

Constructing Workforce Identity: A Content Analysis of Generation Z's Discourse on TikTok and Reddit

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International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2025, 15(03), 143–157

Publication history: Received on 20 April 2025; revised on 27 May 2025; accepted on 30 May 2025

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/ijrsra.2025.15.3.1653>

Abstract

This study investigates how Generation Z perceives and experiences the contemporary labor market, focusing on their early professional identities and values as expressed in digital spaces. Using a mixed-method content analysis of 400 user-generated comments from TikTok and Reddit, the research identifies five recurring typologies that reflect this cohort's relationship with work: the Transactionalists, who treat employment as a financial exchange with minimal emotional investment; the Apathetics, who express existential fatigue and hopelessness; the Practicals, who prioritize stability and financial security; the Solitaries, who favor autonomy and remote work; and the Equalists, who advocate for equity and workplace reform. These typologies, while analytically distinct, often intersect in practice, illustrating the complexity of generational identity.

These typologies are situated within a broader cross-cultural context, aligning with global youth movements such as Tang Ping in China, Sampo in South Korea, Satori in Japan, and Taiwan's Strawberry Generation, all reflecting a shared disengagement from traditional labor ideals.

The study demonstrates the analytical potential of social media as a source of candid, real-time labor narratives, revealing Generation Z's emphasis on mental well-being, fairness, and value-driven employment. The findings suggest a cohesive generational ethos that prioritizes flexibility, dignity, and ethical alignment in professional life. This has significant implications for employers, HR professionals, and policymakers seeking to align organizational practices with the expectations of this emerging workforce. Social media thus emerges as a vital tool for decoding generational labor narratives.

Keywords: Generation Z; Workforce; Social Media Discourse; Content Analysis; Digital Labor Narratives

1 Introduction

Generation Z has emerged as a central concern in contemporary society, owing to its profound influence across various domains of modern life, from adolescent behavior to workforce integration. Members of this generation are characterized by their active resistance to traditional societal pressures and expectations, a phenomenon that has generated a series of public labels, such as "the hopeless generation" or "young people with no work ethic." This study seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of Generation Z's global professional identity and to analyze their current positioning within the workforce.

Across different countries, Generation Z is identified by culturally specific labels, for instance: "Tang Ping" in China, "Sampo" in South Korea, "Satori" in Japan, and the "Strawberry Generation" in Taiwan. While the terminology varies, the underlying conceptual foundations remain consistent. Generation Z shares a unique global culture, as they are the first generation to be raised entirely in the digital era.

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A persistent challenge for contemporary sociologists is the acquisition of real-time data reflecting the evolving attitudes and behaviors of youth. The emergence of social media platforms has drawn considerable attention to youth trends in recent years. For the first time in history, young people are using public platforms to share their daily lives and professional experiences. This study employs content analysis of user-generated content to construct an overview of the expectations and challenges facing the emerging workforce. Specifically, the platforms TikTok and Reddit, widely used by young users, serve as primary data sources. Sociological concepts are derived from both textual and audiovisual content, and a detailed analysis is conducted based on these insights. Conceptually, the study underscores the importance of context and actor positionality in understanding the discourses produced by and for Generation Z.

1.1 Generation Z . The Workforce

Generation Z actively resists conforming to societal expectations and norms that have historically shaped and regulated behavior. In response, public and institutional discourse has labeled them with increasingly critical terms such as “the hopeless generation,” “a generation without work ethic,” “a generation without the will to live,” “a generation of the depressed and anxious,” “doomers,” and even “the identity crisis generation.” This study seeks to offer a clearer understanding of Generation Z’s professional identity from a global sociological perspective and to map their current position within the workforce.

The term Generation Z is generally used to define the demographic cohort born between the late 1990s and approximately 2012. Some scholars refine this definition further, identifying Generation Z as the offspring of Generation X. Due to their distinctive attributes, which differentiate them sharply from all preceding cohorts, extensive research has been conducted to conceptualize their specific socio-cultural traits. These studies have introduced new terminologies for Generation Z, often localized to the cultural context of the country in which the research was conducted. Although these terms vary, such as “Tang Ping” in China, “Sampo” in South Korea, or “Satori” in Japan, they rest upon a shared conceptual foundation: for the first time in history, a generation exhibits a unified cultural ethos that transcends national boundaries, owing in large part to digital globalization.

1.2 China – The “Tang Ping” Phenomenon

The term Tang Ping, which translates to “lying flat,” gained prominence on Chinese social media in 2021 as a symbolic expression of passive lifestyle resistance adopted by Chinese youth. It spread rapidly online and resonated particularly with individuals born in the 1990s and 2000s, who have increasingly begun to push back against relentless social pressures. The emergence of Tang Ping reveals a widespread sense of mental fatigue and helplessness, driven by the hyper-competitive socio-economic climate. This phenomenon encapsulates the struggles of Chinese youth amid rapid societal transformation.

Viewed as an act of rebellion against the so-called “rat race,” Tang Ping involves the rejection of traditional success metrics such as high-paying careers and material accumulation. Instead, it advocates for a minimalist and low-desire lifestyle. This trend has emerged in response to broader systemic issues, including heightened competition, precarious employment prospects, and rising economic inequality. As a coping mechanism, many young people embrace the philosophy of “lying flat” as a means to reclaim agency over their lives. Despite state-level criticism and attempts to delegitimize the movement, Tang Ping has gained traction as a legitimate cultural response to the pressure cooker environment of modern Chinese society.

