context in which individuals work.

Data Sources

The data sources for this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with Generation Z employees working at various organizations in both the public and private sectors. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, which involves selecting informants based on specific characteristics relevant to the study's objectives. The participant criteria included: (1) belonging to Generation Z (born approximately between 1997 and 2012), (2) having worked for at least one year at their current organization, and (3) being willing to openly share their work experiences. The purposive sampling technique allows researchers to obtain information-rich cases in line with the research focus (Patton, 2015).

The number of participants in phenomenological research is not determined based on statistical representativeness but rather on the depth of information obtained until data saturation is reached. Therefore, the number of participants ranges from 8 to 15, adjusted to ensure the emergence of recurring themes during the interview process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained through various supporting documents, such as organizational profiles, human resources policies, relevant internal documents, and scholarly articles on employee engagement and the characteristics of Generation Z. Secondary data was used to strengthen the interpretation of interview results and provide context for the experiences shared by participants (Yin, 2018).

Data Collection Techniques

The primary data collection technique used in this study was in-depth interviews (semi-structured interviews). This technique provided the researcher with the flexibility to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, emotions, and interpretations of employee engagement, while ensuring that the interview process remained focused on the research objectives. The interview guidelines were developed based on key concepts of employee engagement, such as the meaning of work, relationships with supervisors and coworkers, opportunities for self-development, organizational support, and experiences that make participants feel connected to or disconnected from the organization (Kallio et al., 2016).

In addition to interviews, this study also employed nonparticipant observation during interactions with participants. Observations were conducted to record nonverbal expressions, interview situations, and the work environment context that could enrich data interpretation. Field notes were systematically compiled as part of the research documentation process to supplement the information obtained through interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve data integrity. This study also adhered to research ethics principles by providing informed consent forms, maintaining the confidentiality of informants' identities through the use of codes or pseudonyms, and ensuring that participation was voluntary and free from pressure from any party (Orb et al., 2001).

Data Analysis Method

Data analysis was conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), developed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin. This approach aims to uncover the meaning of individuals' life experiences through a systematic process of interpreting participants' narratives. The analysis began with repeated readings of the interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of each participant's experience (Smith et al., 2022).

The next stage involves making exploratory notes (initial noting) on each transcript. These notes include descriptive comments on the content of the experience, linguistic comments regarding language use, and conceptual comments representing the researcher's initial interpretation of the meaning of the participants' experiences. This process yields a number of emergent themes that describe key aspects in the construction of employee engagement.

Next, the emerging themes are analyzed to identify relationships among them, thereby forming superordinate themes. The analysis is conducted on each case individually before a cross-case analysis is performed to identify patterns of experience that share similarities or differences among participants. This stage enables the researcher to understand how the meaning of employee engagement is constructed on a personal level while also being influenced by the organizational context in which the participants work (Smith et al., 2022).

To ensure the credibility of the research findings, source triangulation, member checking, and the creation of an audit trail were conducted throughout the research process. Triangulation was performed by comparing interview results, observation notes, and supporting documents, thereby ensuring that the resulting interpretations have a higher level of reliability. Member checking was conducted by asking participants to confirm whether the researcher's interpretations aligned with the experiences they had shared. In addition, the entire analysis process was systematically documented to ensure the study had a high level of dependability and confirmability in accordance with the criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Meaning of Employee Engagement Among Generation Z Employees

The results of a phenomenological analysis show that employee engagement among Generation Z employees is not merely understood as loyalty or the desire to remain with the organization, but as a psychological experience shaped by the interaction between the individual, the work, and the work environment. Participants interpreted work engagement as a state in which they feel valued, trusted, given opportunities for growth, and able to make meaningful contributions. Thus, employee engagement is determined more by the quality of the work experience than by the length of service. This finding aligns with the concept proposed by Schaufeli et al. (2002), which explains that employee engagement is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption.

The participants' experiences indicate that employee engagement begins to take shape when the organization acknowledges their capabilities. Opportunities to voice opinions, earn trust, and be valued from the start of their careers serve as experiences that strengthen their emotional bond with the organization. One participant stated, "I feel motivated to work when my ideas are truly heard. Even though I'm still new, I feel that my contributions are valued." This finding supports, Kahn (1990), view that employee engagement develops when individuals feel psychological safety and are valued.

