PERSONIFIKASI: Jurnal Ilmu Psikologi
Vol. 17 No. 1, May 2026
ISSN: 2087-7447 (print) | ISSN: 2721-0626 (online)
https://journal.trunojoyo.ac.id/personifikasi

Happiness at Work: Gen Z's Experience in Finding Meaning in Their Work

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ARTICLE INFO
Article history:
Received
October 06th, 2024
Revised
April 03th, 2026
Accepted
May 24th, 2026

ABSTRACT

Indonesia is one of the countries that employs Gen Z on a large scale. It is known that the industry turnover rate in Indonesia reaches above 10% on average. Generation Z is known to be the most unhappy generation; they expressed feeling unhappy with their jobs for 22% of their time. The question in this study is to explore how Gen Z experiences in making meaning of their work. A descriptive phenomenological qualitative research design was chosen to get a picture of the experience of finding the meaning of work for Gen Z. The participants involved in this study amounted to three people, with the characteristics of participants being Gen Z and having a minimum tenure of three years. The participants consisted of two women and one man, who was 26 years old and worked as an employee. Data were collected through in-depth interviews online and face-to-face. The results of this study show that there are things that influence finding happiness at work, namely career decision making, success in adjusting, compatibility with the work done, and support from coworkers. Participants mentioned that the fit with the work they do and the support of coworkers have a big influence on their finding happiness at work. For future research, more in-depth research can be conducted on other psychological aspects in the industrial field, as well as research using quantitative methods to examine the variable of employee happiness at work in relation to several other variables, involving a larger number of subjects.

Keywords: *happiness, happiness at work, gen Z*

Journal homepage: https://journal.trunojoyo.ac.id/personifikasi
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1. INTRODUCTION

Generation Z has faced a difficult start in life; they have experienced various hardships, including financial crises, their parents losing their jobs, and divisive politics that leave them feeling powerless. These conditions have led to the emergence of realism among Generation Z in Indonesia (Hinduan et al., 2020). However, this realism often manifests itself in the form of aggressive attitudes and a weakening of their commitment to organizations (Bencsik & Machova, 2016).

The challenges faced by Generation Z make the workplace feel intimidating to them (Md Zani et al., 2022). Consequently, there is a tendency for Generation Z to change jobs frequently; on average, they intend to stay in a job for only two years (Miller, 2019). This is further supported by research by Sidorcuka and Chesnovicka (2017), who found that the majority of Generation Z employees plan to remain at their current company for 6 months to less than 3 years and are ready to leave their current employer. This is because Generation Z reports feeling unhappy in their jobs 22% of the time (Md Zani et al., 2022). This finding is further supported by the Randstad (2022), which found that 40% of Gen Z respondents would rather be unemployed than unhappy in a job they dislike. Gen Z members say they have quit jobs because they were incompatible with their personal lives. They will not accept a job if it negatively impacts their work-life balance.

They will also quit if the company does not address requests for better working conditions.

Business Digest reports that Indonesia is among the countries that employ Generation Z on a large scale. Members of Generation Z believe that working at multinational companies allows them to achieve job stability while maintaining a work-life balance (Hinduan et al., 2020). However, a Deloitte survey (2019) found that the average industry turnover rate in Indonesia is above 10%. Dwidienawati and Gandasari (2018) also found that Generation Z is willing to work harder and even agrees to relocate to another city or country to secure higher pay, job security, and better career opportunities. Employees want more meaning in their work because they have a sense of purpose in their jobs (Randstad, 2022). Charles-Leija et al. (2023) found that having a life purpose alone is not enough to keep someone in a job. They need to feel that their work contributes to their life purpose. Job meaning is not always related to the amount of income earned. Although financial incentives are a key element for workers, the study shows that financial components do not affect workplace happiness.

Workplace happiness is a continuous positive feeling experienced by an individual while in the workplace. This occurs because an individual possesses an understanding of, attention to, and influence over their environment, which ultimately enhances performance and provides personal satisfaction in work (Pryce-Jones, 2010). Workplace happiness is also defined as a broader attitudinal concept compared to individual concepts, such as commitment, engagement, or job satisfaction, in driving performance outcomes (Salas-Vallina et al., 2020). In analyzing workplace happiness, three components provide foundation for exploring the extent to which Generation Z experiences workplace happiness. These three components include antecedents, behaviors, and consequences.

