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WORK ENVIRONMENT AND AUTONOMOUS WORK MOTIVATION IN EXPLAINING JOB SATISFACTION AMONG GENERATION Z EMPLOYEES IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: *Generation Z is increasingly a significant contributor to the Malaysian workforce and there is an urgency for organisations to understand the factors that contribute to young people being satisfied in their work. This concept paper is an integrated framework of Work Environment (WE), Autonomous Work Motivation (AWM), and Job Satisfaction (JS) for Generation Z employees in Malaysia. The model is based on the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) theory and the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Work environment is conceptualised as a multidimensional set of physical, social, and organisational conditions that provide employees with job resources, while autonomous work motivation refers to engaging in work because it is intrinsically interesting or personally valued. The framework contains three relationships: Job satisfaction is positively related to a supportive work environment, autonomous work motivation is positively related to job satisfaction, and a supportive work environment is positively related to autonomous work motivation. The third relationship serves as a foundation for further testing of autonomous motivation as a mediator between work environment and job satisfaction. The importance of studying flexibility, development, autonomy, supportive relations and meaningful work as a whole, rather than separately, is warranted by recent evidence on the values of the generation Z and on employment conditions in Malaysia. The paper makes a contribution by combining two complementary theoretical lenses in a Malaysian*

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context for Generation Z and by proposing a testable mechanism by which workplace resources might help to increase job satisfaction.

Keywords: *work environment; autonomous work motivation; job satisfaction; Generation Z; Malaysia; Job Demands–Resources theory; Self-Determination Theory*

Introduction

The Generation Z has come into the world in an era of digitalization, new working patterns and employee well-being. Research often mentions that development, work–life balance, financial security, recognition and flexible or supportive working conditions are among the factors that are important for some of the younger working people (Spada et al., 2024; Pózner & Kozák, 2025). These patterns should be interpreted as a tendency; they were observed in specific groups and do not represent a universal trait of all the Gen Z employees. The findings across the generations can be skewed by age, career stage, occupation, economic conditions and history; a preference stated by an early career employee may be related to the stage of his/her career and not be just a generational preference (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Ngotngamwong & Suvannasing, 2024). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is not to represent Generation Z in its entirety, but to provide a context in which to investigate.

This is a more pressing concern in the Malaysian context. The labour force in Malaysia in 2025 was 17.09 million people, of which 16.58 million were employed, and the rate of unemployment fell to 3.0 per cent (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2026). While these overall data suggest a stable labor market, they do not provide insights into whether younger workers perceive their workplace as supportive, meaningful, and satisfying. Previous research in Malaysia has revealed the preferences of Generation Z towards their working environment, leadership, communication, autonomy, and flexible working arrangements (Aziz et al., 2021; Adnan et al., 2024; Salem, 2025). This indicates that organisations should not just focus on attracting young workers and think about the impact of the working environment on their experience once they have joined.

Job satisfaction is the general assessment of and feeling about a job. It can encompass a number of elements of work, such as work tasks, supervision, peers, and training and development as well as employment circumstances (Macdonald & MacIntyre, 1997; Judge et al., 2001). Job satisfaction is not necessarily related to any one workplace characteristic. While some employees can be compensated competitively and not happy with their job, others might be happy in their jobs but be paid less or receive inadequate compensation. This means that the link between workplace resources and satisfaction may be mediated by employees' perceptions and experiences of workplace resources rather than the very presence of a specific workplace resource.

Central research gap is not just a breaking up of the existing literature but an explanatory gap. While some previous research has investigated work values, working environment, motivation, commitment to the organization, and satisfaction among members of Generation Z, none of these studies has dealt with the topics specifically. These studies would need to be combined to provide an understanding of how working environment could influence the employees' satisfaction with their jobs. Specifically, the connection between workplace resources and job satisfaction may be a more complex relationship. Workplace factors such as resourcefulness and supportive work environments may positively influence employees' evaluations of their

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jobs. These resources, however, can also be linked to job satisfaction in a motivational way because employees feel their work has personal meaning for them, that they endorse, and that it is in line with their values.