Furthermore, participants view work as a means to achieve meaningful goals (meaningful work). They feel more engaged when their work not only provides financial rewards but also benefits the organization and society. One participant shared, "I'm not just chasing a paycheck. I want my work to have an impact so that I feel what I'm doing is truly meaningful." This finding aligns with Saks (2022), who states that meaningful work is one of the primary predictors of employee engagement.

The analysis also shows that employee engagement is built through reciprocity between individuals and the organization. Participants are willing to give their best dedication and effort when the organization shows care, supports competency development, and values their contributions. Conversely, an organizational orientation that focuses solely on targets without appreciation or opportunities for growth tends to reduce employee engagement. These findings reinforce the Social Exchange Theory proposed by Saks (2006), which states that employee engagement grows through fair and mutually beneficial social exchange relationships.

Overall, this study indicates that the meaning of employee engagement among Generation Z is a dynamic and contextual construct of experience. Work engagement is shaped through experiences of being valued, trust, the meaningfulness of work, and positive reciprocal relationships. Therefore, employee engagement among Generation Z needs to be understood from a more humanistic perspective, namely, as the result of individuals' interpretation of the quality of their daily work experiences.

Factors Shaping Employee Engagement

A phenomenological analysis shows that employee engagement among Generation Z employees is not shaped by a single factor, but rather through the interplay of various interconnected work experiences. Participants interpreted work engagement as the result of a supportive work environment, leadership that instills trust, opportunities for growth, and freedom in performing their jobs. These factors create positive experiences that are then interpreted as reasons to remain emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally engaged in the organization. Thus, employee engagement is understood as a process that develops through daily work experiences, not merely as a consequence of organizational policies.

Work Environment and Interpersonal Relationships

The research findings indicate that the quality of the work environment is one of the key factors shaping employee engagement among Generation Z. Most participants felt that a supportive work environment made them more comfortable working, more open to discussion, and more willing to help one another. Conversely, unhealthy competition and a lack of open communication reduced motivation and commitment to the organization. These findings suggest that positive social relationships form the foundation for a meaningful work experience.

Interpersonal relationships also serve as a source of emotional support and a means of learning. Interactions with coworkers help participants develop competencies, boost self-confidence, and strengthen their professional identity. Conversely, prolonged conflicts make them feel alienated and reduce employee engagement. These findings align with the research by Bakker & Albrecht (2018), which emphasizes that social support and interpersonal relationships are important job resources for enhancing employee engagement.

This study also shows that interpersonal relationships reflect the principles of Social Exchange Theory. When participants feel supported, trusted, and valued by their work environment, they are motivated to demonstrate commitment and make greater contributions to the organization. These findings are consistent with the explanation by Cropanzano et al. (2017) that positive social relationships encourage individuals to reciprocate the organization's kindness through increased employee engagement.

Supportive Leadership

Leadership is one of the key factors in shaping employee engagement. All participants viewed leaders not only as those who give instructions, but also as mentors who provide guidance, foster two-way communication, and value employees' ideas and well-being. Conversely, an authoritarian leadership style was perceived as creating less positive work relationships.

Participants also felt that trust from leaders boosts motivation and a sense of responsibility at work. Conversely, overly controlling leadership stifles creativity and diminishes a sense of belonging to the organization. These findings support the research by Breevaart et al. (2015), which shows that leadership that supports employees' psychological needs contributes to increased employee engagement.

Furthermore, open communication is viewed as a hallmark of effective leadership. Leaders who provide constructive feedback, listen to employees' aspirations, and involve them in decision-making are able to build trust and strengthen emotional ties to the organization. These findings align with Breevaart & Bakker (2018), who explain that leadership that fosters high-quality interpersonal relationships creates a more supportive work environment and enhances work engagement.

Opportunities for Growth and Work Autonomy

Research findings indicate that opportunities to learn and grow are key factors in shaping employee engagement among Generation Z. Most participants felt more motivated when their organizations provided training, mentoring, job rotations, and clear career development paths. Organizations are viewed not only as places to work but also as spaces for continuous skill development. Conversely, monotonous work without opportunities for growth reduces motivation and commitment to the organization. These findings align with Schroth (2019), who states that Generation Z has a strong orientation toward continuous learning and competency development.

In addition to opportunities for growth, the need for autonomy also emerged consistently. Participants felt that the freedom to determine how they work, manage their time, and develop creative solutions is a form of the organization's trust in their abilities. This experience enhances a sense of responsibility and intrinsic motivation. Conversely, work systems that are overly bureaucratic and restrict creativity are perceived as hindering employee engagement.