The movement has sparked public dialogue about the balance between work and personal well-being, challenging the dominant values of productivity, accumulation, and conformity. It critiques the unrealistic expectations placed on youth and advocates for alternative ways of living that prioritize mental health and self-determination. Rooted in both contemporary cynicism and traditional philosophies, Tang Ping echoes Taoist teachings from Laozi and Zhuangzi, which promote detachment, simplicity, and contentment (Jingyi, Z., 2022). These classical ideals provide a philosophical context for the modern Tang Ping mindset, even though its practical application has evolved in the digital age.

One study investigating moral evaluations of effort-making (EM) and Tang Ping (TP) found that EM was generally perceived positively, while TP was rated neutrally or negatively. Nevertheless, TP behaviors became more acceptable when expectations of reward were low. The study concluded that strong societal beliefs in the value of effort persist, but TP is emerging as a contextually justified response to perceived structural limitations (Zhou, 2022).

While critics may interpret Tang Ping as nihilistic, proponents frame it as a deliberate rejection of social overexertion in favor of personal peace. It combines Western skepticism with Eastern philosophical traditions, acting as a form of cultural resistance and ironic self-reflection for an overstressed youth population. Ultimately, “lying flat” exposes systemic issues in China’s labor market, many of which mirror those in Japan and South Korea, where young people

similarly experience employment challenges and social withdrawal. Dissatisfaction with the work environment and economic stagnation has led many to abandon traditional career pursuits in search of fulfillment beyond conventional employment structures.

1.3 South Korea – The “Sampo Generation” and the Expansion to “N-Po” Youth

In South Korea, the term Sampo Generation denotes a significant shift away from traditional family structures and values, reflecting broader social transformations. This generational label primarily applies to adolescents and young adults who increasingly exhibit reluctance toward courtship, marriage, and childbearing. This withdrawal is largely driven by economic pressures and shifting social expectations. The phenomenon underscores the broader impact of economic instability and evolving family dynamics on the country’s youth. In fact, Sampo, literally translating as “three give-ups” refers to giving up on relationships, marriage, and children (Aituar, 2021).

The Sampo phenomenon encapsulates the multifaceted struggles faced by contemporary South Korean youth. High living costs, overwhelming student debt, and unaffordable housing are just a few of the structural obstacles they confront. Coined in 2011 by the Kyunghyang Shinmun special reporting team, the term reflects a generational response to enduring financial hardship. Although often subject to public criticism, the life choices of Sampo youth highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of evolving family norms and social roles. Rising female workforce participation, in particular, has disrupted traditional gender roles and contributed to trends such as delayed marriage and declining birth rates.

With a falling fertility rate and growing economic dependency among young adults, the Sampo generation exemplifies South Korea’s broader demographic and economic challenges. These changes have catalyzed a reevaluation of what constitutes success and family in modern society. Economic precarity and societal pressure are leading many to reject traditional career paths and familial structures in pursuit of autonomy and psychological well-being.

The Sampo trend has since expanded into the N-po Generation, referring to individuals who have also abandoned other life goals such as career ambition, homeownership, and social status. This deepening disengagement illustrates the escalating sacrifices made by Korean youth. The global nature of this trend necessitates careful examination by scholars and policymakers alike to identify the root causes of these demographic shifts. A comprehensive understanding of the interplay between economic, social, and cultural factors is essential for devising sustainable policies that support the well-being and long-term stability of younger generations worldwide.

1.4 Japan – The “Satori Generation”

In Japan, the cohort equivalent to Generation Z is often referred to as the Satori Generation. The term first appeared in online forums around 2010 and gained widespread traction following the publication of a best-selling book by a prominent Japanese financial analyst (Harada, 2013). In 2013, the phrase Satori Sedai, meaning “enlightened generation” was nominated for the annual New Buzzword Awards, which recognizes impactful new entries into the national lexicon (U-Can, 2022).

The Satori Generation, comprising individuals born after 1990, is characterized by a marked shift toward non-materialist aspirations, deeper self-awareness, and a lifestyle oriented around sustainability. This group came of age during Japan’s post-bubble economic stagnation, a context that significantly shaped their worldviews and consumption habits. Rooted in the Buddhist concept of satori (spiritual enlightenment), the term captures their approach to life: one that emphasizes interpersonal awareness and the minimization of material desire. Members of this generation generally reject luxury goods and place greater value on personal well-being and meaningful experiences.

Their reduced material consumption is not merely a byproduct of lower income, but rather a deliberate lifestyle choice. This finding is supported by quantitative data from Japan’s Consumer Affairs Agency (2017). Similar generational trends in East Asia, including China’s Tang Ping and Korea’s Sampo Generation, suggest a regional pattern wherein youth prioritize wellness over wealth. This represents a larger generational shift toward sustainable living, pragmatic aspirations, and reduced emphasis on individualistic achievement (Kuo, 2021).

The Satori Generation is also notable for its technological fluency, leveraging social media for both information acquisition and social connection. They tend to avoid conflict, prefer harmonious interactions, and value teamwork. In romantic and professional contexts alike, they exhibit a cautious approach: many opt for part-time work or flexible career paths to achieve a more balanced and less stressful life.