This possible mechanism can be explored using the integration of Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) theory and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). The JD-R theory suggests that job resources can be associated with positive employee outcomes, while SDT suggests that job conditions that support employees' psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness can support autonomous work motivation. These perspectives can be incorporated in the framework and it can differentiate between the direct link between work environment and job satisfaction and a potential indirect link via autonomous work motivation. However, this route cannot be taken for granted. Workplace resources do not necessarily mean that employees feel supported by the resources and autonomy can differ based on employee context, job and organisation context.

As a result, this issue should be explored with Generation Z workers in Malaysia, as they have different employment contexts, workplace practices and career experiences. But Generation Z should not be considered an undifferentiated audience with a homogeneous taste. The way that workers react to resources and motivational support might vary depending on their occupation, career stage, financial position and working conditions. The central issue in this conceptual paper is not only the question of the relationship between work environment, autonomous work motivation and job satisfaction, but how the relationship between these constructs can be realised in a theoretically founded motivational process and how it may differ under certain conditions. Thus, the paper builds up an integrated conceptual framework, which includes direct linkages between the work environment and the job satisfaction, autonomous work motivation and job satisfaction, and the work environment and autonomous work motivation. The propositions serve as a foundation for future empirical studies to examine the mediation of autonomous work motivation between work environment and job satisfaction for Generation Z workers in Malaysia.

This conceptual paper thus aims to answer the question of how job satisfaction among Generation Z workers in Malaysia can be explained by work environment resources and work autonomy, and what conditions may affect the proposed relationships. It builds propositions based on the JD-R theory, SDT and literature identified by the authors. It does not carry out a systematic review or empirical test, it serves to make the proposed mechanism explicit, and to give a transparent rationale for any future empirical evaluation.

Literature Review

Job Satisfaction among Generation Z Employees

Job Satisfaction is the general evaluative and affective reaction of an employee about his/her job. This may include satisfaction with the job, with supervision, among co-workers, with career growth, and with the job environment. One of the scales developed to measure job satisfaction in general, in all work contexts is the GJS (Macdonald & MacIntyre, 1997). Judge et al., 2001 suggest that job satisfaction can be seen as a general attitude, but might be different for different jobs and different organisations. It is not a direct indicator of motivation or quality of the work place, but rather an indicator of the outcome that should be explained in the present framework.

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Researchers have found that the following work values are relevant to Generation Z workers: Development, work–life balance, flexibility, financial security, sustainability, and recognition (Waworuntu et al., 2022; Spada et al., 2024; Zahra et al., 2025). Additionally, evidence from the nurse's experience with both Generations Y and Z nurses indicates that work values are associated with job satisfaction (Kim et al., 2024). These results do not confirm that all Generation Z workers perceive these features in the same way, however, and they do not provide a basis for saying that the same factors apply to all occupations and employment settings. Money, benefits, employment security, and external acknowledgment may still be important, especially if workers are financially constrained or are at risk of losing their jobs. The framework thus takes into account the quality of the motivation and the resources of the workplace together because it is assumed that material rewards do not result in an intrinsic or autonomous motivation.

Work Environment

Work environment is conceptualised as a multidimensional construct of job resources consisting of three distinct conceptual domains: Physical Resources, Social Resources and Organizational Resources. Physical Resources include safe and ergonomic facilities, equipment and access to usable technology, Social Resources include supervisor support, constructive communication, respectful relationships and teamwork, and Organizational Resources include role clarity, fair procedures, appropriate flexibility, learning opportunities and discretion in how work is done. This is a higher order conceptual construct intended to help explain and provide a theoretical framework for related domains of resources, and not to suggest that all indicators are equivalent, or that one dimension can simply be substituted for the other. The domains are based on work-design and job-resource theory perspectives (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; Parker et al., 2017). Future empirical studies should clearly indicate whether the higher order construct is modelled reflectively or formatively and validate this assumption prior to testing the propositions.