These findings indicate that autonomy does not merely mean the freedom to work, but also provides a sense of competence and control over one's work. These research results align with Self-Determination Theory developed by Deci & Ryan (2000), which explains that the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness form the basis of intrinsic motivation. Organizations that are able to provide development opportunities while also allowing space for independent work have a greater chance of increasing employee engagement among Generation Z employees.

Table 1. Themes Emerging from the Phenomenological Analysis

Main Theme	Meaning Constructed by Participants	Sample Statement
Recognition	Feeling valued and trusted	"My ideas are really heard."

Supportive work environment	Social relationships boost morale	Colleagues help one another
Opportunities for growth	The organization becomes a place of learning	Training, mentoring, job rotations
Meaningful work	Work makes a difference	“I want my work to be meaningful.”
Appreciation	Non-material rewards boost engagement	Feedback and recognition
Leadership	Leaders as mentors	Two-way communication
Autonomy	Trust boosts motivation	Freedom to choose how to work
Mutual relationships	Engagement arises from reciprocity	The organization also cares about its employees

Source: Research data

The Concept of Employee Engagement from a Phenomenological Perspective

Phenomenological analysis shows that employee engagement among Generation Z employees is the result of a process of making sense of their lived experiences within the organization. Work engagement does not arise automatically but develops through experiences of receiving recognition, trust, opportunities for growth, and positive interpersonal relationships. These experiences shape the perception that the organization supports personal and professional growth. This finding aligns with the phenomenological perspective, which positions lived experience as the foundation for the construction of social meaning (Van Manen, 2017).

From the perspective of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), each individual interprets work experiences differently based on their personal context and background. Interview results indicate that the same experience can lead to different levels of employee engagement because it is influenced by each individual’s values, expectations, and career goals. Opportunities to participate in decision-making are interpreted as a form of trust and recognition of competence, whereas communication lacking appreciation is perceived as a lack of organizational attention. These findings support the view of Smith et al. (2022) that individuals understand reality through the process of interpreting life experiences.

This study also shows that psychological needs play a greater role than economic needs in shaping employee engagement. Although compensation is considered important, participants placed greater emphasis on recognition, learning opportunities, open communication, and a sense of belonging to the organization. These experiences convey the meaning that the organization values them as individuals. These findings expand upon Kahn (1990) concept, which explains that employee engagement is influenced by psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability.

Furthermore, employee engagement is also linked to the formation of professional identity. Participants viewed the organization as a place to learn, enhance their competencies, and build self-confidence. Opportunities to learn, receive feedback, and face challenges were perceived as a process of self-actualization. Conversely, monotonous work without opportunities for growth hinders the formation of professional identity and reduces employee engagement.

The research results also indicate that employee engagement among Generation Z is dynamic. Participants continually evaluate their relationship with the organization based on their day-to-day experiences. They demonstrate high commitment when their personal values align with the organizational culture, but they also consider other job opportunities if the organization no longer provides growth opportunities or neglects their psychological well-being. This suggests that loyalty is built on sustained positive experiences, not as an obligation.

Overall, employee engagement among Generation Z is the result of a reflective and continuously evolving interpretation of work experiences. Recognition, interpersonal relationships, leadership, opportunities for growth, and the meaningfulness of work collectively

shape how individuals view their organization. Thus, from a phenomenological perspective, employee engagement is understood as a subjective construction that continually evolves through an individual's interactions with the work environment. These findings underscore the contribution of the phenomenological approach to understanding Generation Z's work experiences, experiences that cannot be fully explained through quantitative measurements but rather through individuals' processes of making sense of their life experiences (Smith et al., 2022).

Synthesis of Findings with Previous Research

The research findings indicate that employee engagement among Generation Z employees is shaped by their subjective experiences during interactions with the organization. Employee engagement is influenced not only by organizational factors but also by how individuals perceive recognition, trust, opportunities for growth, and positive interpersonal relationships. Unlike previous quantitative studies, the phenomenological approach in this research explains the process of employee engagement formation based on lived experience, thereby providing a deeper understanding of Generation Z's work experiences.

The findings also indicate that Generation Z's loyalty is not permanent. Participants are willing to give their best as long as the organization can meet their psychological and professional needs. Conversely, when opportunities for growth diminish or the organization's values no longer align with their expectations, they begin to consider other jobs. These findings complement the research by Ozkan & Solmaz (2015), which noted that Generation Z tends to change jobs, by demonstrating that such decisions are more influenced by their evaluation of the quality of their relationship with the organization.

