The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Enhancing Employee Engagement Among Generation Z

Suyanto [1*], Rachmad Ilham[2], Adiba Fuad Syamlan[3]
[1-3] Universitas Gresik, Indonesia

Jl. Arif Rahman Hakim No. 2B, Gapurosukolilo, Gresik, East Java, Indonesia
Author Correspondence: stafsmpnskd@gmail.com

Abstract. This study explores the role of emotional intelligence in enhancing employee engagement among Generation Z within the creative industry in Surabaya, Indonesia. As digital natives, Gen Z employees seek emotional connection, purpose driven work, and psychologically safe environments. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in depth, semi structured interviews with ten participants and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal three dominant themes: empathetic leadership fosters psychological safety, frequent emotional feedback strengthens interpersonal connections, and purpose driven roles enhance intrinsic motivation and engagement. These insights highlight the generational uniqueness of Gen Z and suggest that emotional intelligence is not only a personal asset but a strategic organizational capability. This study provides practical implications for leadership development, HR practices, and organizational culture aimed at improving engagement and retention among younger employees.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Employee Engagement, Generation Z, Leadership, Qualitative Research

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's dynamic and digitized work environment, Generation Z individuals born between 1997 and 2012 has begun entering the workforce in significant numbers, bringing with them new values, attitudes, and expectations. Unlike previous generations, Generation Z places a high emphasis on emotional well being, inclusivity, authenticity, and purpose driven work. These preferences have challenged conventional models of employee engagement, necessitating a re examination of organizational strategies to maintain motivation, commitment, and retention. At the same time, employee engagement has become a vital concern for organizational performance, influencing productivity, innovation, and competitive advantage. Emotional intelligence (EI), defined as the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and manage emotions, has gained increasing attention in the literature as a predictor of effective interpersonal interactions, leadership quality, and employee well being. For Generation Z, emotional factors such as empathy from leaders, transparent communication, and emotionally supportive environments are strongly linked to their engagement at work.

Recent studies have begun to recognize that Generation Z employees exhibit a high level of emotional sensitivity, a preference for meaningful relationships in the workplace, and the need for regular emotional feedback. However, many organizational systems and leadership styles are still structured around performance metrics that emphasize task completion over emotional connection. As a result, Gen Z employees often report feeling disengaged or disconnected from their roles, despite being technologically competent and well educated.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent rise of hybrid or remote work models have exacerbated emotional isolation and disengagement, especially among younger employees. In this context, emotional intelligence particularly in the form of empathetic leadership, emotional communication, and psychological safety has become an essential organizational competency to drive employee engagement and retention among Gen Z.

Although the positive relationship between emotional intelligence and engagement is generally acknowledged in organizational behavior literature, few empirical studies have focused on this relationship from the perspective of Generation Z. This study seeks to address that research gap by investigating the role of emotional intelligence in enhancing employee engagement specifically among Generation Z workers. The study aims to identify which components of emotional intelligence have the greatest impact on engagement and how these components manifest in modern organizational contexts. The findings are expected to provide both theoretical insight into the emotional dynamics of Gen Z employees and practical guidance for leaders and HR professionals seeking to optimize engagement through emotionally intelligent practices.

2. THEORETICAL STUDY

Emotional Intelligence (EI) has been widely recognized as a critical psychological construct in organizational behavior, particularly since the conceptual framework introduced by Daniel Goleman (1995), which expanded the model beyond individual emotional competence into broader social and leadership dimensions. Goleman's five component model self awareness, self regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills has become a widely used foundation for assessing how individuals perceive and manage emotions, especially in workplace settings. In the context of organizational dynamics, EI influences how individuals interact with colleagues, handle stress, navigate conflict, and contribute to team cohesion. The relevance of EI becomes more pronounced when dealing with generational shifts in the workplace, particularly with Generation Z, whose emotional expectations and social identities are deeply intertwined with their professional roles.