Furthermore, this generation actively promotes gender equality and inclusivity, embracing diverse gender identities and advocating for shared responsibilities in both domestic and professional spheres. Financially conscious and sustainability-oriented, they prioritize value and long-term utility in consumption decisions. Their civic engagement is largely digital, with a preference for supporting social causes via online platforms rather than through direct activism. For marketers, employers, and policymakers, it is crucial to understand these nuanced values and motivations, which differ significantly from those of previous generations. By emphasizing realistic goals, community engagement, and long-term sustainability over conventional symbols of success, the Satori Generation embodies a pragmatic yet spiritually informed vision of modern life.

1.5 Taiwan – The “Strawberry Generation”

The term Strawberry Generation refers to youth perceived as fragile, easily “bruised” under pressure, and incapable of withstanding the social and professional hardships faced by previous generations. Coined in 2005 by Taiwanese writer Chin Heng-wei, the phrase reflects the belief that individuals raised in an era of prosperity and stability lack endurance and resilience. This cohort is typically characterized as highly educated but lacking in practical skills; creative but impatient; individualistic but lacking compassion; and socially connected yet superficial in relationships. Common psychosocial challenges attributed to this generation include high expectations combined with low self-esteem, reduced tolerance paired with heightened sensitivity, and diminished loyalty offset by increased mobility.

Despite widespread criticism, it is essential to engage with the Strawberry Generation in ways that acknowledge and respect their potential for innovation, creativity, and social change. Ironically, the label was reclaimed by members of the cohort during the spontaneous political mobilization of 2008, when over 400 Taiwanese students protested the Parade and Assembly Act during a visit by China’s ARATS President, Chen Yunlin. This event illustrates that, contrary to stereotypes, the so-called Strawberry Generation is fully capable of organized activism in support of significant political and social causes, even amid narratives of vulnerability and fragility.

1.6 Cross-Cultural Cohesion Among Gen Z: A Comparative Synthesis

Across East Asia, various culturally embedded terms such as Tang Ping in China, Sampo in South Korea, Satori in Japan, and Strawberry Generation in Taiwan, reflect a shared generational identity among Gen Z. Despite localized terminology and context, these cohorts reveal a collective disengagement from traditional social expectations and a pronounced preference for minimalist, mentally sustainable lifestyles.

In China, Tang Ping symbolizes the conscious rejection of the competitive economic “rat race,” favoring personal well-being and simplicity over material gain. South Korea’s Sampo Generation distances itself from conventional markers of success such as career advancement, marriage, and parenthood, largely in response to severe economic pressures and shifting societal values. In Japan, the Satori Generation embodies non-materialist aspirations and a sustainability-oriented lifestyle, shaped by the legacy of economic turmoil and an emphasis on self-awareness. Meanwhile, Taiwan’s Strawberry Generation, though often perceived as emotionally delicate, has demonstrated creativity, civic engagement, and a strong sense of social justice, as evidenced by their role in political activism.

Across these contexts, Generation Z resists outdated norms, prioritizes mental health and well-being, and leverages digital platforms for socio-political expression. Together, these variations represent a unified, though culturally diverse, generational shift toward redefining success and fulfillment in the modern world.

2 Research Objectives

This study aims to analyze the early work experiences of young people and identify emerging trends within this cohort. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: What are young people’s perceptions of today’s labor market?

3 Methodology

According to Titscher et al. (2000), content analysis represents “the longest established method of text analysis among the set of empirical methods of social investigation.” Initially, it focused on quantifying textual content through measures such as word frequency. Over time, these quantitative efforts expanded to include classification procedures aimed at measuring the frequency of categorized textual units. Babbie (2001) further defines content analysis as the study of recorded human communication, emphasizing its function as a coding operation, wherein raw data is systematically transformed into standardized formats. As noted by Ryan and Bernard (2000), coding in content analysis

involves making interpretive judgments about blocks of text, an essential step in converting qualitative data into quantifiable matrices for hypothesis testing.

The evolution of content analysis is closely linked to the emergence of mass media, with early methodologies shaped by communication models proposed by Lasswell, Shannon, and Weaver (Titscher et al., 2000). Early applications ranged from hermeneutic text interpretation to newspaper content analysis and even Freud's dream analysis (Mayring, 2000a). Berelson (1971) provided a classic definition, framing it as a technique for objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.

While classical content analysis is inherently quantitative, focused on counting category occurrences, qualitative content analysis emphasizes the attributes, processes, and embedded meanings within texts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Cassell and Symon (1994) argue that qualitative methods are particularly well-suited to exploring organizational processes and understanding individual and group experiences, especially in the context of complex social phenomena that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative techniques alone.

Mayring's approach to qualitative content analysis seeks to merge the strengths of quantitative methods with qualitative, interpretive analysis (Mayring, 2000a). His methodologically controlled framework involves developing a category system directly from the material itself, ensuring that the analysis remains theory-guided (Mayring, 2002). Titscher et al. (2000) emphasize that the core instrument of content analysis is the categorical system, which organizes the material and enables comprehensive analysis by coding each unit into predefined categories.

The integration of qualitative and quantitative content analysis is particularly relevant for examining user-generated content on social media platforms. The vast volumes of data produced on platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and blogs have spurred the advancement of sentiment analysis and opinion mining (Pang & Lee, 2008). These hybrid methods combine quantitative measures, such as sentiment classification and opinion extraction, with qualitative insights to yield richer interpretations of online discourse.