These resources may be applicable to some Gen Z employees as they start or join their careers, but not the same for everyone. Malaysia-based studies have looked at the expectations of younger workers at the workplace, the manner in which they communicate, leadership and desired work arrangements (Aziz et al., 2021; Adnan et al., 2024; Salem, 2025). Implications can vary by occupation, sector, organisational size, career stage, financial obligations and/or flexibility in the workplace. These should be seen as indicator variables of what one might expect to find in the preferences of Generation Z, and not as proof that everyone in this generation prefers each one of these.

The notion of workplace features as job resources follows JD-R theory: when they facilitate employees in attaining work goals, coping with job demands, or learning and development, they qualify as job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2023). The proposed framework considers the three above as the content of work environment, and separates them from employees' psychological reactions to the conditions. A resource may not necessarily be seen as helpful, and may have an impact on employees based in the implementation, the employee, and the job context.

From a conceptual and measurement perspective, this paper conceptualises work environment as a higher-order, multidimensional construct consisting of a formative composite of job-resource domains including physical, social and organisational environments. Each of the domains is distinct and does not necessarily overlap with the other: safe facilities and usable technology do not always overlap with role clarity and supervisor support; either or both can

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contribute to the overall resource environment. In this sense, the higher order construct should not be operationalised as a reflective scale, where all indicators are thought of as reflecting a single underlying construct. Empirical studies for future should validate the specification of the measures, validate each domain, and establish the appropriateness of a higher-order model (formative) for the study context (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; Parker et al., 2017).

Autonomous Work Motivation

Self-motivation to work is a type of work motivation in which work is performed because it is interesting or the worker's own opinion of its value. In SDT, intrinsic motivation is described as being based on interest or enjoyment, identified regulation is defined as knowing and feeling the importance of an activity (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Gagné et al., 2015). These are different from being controlled by a contingency or internal pressure (controlled motivation). Autonomous motivation is thus the quality or the motive of action and not autonomy per se nor autonomy as given by jobs.

This is significant because there are three related concepts which must not be confused one with another. Job autonomy or autonomy support is a characteristic of the work environment or management by the supervisor; the need for autonomy is an employee's psychological experience of volition; autonomous work motivation is an employee's endorsement of the reasons for doing the work. These ideas might be connected or related, but not synonymous. The strength and direction of associations between autonomous motivation and outcomes like satisfaction and engagement (Deci et al., 2017; McAnally & Hagger, 2024) must be tested in specific contexts. A positive work environment can still seem like a controlling place and working can still be rewarding for salary or job stability even if it is rewarding for the work itself.

According to some research, the following may be relevant work experiences for younger workers: meaningful contribution, development, flexibility, and congruence of personal values and organisational practices (Dwivedula, 2025; Spada et al., 2024; Pózner & Kozák, 2025). This type of evidence can be used to look at autonomous work motivation but it is not proof of one being the predominant motive for Generation Z. This paper concentrates on the concept of autonomous work motivation, as it is one theoretically important pathway, but it should be noted that controlled motivation and external incentives might also have an impact on employees' work evaluations.

An important qualification is that autonomous motivation does not mean that there is no external reward. Pay, benefits, job security and recognition can play a significant role when employees have financial responsibilities, or are unsure about their job security. SDT differentiates between the presence of an external incentive and the nature of the incentive: someone can perform a task for controlled reasons (for pressure or contingent reward) or because he or she personally believes that the task is worthwhile (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Gagné et al., 2015). Therefore, the proposed framework does not claim that meaningful work or autonomy will always be the most important consideration as compared to salary. Instead, it's whether workplace resources and autonomous motivation are related to job satisfaction in addition to material and employment conditions, that is, whether such measures should be used in future studies, when applicable (Rynes et al., 2004).

Theoretical Foundations

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Critical Synthesis and Boundary Conditions

The proposed relationships are supported from a theoretical perspective in the literature, but it is not justified to assume that all pathways are equally positive. According to JD-R theory, resources can help or hinder motivation and well-being, but the value of a resource is contingent on the relevance to a task and demands of an employee. The benefits of resources can be restricted if they are overloaded, if role expectations are at odds with each other, if employment is insecure, or if the resource is used as a control and monitoring tool and not as a support tool (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker et al., 2023). The supportive work environment thus should be seen as a dynamic, subjective, rather than guaranteed, constellation of resources, rather than as a source of satisfaction or self-motivation.