One factor that can influence job satisfaction is enjoying one's work activities. This means that the more someone enjoys their work routine, the greater their job satisfaction. Additionally, supportive coworkers also provide an opportunity for someone to experience job satisfaction. Other factors that can influence happiness at work include positive relationships with others, health, compensation, the physical work environment, and achievements (Charles-Leija et al., 2023). Tjiabrata et al. (2021) found that happiness, emotional intelligence, and work life account for 75.4% of work engagement. Employees tend to perform their tasks well if they view their work as a meaningful and beneficial activity for their personal and career development. A positive attitude toward work is also linked to the meaningfulness of the work, where employees can perceive their work as a career and a job that helps them achieve their goals (Juniartika et al., 2020).

Based on the above, this study was conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of how Generation Z members perceive their work. A phenomenological study was chosen as the appropriate method to explore their experiences. It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide useful insights for Generation Z members in understanding their work.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, phenomenological approach. According to Herdiansyah (2015), phenomenology seeks to gain a deep understanding of phenomena occurring in everyday life, with an emphasis on the direct experiences of individuals or groups. This method aims to uncover the specific context and meaning of a phenomenon and to understand the beliefs underlying it.

2.1. Data Collection

Data collection for this study was conducted through in-depth interviews. The interview technique used was a semi-structured interview. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure that the discussion remained on the predetermined topics (Herdiansyah, 2015). During the interview process, recordings were made with the participants' consent. The interviews were conducted over three weeks. The interviews were conducted both online and in person.

2.2. Participants

The sampling technique used in this study was purposive sampling, in which participants were selected based on criteria aligned with the study's objectives (Herdiansyah, 2015). The

participants in this study were selected based on the following criteria:

1) Generation Z (Individuals born between 1997 and 2008)

   According to Hinduan et al. (2020) Generation Z consists of individuals born between 1997 and 2008.

2) Have a minimum of three years of work experience

   The determination of participants' work experience is based on several factors: HiBob (2024) explains that short-term work experience is defined as approximately 2 years or fewer; in the study by Fitri et al. (2023) Gen Z individuals who have worked for 1–2 years demonstrate good career adaptability. This is further supported by a statement from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicating that the average tenure for workers aged 25–34 is 2.8 years (BLS, 2024). Therefore, participants with a minimum of 3 years of work experience were selected for this study.

   The participant selection process began with the distribution of digital flyers through various WhatsApp groups. To expand the reach, the researchers also contacted potential candidates directly within their professional networks, who then recommended other individuals who met the criteria. The screening phase was then conducted through brief preliminary communication to ensure that all candidates truly met the established inclusion criteria. Following this screening, three individuals who met all requirements agreed to participate in the study. The researcher then explained the study's objectives and provided a consent form before data collection began. Details of the interviews are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Data Collection Details

Participant	Age	Length of Employee	Interview Date
1. M	26 years old	3 years 9 month	1/5/2024
2. N	26 years old	5 years	6/5/2024
3. D	26 years old	4 years 6 months	11/5/2024

The data source for this study was in-depth interviews with the participants. These interviews served as the primary data source for this study, with each session lasting between 90 and 120 minutes per participant. Before the main interview session began, the researcher engaged in rapport-building to create a comfortable atmosphere for the participants. The researcher began with an informal conversation about daily work routines and shared professional experiences. Once trust was established, the researcher reiterated the research objectives, assured data confidentiality, and requested written consent before recording began. Thus, throughout the interview process, recording was conducted with the participants' permission. The following are some examples of questions from the interview guide:

a) How do you define happiness in the workplace?
b) What factors help you—and what factors hinder you—from finding happiness in the workplace?
c) What positive outcomes do you experience when you achieve happiness in the workplace?

2.3. Data Analyst

Data analysis in this study employed descriptive phenomenological analysis. This approach focuses on the participants' shared experiences to understand the progression of data from transcripts to essential themes, ultimately arriving at the essence of all participants' experiences (La Kahija, 2017). The intuitive synthesis of all textual and structural descriptions into statements that describe the essence of the participants' experiences regarding the phenomenon as a whole (Moustakas, 1994).