Consequently, social media analysis has emerged as a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating methods such as sentiment analysis, topic modeling, and social network analysis to investigate dynamic phenomena on digital platforms (Stieglitz et al., 2014). This methodological triangulation addresses the sampling validity challenges inherent in social media data by integrating diverse forms of information, thereby offering deeper insight into behavioral patterns and online trends (Burnap et al., 2015).

The academic literature underscores the evolving nature of content analysis, from a purely quantitative technique to a more nuanced, hybrid approach that incorporates qualitative dimensions. This evolution is especially pertinent in the analysis of dynamic and complex online environments, where both qualitative and quantitative methods are essential for extracting meaningful insights.

In this research, I employed a mixed-method strategy, combining both qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The data set includes 80 TikTok videos and user discussions from the Reddit forum r/GenZ, which has approximately 580,000 members. These platforms were selected as they represent two of the most widely used digital environments by Generation Z.

- TikTok serves as a primarily visual and fast-paced information source. Its short-form video content is particularly appealing to younger users due to its immediacy, ongoing development, and widespread adoption among youth demographics.
- Reddit is a community-driven platform where individuals discuss shared interests, exchange viewpoints, and support their claims with personal or collective insights. The selected forum provided rich textual data reflecting generational perspectives on labor market experiences.

4 Database and Data Collection

For the purposes of this study, a custom database was developed using user-generated comments from the most widely used social media platforms among young people as of May 2025. The data collection process followed a multi-step procedure:

- Initial Compilation: A preliminary database was created by aggregating user comments from selected social media platforms.

- Filtering for Demographic Relevance: The dataset was then refined by extracting comments that met criteria indicative of being authored by members of Generation Z.
- Comment Selection Protocol: A selection framework was applied to assess whether individual comments met the qualitative standards necessary for inclusion in the study.

Online user comments often contain valuable insights and subjective interpretations. However, comment quality varies significantly, and identifying high-quality contributions is a central objective of content analysis research. Comments that reflect structured reasoning or offer clear argumentative support are particularly valuable for understanding public opinion, especially when examining collective attitudes toward labor market experiences. To evaluate whether a comment was suitable for analysis, the following qualitative criteria were applied:

- Criterion 1: Does the comment merely repeat or paraphrase the original post or discourse without adding substantive content?
- 1.1. Example: “Young people say employers should be more empathetic” is a passive reiteration of a common sentiment without additional interpretation.
 - Criterion 2: Does the comment reflect the author’s personal opinion?
 - 1.2. Example: “I’m sure this makes Andrew happy” may touch on the topic of salary benefits but lacks a concrete stance.
 - Criterion 3: Does the author provide reasons or arguments to support their opinion?
 - 1.3. Example: “All this disinterest from young people in long-term careers stems from the fact that we don’t see the point. In such an unpredictable world, where effort is so poorly rewarded, I don’t even feel motivated to try.”

The core research topics investigated through these comments included: Generation Z in the labor market, Generation Z in corporate environments, First job experiences, and post-graduation employment.

Two keyword-based search queries, “Generation Z in the labor market” and “Generation Z in corporations” were used in combination with a chronological sorting technique to extract comments posted over the last four years (2021–2025). URLs and comments were manually selected, and short comments containing fewer than seven words were excluded from the final dataset.

The final dataset consisted of 300 comments extracted from 80 TikTok videos, which constituted the core of the reference corpus and 100 comments sourced from a Reddit discussion forum titled r/GenZ, a community with approximately 580,000 members.

This dual-platform approach was designed to capture both visual/performative (TikTok) and discursive/textual (Reddit) representations of young people’s perceptions regarding the contemporary labor market.

5 Typologies of Generation Z in the Workforce

The earliest members of Generation Z have only recently entered the labor market, bringing with them a distinct set of values, expectations, and experiences. Understanding these perspectives is essential for employers and researchers aiming to adapt workplace environments and policies to better meet the needs of this emerging cohort. This study employs content analysis to examine social media commentary authored by individuals from Generation Z, reflecting on their initial experiences in the workforce. Through this analysis, we aim to identify and classify the recurring themes and sentiments expressed by this generation.

The methodology involved a systematic process: first, we selected two widely used platforms among Gen Z: TikTok and Reddit. A representative sample of user comments was collected using hashtags and keywords related to first job experiences. The data were then coded and classified, focusing on recurring patterns, themes, and emotional tones.

This process led to the identification of five distinct categories that encapsulate Generation Z’s perceptions and lived experiences in the workplace. These typologies offer insight into the challenges and opportunities faced by young workers today. Each category is described in detail below, with thematic highlights and illustrative examples.

5.1 The Transactionalists

This label refers to a transactional approach to work, wherein the employment relationship is defined by clear boundaries, fair compensation, and a focus on personal well-being over traditional career ambition. Individuals in this category prioritize work-life balance and deliberately avoid allowing work to infringe on their private time. They treat employment primarily as a means to generate income and reject the notion of long-term commitment to a single

employer. The term quiet quitting, which gained traction in March 2022, aptly describes this mindset, characterized by the completion of job duties strictly within the bounds of the role description, accompanied by a heightened sense of self-worth and fairness.