Similarly, SDT suggests that facilitating the autonomy of others can lead to autonomous motivation when it does, but not when it does not. Sometimes employees will have some flexibility as an additional responsibility, or feedback will be controlling instead of informative. Furthermore, material rewards are important in the selection of and satisfaction with work. Research on work motivation warns against making the easy distinction between intrinsic interest and extrinsic incentives; the significance of an incentive and the extent to which they become internalized are important (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Gagné et al., 2015). The framework thus does not imply causal relationships, nor does it allow for variation in the understanding of the same workplace practice by different employees.

Some of the proposed relationships may also be mutual. More satisfied employees may see their managers, coworkers and organization more positively, and less satisfied employees may take a dimmer view on ambiguous conditions. A cross-sectional correlation does not allow one to determine whether resources lead to satisfaction or satisfaction influences perceptions of resources, or whether both processes take place over time. This is in line with the general issue of causal inferences in the context of observational and cross-sectional research in organisations. Future work should attempt to utilize multi-wave or longitudinal designs, and if possible, to have separate measures of job conditions and attitudes, in order to investigate the temporal ordering, not just assume it as Bakker et al (2023) and McAnally & Hagger (2024) did.

The boundary conditions should not be interpreted as restrictions, but rather as part of the theoretical explanation. The resource-motivation-satisfaction pathways can vary from job to job, sector to sector, organisation size to size, employment security to security, and supervisory practice to practice and work arrangement to work arrangement. For instance, discretion might be possible and desirable in professional jobs, but limited in jobs that are very standardised or have safety-related functions, while flexibility might be more valued in jobs where shift cover is important or where interaction with customers is important. Likewise, financial stressors can be a strong motivator for workers. These context differences align with the emphasis on job-specific demands and resources in JD-R theory and the emphasis on how people perceive conditions at work in SDT (Bakker et al., 2023; Deci et al., 2017).

Lastly, there is a need for caution when claiming about Generation Z. As for generational work research, some reports were positive, some mixed, and many studies did not distinguish cohort and age/career-stage effects from period effects sufficiently (Parry & Urwin, 2011; Costanza et al., 2012). Early career workers' preferences are not necessarily a stable generational preference, but may be due to the way they entered the workforce, their bargaining power, their occupation, the national context, or the state of the labour market at that time. The Malaysian context is crucial in setting the framework but is not an assumption that all Malaysian GenZ

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employees would have the same preferences. Empirical research should take into account and document age, career stage, job type, sector, employment status, and relevant financial or family factors, if applicable, in future research. This method does not assume a single explanation for the generations, and allows the suggested framework to be evaluated within a meaningful subpopulation.

Job Demands–Resources Theory

According to JD-R theory, job demands (sustained effort and may have a psychological or physiological cost) are differentiated from job resources (help to achieve job goals, reduce the cost of job demands, and support learning and development; Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The theory gives some justification for the practical resources which are available in a work situation to be considered as opposed to the term ‘work environment' being a general description of the atmosphere of a workplace. It also suggests that resource effects are contingent upon the distribution of demands and resources, and the work context (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker et al., 2023).

Physical and social and organisational resources can have a direct relationship to job satisfaction in the proposed framework as they can influence the safety, manageability, fairness and support of work. Resources include supervisor support, usable technology, role clarity, constructiveness in communication, flexibility and development opportunities, but they may be different in various roles and organisations. The application of JD-R theory does not mean that all resources will be similarly effective, and that demand will always be met by resources. This is not a rule, it is an expectation to be tested, and this is a proposed direct relationship.

One of the key implications of JD-R theory is that a good working environment alone is not enough. Resources need to be appropriate for the work and needs of employees and any practice that could be described as "good" may be of little value if it is not implemented well and/or if there are high levels of workload, insecurity or lack of reward. This lens allows to understand how specific boundary conditions could be present within this framework, such as occupation, sector, work arrangement, organisational size and intensity of job demands.