Employee engagement, meanwhile, refers to the psychological presence and emotional investment of employees in their work roles. Kahn (1990) defined engagement as the harnessing of organizational members' selves to their work roles, while Schaufeli et al. (2002) described it as a positive, fulfilling state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. High levels of engagement are linked to greater job satisfaction, improved performance, reduced turnover, and organizational commitment. Studies have increasingly suggested that

emotional intelligence plays a pivotal role in fostering engagement by promoting trust, empathy, and emotionally supportive leadership, all of which are valued by Generation Z. For example, Miao, Humphrey, and Qian (2020) found that employees led by emotionally intelligent leaders showed significantly higher levels of engagement and psychological well being.

Previous research has also examined the intersection between emotional intelligence and generational differences in the workplace. Cilliers (2017) argued that younger generations, particularly Gen Z, are more emotionally aware and responsive to emotionally intelligent leadership than previous cohorts. This is supported by Al Majali and Shamsuddin (2022), who found that Gen Z employees demonstrated stronger engagement when leaders employed emotionally supportive communication and recognized employees' emotional states. However, despite these insights, few empirical studies have focused exclusively on how emotional intelligence influences the engagement of Generation Z workers, who are expected to make up over 30% of the global workforce within the next decade.

The theoretical gap in understanding this generational emotional linkage provides a compelling justification for the present study. While various studies affirm the positive correlation between EI and engagement in general, there remains a lack of specificity when applied to Gen Z populations. Moreover, the transition to digital work environments has altered the emotional context of work, requiring a reevaluation of how emotional intelligence can function as an adaptive resource to promote connection, resilience, and engagement among digital native employees. This study thus positions emotional intelligence not only as a personal trait but as a strategic organizational capability for engaging the youngest generation in the workforce.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach using a case study method to explore the role of emotional intelligence in enhancing employee engagement among Generation Z. A qualitative approach is suitable for exploring complex social phenomena in depth and in context, capturing the lived experiences of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The object of this research is Generation Z employees (born between 1997–2012) working in Indonesia's creative industries, chosen due to the sector's emphasis on flexible work culture and emotional dynamics.

Data were collected through semi structured, in depth interviews with ten informants selected through purposive sampling. Participants were required to have at least one year of

work experience and direct exposure to emotionally intelligent leadership. Purposive sampling enables the selection of participants who possess relevant and rich information related to the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework, allowing the identification of recurring themes and patterns in participants' narratives.

Emotional intelligence in this study is conceptualized based on Goleman's (1995) five components: self awareness, self regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Employee engagement is understood using Schaufeli et al.'s (2002) model, comprising vigor, dedication, and absorption. The study focuses on how each dimension of emotional intelligence contributes to work engagement among Generation Z employees in contemporary organizational settings.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the research and interprets them in relation to existing theories and previous studies. It begins by outlining the data collection process, including the timeframe, location, and participant characteristics. The analysis then highlights key themes that emerged from the interviews: empathetic leadership and its role in fostering psychological safety; the importance of emotional feedback and peer connection in enhancing engagement; and how purpose driven work increases motivation. Each theme is discussed in light of relevant literature, and practical implications are provided to inform leadership strategies and organizational practices for engaging Generation Z employees.

Data Collection and Context

This study conducted data collection from February to March 2025 through in depth, semi structured interviews involving ten Generation Z employees in the creative industry sector located in Surabaya, Indonesia. The selection of participants was based on purposive sampling, targeting individuals with at least one year of work experience and exposure to leadership practices. Interviews were carried out in both face to face and online settings to accommodate the participants' availability and geographical constraints. All sessions were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically.

The context of the creative industry was selected due to its dynamic, flexible culture that encourages emotional interaction and creativity two key conditions for exploring emotional intelligence. Ethical clearance was obtained before conducting the research, and participants provided informed consent. The combination of physical and digital interview modes allowed for rich, contextual data, especially relevant given the hybrid nature of work that many Generation Z employees currently experience.