5.2 The Apathetics

Members of this category often express disillusionment with both life and work. They hold a generally pessimistic view of the future and avoid long-term planning due to a collective sense of hopelessness. Sociologists across various national contexts have observed this cultural phenomenon under different labels: Tang Ping in China, Sampo Generation in South Korea, Satori Generation in Japan, and the Strawberry Generation in Taiwan. A distinguishing feature within this typology is the phenomenon known as the stench of work, a decline in physical and emotional well-being experienced upon entering the workforce. This group highlights the existential toll that modern labor conditions exact on younger workers.

5.3 The Practicals

This typology is defined by a pragmatic focus on financial independence and personal security amid an unpredictable world. These individuals seek stable jobs that offer decent wages, fair conditions, and mutual respect. They reject the narrative of perpetual professional advancement, instead favoring the construction of a solid foundation that allows for a balanced and personally fulfilling life. Stability, rather than prestige, is their key driver in career decision-making.

5.4 The Solitaries

The Solitaries thrive on independence and solitude. They value personal space and autonomy, often preferring to work from the comfort of their homes. With minimal desire for social interaction, they function best in environments devoid of workplace distractions and obligatory interactions. Remote work is strongly favored, and they enforce strict boundaries between professional and personal life. Interactions with colleagues are kept to a minimum, confined to what is necessary for job completion. A key behavioral expression in this group is bed rotting, a term describing prolonged periods of isolation and inactivity, often viewed as a form of self-care in response to the challenges of modern life. This tendency has intensified with the normalization of remote work, which increasingly blurs the line between home and workplace, sometimes leading to cycles of demotivation and social withdrawal.

5.5 The Equalists

This group is characterized by a deep commitment to creating more equitable work environments. Motivated by ethical principles and a desire to foster social justice, peace, and positive change, these individuals strive to align their personal and professional lives with their core values. They seek employers who share their ideals and are vocal advocates for transforming workplace culture. Active on digital platforms, they call for greater support, inclusive practices, and environments that prioritize employee dignity. These individuals aim to reshape labor standards and promote compassion and fairness as foundational principles in organizational life.

6 Data analysis

6.1 The Transactionalists

The term Transactionalists reflects Generation Z's transactional approach to work, wherein the employment relationship is defined by clear boundaries, equitable compensation, and a prioritization of personal well-being over traditional career ambitions. This typology captures the essence of Gen Z's evolving relationship with corporate structures, emphasizing their unique stance on work-life balance and self-worth.

Members of this category conceptualize work strictly as an exchange of services for monetary compensation. They are explicit about only performing tasks they are directly paid to do:

"I'm a Gen Z in corporate. If you are not paying me to do it, I AM. NOT. DOING. IT."

"I'm a Gen Z in corporate, of course I work to live and not live to work."

This group places a high value on personal time and mental well-being, maintaining firm boundaries between professional obligations and private life:

"I'm a Gen Z in corporate of course you can't reach me after office hours."

Corporate discourse typically equates extra effort with career progression, but this notion is firmly rejected by Transactionalists, revealing a fundamental clash between traditional organizational expectations and Gen Z's values. For them, jobs are utilitarian tools for financial survival:

“Who says we want a career? My job is a literal business transaction. I provide a service and my employer pays me for that service. To literally be able to live my life. Because life is expensive. I’m done with the whole career narrative. Why does everything have to be infinite growth? Just because the company is chasing infinite growth doesn’t mean I have to.”

They openly communicate expectations and limitations, expressing a refusal to exceed job responsibilities without appropriate compensation:

“I’m not gonna be an overachiever if I’m not getting overly paid!”
“I am a Gen Z in corporate don’t ask me to do anything outside my job description.”

They also avoid engaging in social or professional obligations beyond contractual hours:

“I’m Gen Z in corporate and I kindly decline any dinners/events with coworkers after hours. I’m not getting paid to be your friend on a weekday BYEEEE”

Loyalty to a single employer is rare. Members of this typology are willing to leave their jobs if their expectations are unmet or if better opportunities arise:

“I’m a Gen Z and I will quit my job WITHOUT notice if the vibes ain’t right and the pay too low. byeeee.”

For them, job satisfaction is grounded in fair compensation rather than professional recognition or career milestones. Their self-worth is not tied to productivity or external validation but is rooted in personal fulfillment:

“I am a Gen Z in corporate you should be grateful I even show up to work.”

The quiet quitting phenomenon, which went viral on LinkedIn in March 2022, exemplifies this ethos. It refers to employees fulfilling only their core job duties, without engaging in additional tasks unless appropriately compensated. This mindset reflects Generation Z’s strong sense of justice and self-respect. For many employers, the perceived lack of discretionary effort represents a novel challenge, particularly as older employees begin to adopt similar behaviors inspired by Gen Z values.

From the Gen Z perspective, the sole purpose of employment is income, used to fund personal interests and pleasures. Long-term career trajectories are rejected as unrewarding and incompatible with modern labor realities. Current salary levels are viewed as insufficient to justify emotional investment or a sense of responsibility toward the employer. Their relationship to work is fundamentally transactional.

In light of the mass layoffs observed across major international corporations in recent years, many Gen Z employees have become disillusioned with corporate loyalty narratives. The perception of being easily replaceable has fueled a growing skepticism toward the long-term value of corporate careers. As a result, many within this category hold a deeply critical view of corporate culture and reject the ideal of lifelong career commitment.