Self-Determination Theory

According to SDT, autonomy, competence and relatedness are three basic psychological needs that are relevant to motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy is feeling of volition, competence is feeling capable and effective, and relatedness refers to feeling respected and connected with others. These needs can be met in organisations through contextual support that can help to support autonomous motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Deci et al., 2017). There is a distinction between psychological autonomy and job autonomy (discretion in the design of work) and autonomy-supportive management (interpersonal and/or managerial practices).
There are two related explanations for the proposed model in SDT. First, it is important to note that resources like adequate discretion, positive feedback, and respectful relationships can facilitate autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and thus relate to autonomous work motivation. Secondly, when work is interesting or meaningful to the employee, they have a more positive evaluation of the job concerned. Need support is not need satisfaction, and need satisfaction is not autonomous motivation, however. A resource could be felt as controlling, and employees' response will vary depending on individual and organisational context. These differences should be taken into account when designing measurements and empirical testing in the future (Deci et al., 2017; McAnally & Hagger, 2024).

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Integrating JD-R Theory and Self-Determination Theory

JD-R theory and SDT are complementary but address different parts of the proposed explanation. The work-context resources identified in JD-R theory are factors that can facilitate employees and allow them to handle the demands; SDT outlines a potential psychological process whereby need-supportive conditions could be linked to autonomous motivation. The integrated logic is, therefore, that work resources can directly influence job satisfaction, and that it could also support need satisfaction and autonomous work motivation, which, in turn, can influence job satisfaction. Theoretically possible, but not supported by the conceptual analysis, this sequence is not a causal process to be presented to others.

Autonomous work motivation is therefore placed as a possible mediator in this model instead of simply being another predictor of the model. The proposed framework preserves the direct relationship between the work environment and job satisfaction since resources can also lead to satisfaction by means other than autonomous motivation. The indirect effect should be explored in future studies, and the nature of the mediation (total or partial or dependent on workplace and employee factors) should be assessed. It is also possible that the direction is reversed – that is, that when employees are happy, they judge their workplaces more positively. A longitudinal or multi-wave design would be helpful to better determine the temporal ordering than a single cross-sectional survey.

Proposed Conceptual Framework and Propositions

The proposed framework includes three relations, namely: (1) environment the work and satisfaction, (2) autonomous motivation and satisfaction, and (3) environment the work and autonomous motivation. These two paths represent a direct association and a possible indirect pathway. The third proposition sets up the antecedent connection required to support a test for mediation, but alone does not prove that mediation is taking place. The figure, propositions and explanation should not be interpreted as facts, but as hypotheses to be tested in the future.

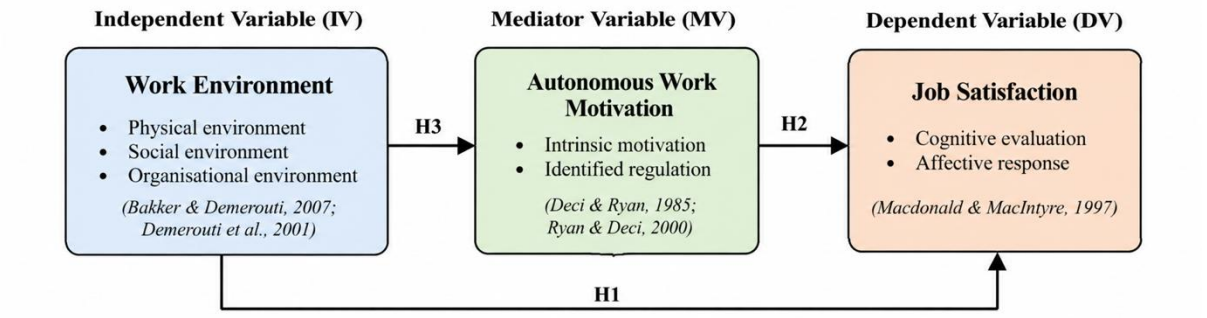


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework Linking Work Environment, Autonomous Work Motivation, and Job Satisfaction

Source: Author's conceptualisation based on Job Demands–Resources theory and Self-Determination Theory.