In conducting a descriptive phenomenological analysis, the first step is to read the participants' written descriptions from beginning to end and code each line of the interview transcript. Second, the researcher adopts the participants' psychological attitudes. Third, the researcher breaks the data down into several analytical segments. After identifying units of meaning, the researcher describes them psychologically. The final step involves outlining the general structure of the participants' experiences. By examining this general structure, the researcher can determine

that it captures the essence of the participants' three experiences (Giorgi et al., 2017; La Kahija, 2017)

To enhance the validity and credibility of the research, the researcher conducted data validation through participant validation and inter-researcher triangulation. Participant validation was conducted by presenting participants with verbatim transcripts of their interviews after the researcher had compiled them. Participants were then asked to read and evaluate the analysis based on their interviews. Additionally, they were asked to verify whether the researcher's analysis aligned with the participants' own understanding and explanations. Meanwhile, participant reliability was achieved when there was consistency, similarity, or a common thread among the three participants (Herdiansyah, 2015). Furthermore, inter-researcher triangulation was conducted in collaboration with a second researcher during data analysis. This was done to expand knowledge and obtain reliable findings (Susanto et al., 2023; Tjiabrata et al., 2021). Data sufficiency in this study was determined using the theoretical completeness model. The researcher stopped data collection when sufficient information had been obtained regarding the depth of meaning within each thematic category (Saunders et al., 2018).

3. RESULT

There were three participants in this study. Based on a phenomenological descriptive analysis, four essential themes were identified: career decision-making, adaptability, job fit, and peer support. A summary of the findings and the distribution of participants across each theme is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Essential Themes

Essential Themes	Participants
1. Career Decision Making	M, N, D
2. Adaptability	M, N, D
3. Person-Job Fit	M, N, D
4. Coworkers Support	M, D

These four essential themes provide participants with the key to finding happiness in the workplace. The happiness participants experience at work has a significant impact on them. This happiness leads participants to be willing to work beyond regular hours and to stay with the company in the long term.

3.1 Career Decision-Making

The first finding regarding career decision-making suggests that career decisions do not stem from planning or autonomy established from the outset, but rather from a process of adapting to available opportunities.

Participant M first started her career, but she felt pessimistic and faced pressure from her parents to pursue a career in banking, which she felt did not align with her interests. However, she found happiness when she was placed in a position that aligned with her educational background. According to M, happiness means having the opportunity to keep learning and pursuing hobbies alongside a demanding professional workload.

Participant N had a similar experience; he made a career decision based on his supervisor's authority. N was entrusted by the head of the organization where he worked to be hired there. Although he was later transferred to another unit by his supervisor's authority, he has remained in that position to this day.

Meanwhile, Participant D exhibited a decision-making pattern driven by post-graduation exploration (as a recent graduate). D described the process as an effort to seize the first opportunity that came along. D described an intensive exploration phase. Initially, D planned to work for only a short time, but the satisfaction D found in the work environment led D to decide to stay on for a longer period.

All three participants experienced the dynamics of career decision-making as they began their careers. They started their careers as recent graduates and went through various stages in securing those jobs. All three participants also demonstrated great effort to secure their current positions. Although one participant initially had doubts about working at the company, they eventually became fully committed to the role after securing a position aligned with their field of interest. However, adapting to the new environment presented a fresh challenge as they settled into their roles.

3.2 Adaptability

The second theme that emerged was adaptability. All three participants viewed happiness as a result of their ability to adapt.

This adaptation included adjusting to leadership styles, transitioning from independent work to teamwork, and physically adapting to professional routines.

According to participant M, leadership figures were a major factor in the adjustment process. The transition from a male leader to a female leader with a different communication style presented a unique challenge for M. In addition to leadership style, M also finds it challenging to step out of her comfort zone when interacting with new people.

While participant N offers a different perspective on adaptation, he is accustomed to working as a solo fighter; he was transferred and had to adapt to a complex team. N acknowledged that this change in work rhythm and style was extremely draining on his social energy. Although he felt socially exhausted, N understood that this adaptation was part of a broader process of personal development. This adaptation process has helped N grow professionally.

For participant D, the challenge of adjustment was the culture shock of transitioning from the relaxed college environment to the rigid, serious world of work. D described the early days of her job as physically and mentally exhausting. At the start of her job, D found it difficult to adjust, but as time went on, she was able to get through that adjustment period.

All three participants went through different adjustment processes. While adjusting to the work environment, they faced several challenges. Two of the participants found it difficult to adjust at the beginning of their employment because they considered themselves introverts, yet their work required them to interact with new people and engage in discussions with their team. Meanwhile, another participant was surprised by how different the workplace was from college, making it quite difficult for his/her to adjust at the beginning of his/her job. However, they were able to overcome all the challenges they faced during the adjustment process. The longer they worked, the more they felt at home in their roles.

3.3 Person-Job Fit

The third theme is participants' fit with their jobs. For participants, workplace happiness grows in tandem with their understanding of their job fit, their understanding of business processes, and their ability to make a tangible contribution through innovation.