6.2 The Apathetics

The Apathetics represent a typology of young individuals who express profound disappointment with both life and work. Their narratives reveal a sense of futility regarding effort and reward, rooted in early negative experiences in the labor market. This group frequently articulates emotional fatigue and existential despair:

“My biggest achievement in life is that I managed to stay out of a mental health hospital.”
“I realize I can’t skip my office like I skipped my classes. It’s depressing.”
“I wasn’t born to work.”
“I would rather kill myself than work till I’m dead.”
“We have no desire to live. How do you expect us to work?”

Their outlook on the future is predominantly pessimistic. Many believe that long-term planning is futile in the face of economic precarity and societal instability:

“We have NOTHING to look forward to. We work ALL THE TIME and cannot save. We cannot take time off to heal. We cannot afford anything. It’s awful.”

“There is no reward for hard work and the youngest gens see that. No pensions, no good salaries, barely any benefits/perks.”

“Gen Z grew up at the intersection of multiple economic crises and wars, and world-wide free info on social media. Our reaction was inevitable.”

“Bold of you to assume the retirement system will not break before our generation becomes old.”

A central sentiment expressed by this group is hopelessness

“I would rather kill myself than work till I’m dead.”

“I don’t like the expectation that our whole lives should revolve around work. I also don’t like that most people don’t have an opportunity to pursue their passions, whether it’s in their work or as a hobby. The whole system seems more ineffective than it has to be.”

This typology is marked by a widespread rejection of competitiveness. Across national contexts, the phenomenon has been identified under various cultural terms: Tang Ping in China (a resistance to participation in hyper-competitive labor markets), Sampo Generation in South Korea (a rejection of marriage, children, and career advancement), Satori Generation in Japan (marked by non-materialist detachment), and Strawberry Generation in Taiwan (perceived as fragile and unsuited for competitive environments).

A distinct symptom of this typology is the so-called “stench of work”, a term that gained traction in 2024. It refers to the physical and emotional deterioration young people report after entering the workforce. Chinese members of Generation Z have documented these effects extensively on social media:

“Once I started work, I got fat, but when I’m eating at home and sleeping, I actually lose weight.”

“Anyone who goes to work loses the light in their eyes.”

“Once I started work, I gained 24 kg.”

“You become happier when you don’t go to work.”

“Leaving your job is the best health supplement for young people.”

This decline in well-being is attributed to insufficient salaries, poor work-life balance, and toxic work environments. These conditions collectively intensify feelings of dissatisfaction and exhaustion among young professionals, underscoring the need for structural labor reforms and policies that promote mental health and sustainable working conditions.

An emerging social phenomenon in China, known as “full-time children”, further exemplifies this retreat from conventional employment. In this arrangement, adult children are effectively employed by their parents to perform domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, and organizing leisure activities. Popular hashtags such as #FullTimeDaughter and #FullTimeSon became widely used on Chinese social media in 2022.

Motivations for this lifestyle vary: some young people choose it due to high youth unemployment; others seek relief from stressful work environments, and some reject modern expectations altogether:

“The reason why I am at home is that I can’t bear the pressure of going to school or work.”

“I don’t necessarily need a higher paid job or a better life.”

Despite its voluntary appearance, this lifestyle often arises from structural constraints. According to China’s National Bureau of Statistics, the urban youth unemployment rate reached a record high of 21.3% in June 2023, meaning one in five individuals aged 16 to 24 was unemployed.

Even those with jobs face financial hardships, as earnings are consumed by rent and basic necessities. Co-residing with parents offers economic relief and emotional support:

“I like cooking. I cook for my family from Monday to Friday. My parents give me money and don’t interfere with my life. I’m happy!”

This emerging “profession” reflects young people’s adaptation to unstable economic conditions and shifting family dynamics. It highlights broader societal transformations in the meaning of labor, autonomy, and well-being amid increasingly volatile job markets.

6.3 The Practicals

The Practicals represent a category of Generation Z characterized by a pragmatic approach to career-building and a strong desire for financial independence. In an unpredictable world marked by recurring crises and instability, members of this group prioritize security, stability, and peace of mind. Their goal is not professional ascension at all costs but the establishment of a solid foundation that enables a fulfilling and balanced life:

“I think some people are OK with just being chill and getting paid. Especially after years of financial insecurity and stressful events, knowing you will have what you need and be stable is enough for a lot of people.”

The Practicals value workplaces that offer decent pay, fair conditions, and respectful treatment. For them, emotional safety and collegial respect are as important as salary:

“Seriously tho..... like I finally found a job where I like my coworkers, am treated with respect, and get to decorate my office??? I love it.”

“I feel duped. College made me fear working full-time and losing my free time, but irl working a full-time job is awesome? I have my own space, get paid, and when I go home, I'm not racked with crippling anxiety about my grades???”

They strive to balance professional obligations with personal well-being, favoring employers that offer stability and tangible benefits:

“I was so anti working for like a big corporation but now I do and the benefits are insane and I get random free stuff ALL the time. My job offered to get me scuba certified for free.”

“I'm fine with working a 9-5 until working a 9-5 isn't enough for me to survive.”

“Whoever decided that office jobs were miserable was lying. I have my own office, coffee, and a spreadsheet open on the screen all day...”

Efficiency and time management are valued attributes. Many view office work as more manageable than academic pressure or gig-based employment:

“Can't tell you how much time I spend staring at my email. Office work DOES NOT take that long to do.”