Furthermore, digital technology plays a crucial role in Generation Z's employee engagement. Participants view technology as a tool for communication, collaboration, learning, and recognition of performance. Organizations that effectively leverage technology are perceived as more adaptive and supportive of productivity, whereas systems that remain bureaucratic and lack digitalization are seen as hindering creativity. These findings align with the Deloitte (2024).

When examined through the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model, employee engagement increases when organizations provide job resources such as open communication, supportive leadership, learning opportunities, and recognition of employee contributions. Conversely, high job demands without organizational support reduce motivation and work engagement. These findings support the model proposed by Bakker & Demerouti (2017).

Table 2. Synthesis of Findings with Theory

Findings	Explanation	Supporting Theories
Recognition increases engagement	Employees feel safe expressing themselves	Kahn (1990)
Interpersonal relationships	Social support strengthens engagement	Social Exchange Theory
Opportunities for growth	Learning boosts motivation	Schroth (2019)
Autonomy	Freedom at work enhances intrinsic motivation	Self-Determination Theory
Supportive leadership	Leaders foster psychological safety	Breevaart et al.
Job resources	Organizational support reduces job demands	JD-R Model

Source: Research data

This study also shows that organizational culture shapes Generation Z's work experience through actual practices, not just the company's vision or slogans. Transparent communication,

openness to new ideas, consistent policies, and respect for diverse opinions enhance trust and employee engagement. Conversely, a disconnect between organizational values and practices reduces work engagement. These findings align with the views of Schein & Schein (2021).

From a practical standpoint, increasing employee engagement among Generation Z cannot be achieved through financial compensation alone. Organizations need to create a work environment that supports learning, open communication, participatory leadership, constructive feedback, and employee involvement in decision-making. This is becoming increasingly important as Generation Z will dominate the workforce in the future. These findings are supported by Gallup (2024).

Table 1. Teacher-student ratios in three provinces (Yogyakarta, Jakarta and Papua) based on the level of education in 2015

Factors	Participant Experience	Impact on Employee Engagement
Leadership	Communicative and supportive	Increases trust
Work environment	Collaborative	Increases a sense of belonging
Personal development	Training and mentoring	Increases motivation
Meaningful work	Meaningful work	Increases dedication
Autonomy	Freedom to work	Increases accountability
Recognition	Recognition and feedback	Increases commitment
Organizational culture	Inclusive and open	Strengthens engagement
Technology	Supports collaboration	Facilitates productivity

Source: Research data

Overall, this study shows that employee engagement among Generation Z is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by psychological experiences, social relationships, organizational culture, leadership, opportunities for growth, and adaptation to changes in the work environment. Compared to previous studies, this research offers a new perspective by explaining how employee engagement is shaped through the process of making sense of individual experiences. Thus, this study enriches the literature on Generation Z employee engagement while reaffirming the contribution of the phenomenological approach to understanding the dynamics of work experiences (Smith et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study shows that employee engagement among Generation Z employees is a psychosocial construct formed through individuals' subjective experiences in interacting with the organizational environment. Employee engagement is not interpreted as a form of unconditional loyalty to the organization, but rather as the result of experiences involving trust, opportunities for growth, positive interpersonal relationships, supportive leadership, an inclusive organizational culture, and work that is perceived as meaningful. These findings reveal that Generation Z builds employee engagement based on the principle of reciprocity, whereby the commitment and contributions they provide to the organization depend on the extent to which the organization is able to meet their psychological and professional needs, as well as the values they hold dear. Thus, employee engagement is understood as a dynamic process that continually evolves through individuals' interpretations of their work experiences, rather than as a static condition.

Theoretically, this study enriches the field of employee engagement research by introducing a phenomenological perspective that places employees lived experiences at the center of analysis, thereby complementing previous studies that have been dominated by quantitative approaches. Practically, the research findings imply that organizations need to develop human resource management strategies that are more oriented toward employee experiences through participatory leadership, a work culture that supports learning, open communication, recognition of individual contributions, and the provision of career

development opportunities. Future research is recommended to examine the construct of employee engagement across various organizational sectors and different generational groups, or to combine the phenomenological approach with mixed methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of employee engagement in the context of ever-evolving organizations.

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