Participant M found fulfillment when she was transferred from the recruitment department to the Learning and Development department. That role made her feel comfortable and allowed him to enjoy her daily routine more.

On the other hand, participant N demonstrates a unique alignment dynamic through the integration of his background in psychology with his interests in technology and public relations. For N, the greatest sense of fulfillment comes when he is given the autonomy to be creative and develop innovations that help optimize his team's work.

Unlike M and N, who focused on job descriptions, participant D found a good fit due to her understanding of the organization's business processes. Her long tenure at a single company made her feel competent because she understood the operational intricacies in detail. D's ability to grasp the big picture of the company's operations brought her a sense of fulfillment, making her feel like an integral part of the organization.

As time went on, the three participants grew accustomed to their environment and their work. They felt comfortable with their tasks and found that the work suited them well. Although two of the participants were later rotated to different positions, they continued to perform their duties with enthusiasm. This was largely due to the support of their coworkers.

3.4 Coworkers Support

Colleagues have played a significant role for all three participants in their work. The support of their colleagues makes them happy to engage in discussions and share stories. In fact, the camaraderie the participants experience with their colleagues extends beyond the office; they also make time to go out together outside of work hours. This support from their colleagues helps lighten their workload.

For Participant M, a supportive work environment is the main reason for her happiness and gratitude . M emphasized that at her workplace, no one undermines one another, so she feel comfortable carrying out her daily tasks. Not unlike Participant M, Participant N views coworkers as discussion partners and brainstorming partners for the organization's

development. Although he acknowledges that social interactions drain his energy, the presence of the team and external support provide direction for future planning.

Meanwhile, Participant D stated that support from coworkers made her happy even when faced with various challenges at work. D even mentioned that coworkers serve as a support system that prevents her from quitting amid the unpredictable pressures of work.

These four factors are what help them find happiness in the workplace. The happiness they experience at work motivates them to voluntarily take on extra tasks outside of their regular working hours. It also enables them to remain at their jobs for a considerable length of time—more than three years.

Through a more in-depth analysis, it was found that gender differences, industry characteristics, and cultural values related to collectivism all influence how participants perceive their workplace happiness.

3.5 The Influence of Gender Differences

The research findings indicate differences in the sources of happiness between male and female participants. Female participants (M and D) tend to associate happiness with affective and relational aspects, such as a sense of comfort stemming from the absence of coworkers who undermine one another and the availability of a space to confide in. Meanwhile, male participant (N) placed greater emphasis on happiness in terms of autonomy, with opportunities to innovate and develop something useful in his workplace.

3.6 Characteristics of the Industrial Sector

The characteristics of the industrial sector in which participants work add a distinct dimension to their happiness. In the banking sector, participants attribute their happiness to the leadership style of their supervisors. This differs from participant N, who works in the service sector; with the flexibility available at his workplace, he feels happy because he can innovate various developments there. On the other hand, participant D, who works in the public transportation sector, indicated that a deep understanding of complex business processes is a unique source of happiness amidst unpredictable work pressures.

3.7 Socio-Cultural Influence

It was found that the values of Indonesian cultural collectivism influence participants' happiness. Participants view happiness not merely as a result of individual achievements, but as a product of social harmony. All three participants felt that social support from coworkers enabled them to remain in their jobs. Beyond serving as discussion partners, coworkers also function as a team in completing tasks and as friends with whom to share concerns. The culture of cooperation in completing tasks is a key element that makes the work environment enjoyable for Generation Z.

4. DISCUSSION

The initial phase the participants went through in their work was career decision-making. This is a crucial stage at the beginning of an individual's career journey. The three participants (M, N, D) stated that they secured their jobs through different means. When they were hired at their current workplaces, they consciously decided to pursue careers there and have remained in those positions to this day. This phenomenon suggests that career decision-making aligned with personal aspirations can help individuals find happiness and achieve financial stability (Setianik & Siswati, 2020). In this context, the participants' happiness at work stems from their autonomy in choosing a career that provides job satisfaction.

The adjustment process experienced by the three participants (M, N, D) revealed a rather difficult transition phase early in their careers. They encountered many obstacles during this adjustment process. However, after making a concerted effort to adapt, they found happiness. The initial obstacles they faced stemmed from a gap between their expectations and reality. As the process unfolded, the obstacles they faced gradually shifted into challenges that helped them grow; little by little, they began to feel that their work environment was enjoyable. The study by Nindyati and Ramadhani (2022) also supports this finding, suggesting that one reason Generation Z stays with their employers for a long time is due to a pleasant work environment. In the course of their work, they also experience varying dynamics of self-adjustment. These dynamics vary significantly; one participant (D) tended to focus on adjusting during the transition from academia to the professional world, while the other two participants (M, N) tended to strive to push

beyond the limits of their introverted personalities to overcome obstacles. The participants' self-adjustment is a consequence of their career decisions (Febriyanti et al., 2015). This phenomenon indicates that the success of the participants' self-adjustment efforts in the workplace constitutes a source of happiness stemming from personal triumph in overcoming existing challenges.