“Gen Z here! Work is NOT that bad. Colleagues in my generation are sometimes not even making it through training because they come into it with a bad mindset.”

This group consciously rejects the pressure of endless professional advancement. Instead of climbing the corporate ladder for its own sake, they prefer to create a sustainable, predictable lifestyle. Their aspirations are grounded in comfort, self-sufficiency, and peace of mind:

“I just want more money less responsibilities.”

“My boss recently told me I'm the most likely choice for next manager in the office and in my head I was like ‘is this a threat?’”

For the Practicals, work is not an identity, but a functional tool to support a safe and satisfying daily life. Stability, not ambition, is the ultimate career goal. They prioritize roles that guarantee continuity and low stress, and they value jobs that help them live comfortably, without placing their emotional and mental health at risk.

6.4 The Solitaries

Thriving in solitude and independence, The Solitaries represent a segment of Generation Z that finds strength, comfort, and fulfillment in being alone. They deeply value their personal space and autonomy, often preferring to work independently from the comfort of their homes. Members of this category engage with their tasks efficiently, minimizing social interaction and focusing with clarity and self-direction. Their ideal work environment is one free of distractions and social obligations, an atmosphere in which solitude and productivity coexist.

This category embodies a solitary and self-sufficient approach to work, emphasizing remote labor, clearly defined interpersonal boundaries, and a preference for minimal social engagement:

"I LOVE MY SOLITUDE."

"Working from home? This is legit my dream life."

"Gen Z usually working from home."

"I'm a Gen Z in corporate, of course I'm taking my meetings in bed. Laptop vertical."

The Solitaires enforce strict separation between work and personal life, often rejecting team-building or casual workplace interactions:

"I had an interview yesterday and the interviewer said they were very collaborative and do lunches as a team. I was like absolutely NOT for me."

"My coworkers are going bowling after work today and asked me if I want to go, I said no like I see y'all 40 hours a week?? That's enough."

"I am Gen Z in corporate. Do not ask me if I want to eat lunch together, we already work together that should be enough."

"At my new job, all my coworkers are mid 30s and love taking lunch together, but my lunch is my me time away from them."

Their communication style is typically brief, written, and task-oriented. Many avoid video calls or webcam use and selectively disclose personal information to colleagues:

"I'm a Gen Z in corporate if I feel like that meeting could've been an email, I will NOT be present at the next one."

"I am a gen z in corporate there is no way i am turning that camera on on teams even if the ceo requests me to himself."

A distinct behavioral expression among The Solitaires is bed rotting, a socio-cultural phenomenon in which individuals avoid social commitments and spend prolonged periods in bed, often alone, disengaged, and in a state of psychological retreat. While sometimes misunderstood as laziness or indulgence, bed rotting is framed by many Gen Z individuals as a necessary act of self-care in response to overwhelming modern pressures:

"It's not bed rotting. It's resting, self-care."

"I am not rotting. I am recovering."

"If I'm not at work, I'm in my bed."

"We are just tired! And we're broke. So, you do the math."

This practice has been exacerbated by the widespread normalization of remote work. Many report working from bed, merging their personal and professional environments into one space, which often leads to a vicious cycle of inertia and demotivation:

"I work from home. I'm in bed all day every day."

"I've been bed rotting since I was 15. I'm 20 with no motivation or anything going for me, and at this point, I don't want to do anything."

"As someone with depression who bed rots, it's no trend, it's literally the fact that we don't have motivation to get up and do stuff, we're not lazy, we just don't feel a need to get up."

Far from being a temporary social fad, bed rotting reflects a mental health crisis, one aggravated by economic instability, social alienation, and the pressure to perform. The experience is not simply physical withdrawal but a manifestation of deeper emotional and psychological distress:

"Bed rotting is not a trend... I literally struggle to GET UP OUT OF BED due to copious amounts of anxiety and depression. This is not a trend..."

"As someone who has been bed-rotting for over two years now, it's not a trend I would do anything to get out of this cycle. It is disgusting that people call this a trend."

"Stop letting non-Gen Zers write about Gen Z."

This rejection of traditional workplace culture and mental health stigma is central to the Solitaries' worldview. Their experiences call for a reevaluation of labor norms, institutional practices, and corporate expectations. For many, solitude is not isolation, it is resistance. And for some, bed rotting is not rest, it is survival.

6.5 The Equalists

The Equalists represent a cohort of young individuals committed to reshaping the workplace into a more just and compassionate environment. Their deep dedication to social justice, peace, and positive change is central to their generational identity. Guided by the principle of aligning personal and professional life with ethical values, these individuals make conscious choices that reflect their commitment to the common good.

This group acts as a movement of value-driven young professionals seeking to reform existing workplace norms. They recognize that change can only happen when boundaries are set, even if those boundaries are misinterpreted by older generations as laziness:

“We are the future of the workforce. And the only way change is gonna happen is to set those ad boundaries we get called lazy for. Companies have shown us that we are easily replaceable. So do not let that job stress you out.”

Their commitment is evident in both their actions and their public discourse. They view digital platforms as tools for advocacy, transparency, and resistance to exploitation:

“Gen Z are not lazy. We are smart. Let’s get lazy out of our heads. We are smart. And that’s the reason why we get so much backlash. Hey, we have social media at the palm of our fingertips. So I can see online when someone just got laid off in a very despicable way from a company. I can see online when someone is not being paid right. And still companies expect us to trust them.”