Work Environment and Job Satisfaction

A work environment with relevant job resources may be positively associated with job satisfaction because adequate equipment, safe facilities, clear roles, respectful communication, fair treatment, social support, and development opportunities can make work more manageable and meaningful. This expectation follows JD-R theory, which positions job resources as relevant to positive employee experiences (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2023). Nevertheless, resource effects may be weakened by excessive demands, poor implementation, low employment security, or insufficient pay and benefits. The proposition is therefore an

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expected association rather than a claim that supportive conditions invariably produce satisfaction.

Some studies report that flexibility, growth, recognition, and supportive work cultures are valued by Generation Z employees (Spada et al., 2024; Pichler et al., 2021), while Malaysian research points to the relevance of workplace characteristics and work arrangements (Aziz et al., 2021; Adnan et al., 2024; Salem, 2025). These findings provide a rationale for studying the relationship in Malaysia but should not be generalised to all young employees or occupations. Sector, career stage, work type, and financial circumstances may shape which resources matter most. Therefore:

Proposition 1: A work environment is positively associated with job satisfaction among Generation Z employees in Malaysia.

Autonomous Work Motivation and Job Satisfaction

Autonomous work motivation may be positively associated with job satisfaction because employees who find work interesting or personally important may evaluate their work more favourably (Deci et al., 2017; McAnally & Hagger, 2024). This does not mean that external rewards are unimportant or that autonomous motivation always outweighs controlled motives. Pay, benefits, job security, and recognition may be especially salient in some circumstances, and the relationship may vary with the work performed and the employee's circumstances. The proposition concerns an expected positive association, not an exclusive or universally dominant route to satisfaction. Therefore:

Proposition 2: Autonomous work motivation is positively associated with job satisfaction among Generation Z employees in Malaysia.

Work Environment as an Antecedent of Autonomous Work Motivation

SDT suggests that a supportive work environment may be associated with autonomous work motivation when workplace practices support employees' experiences of volition, effectiveness, and connection. Appropriate discretion may support autonomy; useful feedback and development may support competence; and respectful relationships may support relatedness (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Deci et al., 2017). However, the mere availability of discretion or support does not guarantee that employees experience it as need-supportive. Controlling supervision, inconsistent implementation, or excessive demands may weaken the proposed relationship. This is the contextual-to-motivational link in the framework and a basis for later mediation testing.

Proposition 3: A supportive work environment is positively associated with autonomous work motivation among Generation Z employees in Malaysia.

Novelty and Contribution of the Framework

The contribution of the paper is not merely a combination of three constructs. It defines work environment as a higher-order concept of physical, social and organisational job resources; separates work-context autonomy and psychological need satisfaction from autonomous work motivation; and offers a mechanism that connects resources and job satisfaction. The framework also maintains a direct link between work environment and job satisfaction, therefore, the effect of autonomous motivation on job satisfaction should be tested in future research to see if it is a partial or full mediation of the link between the two variables.

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There is some helpful evidence from previous research with Generation Z about their values for work, preferred environments, flexibility, autonomy, retention, and satisfaction; however, the results of these studies do not necessarily address the connection between workplace resources and satisfaction. In the present synthesis the explanation question is formulated more precisely as to whether there is a direct association between resources and satisfaction and whether autonomous work motivation is one possible intermediary process. Other explanations, such as external rewards, inverse perceptions, and contextual variations, are also plausible and should be explored while testing the propositions.