The fit between an individual and the demands of their job is a key factor in the happiness participants experience at work. Participant N is happy because he feels well-suited to his job, which allows him to develop his creativity. Meanwhile, participants M and D are happy because their current jobs align with their areas of interest, so they feel their work can benefit many people. Sousa and Porto (2015) demonstrated that an individual's fit with their job can influence workplace happiness. When participants feel that their work aligns with their interests and personal development, they view it not merely as a duty but also as a means to achieve life satisfaction. In addition, participants M and D also emphasized that because they feel happy at work, they are willing to go the "extra mile" and do so gladly. Similarly, participant N stated that he often comes up with innovations for his work outside of regular working hours. The happiness they feel makes them willing to invest more energy in their performance. This indicates that their work motivation is not merely extrinsic but is also driven by intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, this phenomenon reflects the presence of positive work engagement, where employees are willing to engage in their work with high energy (Bakker & Leiter, 2010). Employees who feel happy at work will be more enthusiastic about working harder and going home feeling joyful, compared to having little work left and energy remaining to do other things (Divekar & Kulkarni, 2022).

Coworkers' support made the participants' happiness feel even more complete. These findings suggest that high-quality social interactions serve as a complementary source of happiness for the participants. Participants M and D stated that they felt happy when they could share any stories with their coworkers, discuss work-related matters, and receive full support in their work. Meanwhile, participant N felt happy because he could brainstorm with his work team. The presence of coworkers serves not only as discussion partners but also as emotional supporters for the participants. Indeed, one of the key factors supporting happiness in the workplace is positive relationships with others (Wulandari & Widyastuti, 2014). In the context of the participants, healthy relationships with coworkers can fulfill relational needs within the work environment, thereby enabling them to contribute more effectively.

The differences in the sources of happiness reported by participants align with the social role theory by Eagly (1987). This theory predicts that women generally act in a more relationship-oriented manner and are less goal-oriented than men (Ridgeway, 2001). Gender-based differences tend to be more pronounced in informal social interactions. However, these differences tend to fade when performing formal roles within an organization. Nevertheless, this communal nature actually manifests in both genders, albeit in different forms. This is because, in collectivist cultures, individuals are strongly tied to their in-group identity (Uchida & Kitayama, 2009). Therefore, for participants, happiness stems not only from individual achievements but also from the acceptance of social harmony within the team. This is what strengthens their motivation in the workplace and contributes to the organization in the long term.

Participants' success in finding happiness at work motivates them to work hard to achieve their goals. Happy employees tend to perform better because happiness reduces employee turnover and, conversely, can even increase company profits (Awada & Ismail, 2019). In this study, the participants successfully found happiness in their work, as evidenced by their stable tenure. This indicates that their work environment enables participants to achieve psychological well-being, thereby preventing their intention to leave. Therefore, ensuring employee happiness is crucial to organizational success (Divekar & Kulkarni, 2022). When employees are happy with their work, they will maximize their performance and improve its quality; consequently, they will strive to remain enthusiastic, fully utilize their potential, and concentrate fully on realizing their full capabilities (Tjiabrata et al., 2021).

These findings have practical implications for human resource management in designing

retention strategies for younger employees. Companies can provide mentorship programs and grant employees autonomy in task completion to foster organizational stability grounded in the fulfillment of individual psychological well-being. However, this study is not without certain limitations. First, the limited number of participants means the study's results cannot be widely generalized. Second, data collection was conducted at a single point in time, so it cannot capture longitudinal fluctuations in happiness.

5. CONCLUSION

All three participants reported feeling happy at work. The study's findings indicate that several factors contribute to workplace happiness, including career decision-making, adaptability, job fit, and support from coworkers. This sense of workplace happiness helps prevent turnover and boosts employee loyalty.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered for companies and future research. For companies, it is hoped that they can provide support for their employees and place them in positions that align with their interests and expertise. For future researchers, they may conduct in-depth research on other psychological aspects within the industrial sector and use quantitative methods to test the relationship between employee happiness at work and other variables, involving a larger sample size.

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