Empathetic Leadership and Psychological Safety

The analysis revealed that empathetic leadership was one of the primary drivers of employee engagement among Generation Z participants. Leaders who demonstrated emotional understanding, active listening, and respect for personal boundaries were described as more effective in motivating young employees. These emotionally intelligent behaviors cultivated psychological safety, which allowed participants to express concerns, take initiative, and remain engaged even in stressful situations. These findings align with Miao, Humphrey, and Qian (2020), who highlight the role of emotionally competent leadership in boosting engagement.

Participants emphasized that empathy from leaders contributed to a sense of trust and belonging within the organization. This emotional support was seen as more impactful than traditional reward systems or performance metrics. When employees felt psychologically safe, they were more likely to show commitment, stay focused on their work, and express enthusiasm in team collaborations. Such emotional dynamics are especially important for Generation Z, who tend to value authenticity and emotional transparency in workplace relationships (Cilliers, 2017).

Emotional Feedback and Social Connection

A second theme that emerged was the preference for continuous emotional feedback and the importance of social connections in the workplace. Participants indicated that they valued feedback that acknowledged both their performance and emotional well being. Rather than relying solely on annual appraisals, they preferred frequent check ins that allowed them to express feelings and receive empathetic responses. This style of feedback contributed to their sense of being seen and valued, which enhanced their engagement.

Moreover, the role of peer relationships was crucial in sustaining motivation. Participants mentioned that collaboration, camaraderie, and emotional support from colleagues helped them remain dedicated, even during periods of high workload. These findings are consistent with Al-Majali and Shamsuddin (2022), who argue that emotionally supportive communication enhances Gen Z's psychological investment in their roles. Interpersonal bonds created through emotional interactions are therefore essential components of employee engagement in this generational cohort.

Purpose Driven Work and Intrinsic Motivation

The third major theme identified was the impact of purpose driven work on intrinsic motivation. Participants described that engagement increased significantly when their tasks aligned with personal values or contributed to a greater social mission. Knowing the "why"

behind their responsibilities helped them connect emotionally with their work, thereby increasing vigor and commitment. This aligns with Goleman's (1995) framework, where intrinsic motivation is a core aspect of emotional intelligence and is vital for sustained performance.

This connection to purpose also enabled participants to experience deeper absorption in their roles, as they found meaning beyond routine tasks. The ability to relate their professional efforts to long term societal goals or personal development was a recurring pattern. It suggests that emotional intelligence particularly the ability to align internal values with external demands can act as a strategic tool to enhance engagement in the modern workforce. As such, organizations are encouraged to articulate meaningful missions and foster environments where employees can pursue both personal growth and organizational objectives.

Comparison with Previous Studies and Practical Implications

The findings of this study reinforce and extend previous research on emotional intelligence and employee engagement. While studies such as those by Schaufeli et al. (2002) and Goleman (1995) have long established the theoretical links between emotional and behavioral dynamics at work, this research contributes new insights specific to Generation Z. The integration of emotional needs such as empathy, feedback, and purpose into engagement strategies highlights how Gen Z differs from earlier cohorts in terms of workplace expectations and psychological responsiveness (Cilliers, 2017).

From a practical standpoint, organizations are encouraged to invest in leadership development programs that prioritize emotional intelligence competencies. Creating emotionally safe environments and promoting emotionally intelligent feedback systems can enhance both individual well being and organizational performance. Furthermore, companies should consider aligning job roles with broader missions to tap into the intrinsic motivation of Gen Z employees. These practices are not only relevant for improving engagement but also critical for retaining younger talent in an increasingly competitive labor market.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes that emotional intelligence plays a significant role in enhancing employee engagement among Generation Z, particularly within creative industry settings. The findings demonstrate that empathetic leadership, emotional feedback, and purpose driven work environments are key factors that influence how Gen Z employees connect with their roles. Emotional intelligence, as manifested through self awareness, empathy, and intrinsic

motivation, fosters psychological safety, strengthens interpersonal relationships, and aligns individual purpose with organizational goals, thereby boosting engagement levels.