While the Malaysian focus makes the framework applicable to the Malaysian context, this does not imply that the Malaysian generation Z (GZ) should be viewed as a homogeneous group of workers. The studies conducted in Malaysia so far serve as a starting point based on the context (Aziz et al., 2021; Adnan et al., 2024; Salem, 2025). Future studies need to investigate the differences in relations across occupation, organisational size, work arrangement, career stage, and employment security/tenure, and should not compare the differences by generation without accounting for age and period effects.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretical Implications

Based on the proposed integration of JD-R theory and SDT, theoretical implications are drawn. The framework connects specific work resources with job satisfaction and a potential motivational process, and distinguishes between autonomous work motivation and general work motivation, while maintaining a direct path and also allowing for mediation testing. Its contribution is conceptual in nature as it elucidates constructs and propositions for a research context of Malaysian generation Z. Does not claim causality or assert that the proposed pathway is unique or universal.

Care needs to be taken with the methodology. Cross-sectional correlations are not able to determine whether a cause-and-effect relationship exists or whether there are reverse relationships, such as satisfied workers thinking their workplaces are better (McAnally & Hagger, 2024). The propositions should consequently be interpreted as theoretically determined associations. Future studies would benefit from a multi-wave, longitudinal or an appropriate intervention research design to support directionality and mediation.

Practical Implications

The framework proposes that HR managers evaluate staff's real requirements instead of a one-size-fits-all ‘Generation Z' policy. Practices relevant to the problem might include safe facilities, appropriate technology, job clarity, supportive supervision, respectful communication, fair procedures, development opportunities and workable flexibility. These should be assessed with reference to the demands of the job, and to employee feedback, as a resource effective in one job or work setting may not be as effective in another.

Offering employees meaningful but appropriate discretion, developmental feedback, recognition of contributions, and engaging them in decisions that impact their work are other ways that managers can support autonomous motivation. These practices are not to be used as a replacement or substitute for fair compensation, benefits, employment security, or reasonable workloads. The message to take home is that satisfaction is to be achieved not by relying on purpose or autonomy of management alone, but rather with appropriate material conditions.

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Interventions must be tailored to the specific aspects of the sector, job type, organisational size, work arrangement, and career and financial situation of the employees for Malaysian employers. The results of Malaysian SMEs may not be easily applied to large organisations or public-sector workplaces (Salem, 2025). An HR approach that is differentiated and evidence based is more defensible than a generational based one size fits all policy approach.

Directions for Future Research

Empirical research should first operationalise the domains of the work environment clearly and argue the formative or reflective nature of the higher order construct. Work characteristics (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006), motivational regulation (Gagné et al., 2015) and an established measure of job satisfaction (Macdonald & MacIntyre, 1997) may be measured. The reliability, construct validity, and discriminant validity of the relationships should be explored and examined by the researchers, especially between the constructs of autonomous motivation, job autonomy, autonomy support, and need satisfaction. The measurement model is to be tested first and the indirect effect tested second.

It should be noted that a cross sectional survey can be used to provide an initial test of associations but cannot offer causal direction or temporal mediation. Multi-wave or longitudinal designs would enable investigation of possible causal links in which work resources would precede changes in autonomous motivation, and where motivation would precede changes in job satisfaction. There is a need to also consider alternative models, such as the reverse pathway from job satisfaction to perceptions of the work environment, and control for theoretically appropriate potential confounds.

The conditions at the boundaries need to be given beforehand. Proposed partnerships can span between public and private organisations, SMEs and large organisations, between occupations, hybrid and on-site partnerships, career stage, and employment security and financial pressures. Researchers should explore whether autonomous motivation acts as a partial, full or non-medial relationship between the factors and to understand whether the relationship changes when the external rewards or job demands change. Qualitative research can be useful in providing insights to the meanings that employees working in different settings in Malaysia give to workplace resources. The design should allow for age, career-stage and period effects to be separated from generation effects in studies.

Approach to Conceptual Synthesis

This paper is not an empirical research paper, but a conceptual synthesis, based on theory. The aim is to build a single explanation of the direct and indirect (through autonomous work motivation) relationship between work-environment resources and job satisfaction for generation Z employees in Malaysia. The research process is based on conceptual development of articles, which uses literature as a means of clarifying concepts, linking theoretical explanations, boundary conditions, and drawing propositions to be tested in later empirical studies (Jaakkola, 2020).