The Equalists actively seek to work with organizations that align with their ethical beliefs. They are motivated not only by personal well-being but by the broader social impact of their efforts. Their approach challenges the traditional capitalist view of the workplace, emphasizing human dignity, collective welfare, and the moral responsibility of employers.

“People are starting to realize their worth.”

This category consistently advocates for improved labor practices, employee well-being, and a more inclusive workplace culture. They speak out against toxic organizational norms and call for structural changes to support retention and satisfaction:

“I think employers should be concerned about retention and creating a place people want to work vs judging people for leaving jobs.”

Collective action and community are central to their worldview. Their motivation lies in creating tangible, positive outcomes for the larger society:

“Let’s be real, Gen Z is single-handedly fixing the corporate world.”

They also understand the importance of setting healthy boundaries between professional responsibilities and personal life. Self-advocacy and respect for mental health are foundational values:

“Gen Zers do a better job setting boundaries.”

As visionaries, they inspire others to pursue a better future by refusing to normalize exploitative work conditions. Their criticism of managerial practices is both empathetic and direct, advocating for reforms that serve the workforce as a whole:

“Advice to bosses: run better workplaces!”

In sum, the Equalists reflect a conscious shift in how younger generations relate to power, labor, and community. Through transparency, advocacy, and digital solidarity, they are driving an ethical reconfiguration of the modern workplace.

7 Conclusion

Building on the central research question, this study concludes that young people hold strong and nuanced views regarding the contemporary labor market. Through a mixed-method content analysis of their early employment experiences, Generation Z was grouped into five distinct typologies. The Transactionalists approach employment as a straightforward exchange, prioritizing personal well-being and work-life balance over career ambition. The Apathetics express disillusionment with both life and work, avoiding long-term planning due to a collective sense of disappointment in professional opportunities. The Practicals focus on financial independence and security, rejecting the pursuit of endless career growth in favor of stability and personal fulfillment. The Solitaries thrive in independence and solitude, favoring remote work and minimal social interaction. The Equalists are engaged in reshaping workplace culture through the promotion of social justice, dignity, and positive systemic change.

Generation Z has been labeled differently across cultures: Tang Ping in China, Sampo in South Korea, Satori in Japan, and Strawberry Generation in Taiwan, reflecting localized cultural nuances. Despite these varying labels, all refer to the same globally interconnected generation. As the first cohort raised entirely in the digital age, Generation Z exhibits a global identity shaped by continuous exposure to diverse cultural perspectives via online platforms. This shared access to information fosters a sense of collective consciousness and a common generational experience.

Although categorized into five typologies, the findings underscore that these categories are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they intersect and overlap, reflecting the multifaceted nature of individual experience. A single member of Generation Z may exhibit characteristics from multiple typologies, emphasizing the complexity and heterogeneity of this demographic group. Furthermore, the analysis did not uncover any data contradicting the qualities identified across the categories, suggesting a notable consensus among Generation Z individuals regarding their values and workplace expectations.

This generational coherence is vividly expressed on social media, where young workers openly share and validate one another's experiences. The categories identified in this study should therefore be viewed as complementary frameworks that together provide a comprehensive lens through which to understand Generation Z's labor market behavior. Recognizing the nuance and intersectionality among these categories is essential for a thorough and accurate interpretation of this cohort's workforce identity.

Social media emerges as a valuable tool for HR professionals seeking to understand employee sentiment in real time. Young people are highly active online and willing to share their views on work and life, making these platforms a rich source of emergent insights. This research demonstrates the effectiveness of social media-based content analysis in uncovering labor market trends and employee expectations.

As Generation Z becomes the dominant force in the labor market, shifts in workplace expectations are inevitable. Employers will need to adapt to new demands for flexibility, transparency, and empathy. This generation is expected to transform the workforce by championing values such as work-life balance, mental and emotional well-being, social justice, and corporate responsibility. These trends point to future changes in organizational culture, HR practices, and workplace relationships. Generation Z's prioritization of ethical alignment, well-being, and inclusive workplace cultures signals a new era of labor characterized by both individual authenticity and collective reform.

Limitations of the Study

Given the nature of this topic, there is a limited body of existing scientific literature available. Previous research has primarily focused on how society and employers perceive the emerging generation of workers. In contrast, this study centered on understanding how young people themselves perceive their own early experiences in the workforce.

To capture an unfiltered view of reality, a deliberately raw data collection method was employed, extracting user-generated comments from online platforms. Social media spaces, where young people feel most free to express themselves, provided authentic insights into their lived experiences. These platforms serve as open forums where young individuals communicate candidly and without the constraints often found in formal research settings. As such, this study aimed to document how Generation Z identifies and interprets their role within professional contexts.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that this approach may lead to the study being initially interpreted as skewed or negatively toned. While the data presented offer valuable qualitative insights, they represent only a snapshot of a broader and evolving generational narrative.

Further research is needed to explore a more diverse and representative sample of young people, particularly those poised to enter the labor market in the coming years. Longitudinal studies will be essential for assessing the evolving professional trajectories of Generation Z, especially as individuals born after 2002 begin to enter the workforce. Such research would enhance the understanding of how values, expectations, and behaviors may shift over time within this dynamic generational cohort.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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