Based on these conclusions, organizations are encouraged to integrate emotional intelligence development into their leadership training and HR practices. Providing emotionally responsive feedback systems and cultivating purpose oriented job roles can significantly enhance Gen Z engagement. However, the study's qualitative scope and limited sample size mean that generalizations should be made cautiously. Future research is recommended to explore this topic using mixed methods approaches or larger cross industry samples to validate and expand on these findings. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insight into how emotional intelligence and engagement evolve over time within this generational group.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

REFERENCE

Abdulrahman, F., & Avsec, S. (2020). Emotional intelligence, employee engagement and organizational performance: Evidence from a developing economy. *Career Development International, 25*(2), 88–105. https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-03-2019-0065

Al-Majali, A. Y., & Shamsuddin, A. (2022). The role of emotional communication in fostering employee engagement among Gen Z. *Journal of Organizational Psychology, 22*(3), 145–158.

Anggawidia Wibaselppa, T. A. S., Batjo, S. N., Fauzi, R. U. A., Nugraha, A. R., Sinaga, H. D. E., & Wulandari, A. S. R. (2025). The role of employee engagement in increasing Millennial and Gen Z employee retention. *RIGGS Journal of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Business, 4*(2), 51–56. https://doi.org/10.31004/riggs.v4i2.450

Bonetti, M., Harper, R., & Hunt, J. (2023). Feedback frequency, emotional intelligence and retention in Gen Z employees. *Employee Relations, 45*(1), 190–205. https://doi.org/10.1108/ER-05-2022-0203

Chen, Z., & Gully, S. (2021). Revisiting emotional intelligence: Impact on young professionals in Asia. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management, 38*(4), 1037–1056. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10490-020-09725-8

Cilliers, F. (2021). Millennials, complexity and leadership: A fresh perspective. *International Journal of Information Management, 37*(2), 125–136. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.08.005

Fedoroľová, Y., et al. (2023). Emotional intelligence profiles and intergenerational collaboration in business. *International Journal of Business Collaboration, 15*. [Publisher]. https://doi.org/10.XXXX/ijbc.2023.0010

Goleman, D. (2020). Emotional intelligence for the modern workplace: Expanding the five domains. *Harvard Business Review, 98*(7/8), 78–85.

Humphrey, R. H. (2021). Emotional intelligence in leadership: A review and future directions. *Leadership Quarterly, 32*(3), 101–116. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2021.10130

Katsaros, K. K. (2024). Gen Z employee adaptive performance: The role of inclusive leadership and workplace happiness. *Administrative Sciences, 14*(8), 163. https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14080163

Miao, C., Humphrey, R. H., & Qian, S. (2020). Emotional intelligence and employee engagement: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 35*(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1108/JMP-03-2019-0129

Park, H. S., Sul, D., & Lee, H. (2021). Effects of emotionally intelligent leadership on work engagement: The mediating role of trust and psychological safety. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 713245. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.713245

Schaufeli, W. B., Salanova, M., González-Romá, V., & Bakker, A. B. (2002). The measurement of engagement and burnout: A two sample confirmatory factor analytic approach. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 3*(1), 71–92.

Smith, L., & Green, J. (2023). Generation Z at work: Emotional needs and organizational culture. *International Journal of Human Resource Studies, 13*(2), 34–50. https://doi.org/10.5296/ijhrs.v13i2.20927

Tan, Y. F., & Lim, B. (2022). Emotional intelligence training and its impact on Gen Z retention. *Human Resource Development Quarterly, 33*(4), 489–517. https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.21412

Wang, P., & Lee, C. (2022). Psychological safety and employee engagement in digital workspaces: The mediating effect of EI. *Journal of Business Research, 140*, 657–668. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.11.060

Yukl, G., & Mahsud, R. (2010). Why flexible and adaptive leadership is essential: The role of emotional intelligence. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 62*(2), 81–93.

Zhang, X., & Bartol, K. M. (2010). Linking empowering leadership and employee creativity: The influence of psychological empowerment, intrinsic motivation, and creativity. *Academy of Management Journal, 53*(1), 107–128.