The synthesis is based on two streams of literature. First, foundational publications were consulted to convey key assumptions and constructs of the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) theory and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) such as the separation of job demands from job resources, psychological need satisfaction, and autonomous motivation versus controlled motivation. Secondly, the manuscript included contemporary studies related to these concepts to be taken into account in the application of the ideas to work design, employee motivation,

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job satisfaction, and younger or generation Z employees. Theories were defined with reference to sources which were fundamental, and developments, contextual applications, contradictory findings or limitations were assessed by referencing more recent sources. It is a conceptual synthesis and not a time-bound review, so there is no publication-year cut-off for the manuscript.

The literature was purposively selected because it contained concepts that were conceptually relevant to one or more of the following questions: (1) what work conditions can be reasonably considered as job resources? (2) How do workers perceive job resources as autonomy support and autonomous motivation? (3) What theoretical or empirical support exists for the proposed links between job resources and job satisfaction? and (4) what findings or contextual factors support the proposed links between job resources and job satisfaction? Sources were kept when they were instrumental in defining a construct, explaining a theoretical mechanism, in supporting evidence for or against a proposed association, in suggesting an alternative explanation, or in suggesting a boundary condition. This was not a selection and screening process that relied on predetermined inclusion/exclusion criteria or a quality-appraisal checklist.

As for the Malaysia context, the studies cited in the paper were selected for their relevance to Malaysian generation Z employees, younger workers or workplace situations that could help contextualize the proposed framework. They are here as a representation and not an exhaustive list of Malaysian Generation Z research as cited studies do not necessarily represent the complete list of the research done on Generation Z in Malaysia, and the results from youth in the workforce are not assumed to be an indicator of a generation effect. Hence, the synthesis also takes up the Malaysian literature to place the conceptual problem, and when necessary, uses wider theories and international evidence to explain the proposed constructs and pathways. For this paper, no protocol-driven search coverage of bibliographic databases was reported. Accordingly, the authors do not claim that there was any systematic search of specific databases, that there was any application of a defined search string, or that there was any screening through a reproducible selection process of the records. Therefore, search terms, number of hits found in the databases, screening stages and formal study quality assessments are not reported as completed procedures. These references are not meant to be a systematic or exhaustive review, but are used in this manuscript to help frame and develop the conceptual argument. In the event of a systematic review being conducted in the future, the databases used and the full search strings, search dates, date limits, eligibility criteria, screening process and appraisal procedures should be reported separately and transparently.
The JD-R theory and SDT theory were incorporated in the staged analysis. First, the work-environment construct was organised around physical, social and organisational resources that have the potential to support staff in attaining work objectives, demands management or staff development using the JD-R theory. Second, the potential psychological process was explained by SDT, namely when the workplace is self-endorsed, meaningful and supports psychological needs, it is associated with autonomous work motivation. Third, both perspectives were connected in order to differentiate between a direct relationship between job resources and job satisfaction and an indirect relationship via autonomous work motivation. Fourth, these links were validated with opposing evidence and more plausible boundary conditions such as the ongoing significance of pay and job security, work environment differences between occupations and work arrangements, potential reciprocal perceptions between satisfaction and work environment, and heterogeneity of the workforce of Generation Z employees. Lastly, these relationships were presented in terms of conceptual statements, not causal inferences. This

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framework is therefore a theory-based explanation rather than a statement of the empirical evidence of mediation.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper proposes a theory-based explanation of Job Satisfaction for Generation Z employees in Malaysia, which is based on the JD-R theory and SDT. It conceptualises work environment as an umbrella of physical, social and organisational job resources, recognizes the difference between job autonomy and psychological need for autonomy and autonomous work motivation, and states three propositions on the relationship between work environment resources, job motivation and satisfaction. The proposed mechanism is possible but unproven: supportive resources could be linked with satisfaction directly as well as indirectly via autonomous motivation, and external rewards, reverse perceptions, and contextual conditions could influence the relationships. The paper does not aim at representing that all the employees of Generation Z have the same preferences, or that the relationships proposed are universal, but rather, it aims at making these mechanisms and boundary conditions explicit for future testing.

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