

YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF TRADE UNIONS IN MALAYSIA: AWARENESS, RELEVANCE, AND BARRIERS IN THE DIGITAL AND GIG ECONOMY ERA

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Abstract: *Trade unions remain a central mechanism for protecting workers' rights and sustaining industrial harmony, yet their relevance is increasingly questioned by younger workers in an employment landscape shaped by digitalisation and the gig economy. This paper synthesises key literature to explain how Malaysian youth perceive trade unions in terms of awareness, relevance, and barriers to engagement. It highlights a persistent decline in union participation and emphasises that limited knowledge of union roles and benefits is a primary driver of youth detachment, reinforcing perceptions that unions are outdated or misaligned with contemporary work arrangements. The discussion further shows that youth perceptions are shaped by broader influences, including family and workplace experiences, media narratives, and trust in union transparency and leadership. To strengthen youth engagement, the paper consolidates practical strategies centred on digital outreach and social media communication, early exposure through education-sector partnerships, flexible membership models for non-standard workers, and governance reforms that enhance transparency and youth representation.*

Keywords: *youth; trade unions; awareness; perceived relevance; participation barriers; gig economy; digital engagement; Malaysia*

Introduction

Trade unions are formal groups of employees formed to use representation and bargaining to protect and advance their rights and interests as a group (Yusman et al., 2021). By giving workers, a united voice in negotiations about wages, working conditions, and employment laws, they play an important role in maintaining industrial peace (Ali et al., 2023). In the past, exchange unions had been essential in advancing social justice and equality inside the place of work through ensuring that requirements are maintained and workers are not exploited (Robertson et al., 2020).

However, change unions are having to rethink their area and importance inside the twenty-first century due to globalisation, technological advancement, and converting employment developments (Ekanayake, 2021). Younger generations, consisting of Generation Y (Millennials) and Generation Z, have extraordinary expectancies once they input the group of workers. They are much less depending on traditional lengthy-term employment since they've more virtual flexibility, autonomy, and paintings-existence stability (Nugroho et al., 2025). The views of trade unions held by younger workers are shaped by experiences in today's workplace and cultural values that emphasize technological adaptation and individual empowerment. This is because these generations engage less with conventional union institutions because they are often more familiar with individual contracts, freelance labour, and jobs from a distance (Baša et al., 2023).

Despite the historical importance of trade unions, several studies have shown that there has been a global decline in union membership, especially among younger generations. In Malaysia, union density has steadily declined over the past 10 years, presently accounting for fewer than 7% of the workforce (Omar et al., 2025). Young workers often feel that trade unions are slow to adapt to modern employment challenges, such as gig economy protections, flexible working hours and digital work settings. Furthermore, various young workers are unaware of the blessings, criminal roles and achievements of exchange organizations in raising labor standards (Aleks et al., 2020). This knowledge gap undermines collective bargaining power and reduces the effectiveness of labour advocacy by fostering apathy or distrust of union membership. Digital platforms and the gig economy have increased speedy, wherein employment connections are regularly casual. This reduces employees' sense of community, which further reduces the appeal of unionization (Gaspareniene et al., 2024).

Factors Influencing Youth's Perception towards Trade Unions

Young people's opinions about labour unions are influenced by many things. Since many youths are unaware of the role, benefits and operations of unions, awareness and knowledge is the first factor (Jeknic, 2024). They believe unions are antiquated, bureaucratic, or unrelated to present day paintings preparations because of their little publicity to union activity (Nor et al., 2018). Additionally, research suggests that younger employees who are not familiar with collective bargaining tend to undervalue the importance of union safety, especially in sectors wherein employment is volatile. When knowledge gaps persist, youth perception becomes largely shaped by assumptions rather than informed awareness (Sundari et al., 2025).

The second factor is family influence, as beliefs towards labour representation are strongly influenced by one's upbringing and family environment (Cornejo et al., 2020). According to research, people who grew up in unionized homes are more likely to have favourable opinions of unions and consider them trustworthy organizations (Blanden & Machin, 2003). Children are much more likely to accept collective motion when parents proportion their reports of union

victories, which include progressed operating conditions or safety throughout conflict. However, children may be less inclined to join in the future if their parents have negative experiences with unions or are politically distrustful of them (Vestin & Vulkan, 2021).

Furthermore, young people with more work experience are better able to understand the value of labour unions in society. Young employees who have encountered unjust treatment, activity instability, or irregular paintings schedules are much more likely to understand the benefits of union protection (Chadi & Goerke, 2023). On the other hand, young workers or students who have not yet faced difficulties at work often believe that unions are unnecessary or irrelevant to their professional lives (Bulbeck, 2008). Young people's perceptions of unions as beneficial or pointless also are stimulated by way of their publicity to managerial methods, form of employment, and degree of task protection (Jeknic, 2024).

The fourth factor is media portrayal and public narrative. Young people may become sceptical or disinterested in union membership if unions are represented in a negative light or become embroiled in politics (Jeknic, 2024). This means that feelings toward unions are also greatly affected by depictions of unions in the media and the amount of trust that is placed in unions' leaders (Yildiz et al., 2025). The concept that unions are disruptive as opposed to helpful is frequently reinforced by means of media narrative that highlights war, strikes, or political conflicts. On the other hand, youth knowledge and interest can be increased through positive portrayals that highlight union success stories (Kane & Newman, 2017).

Trust in organisational transparency and union leadership constitutes another factor. Today's youngster's region a high precedence on organisational governance that is transparent, inclusive, and equitable (Rawlins, 2008). Trust declines when unions are dominated by older officials or seem distant from youth issues. Conversely, unions that showcase obligation, communicate nicely, and include younger representatives in decision-making procedures generally acquire extra aid (Fazio, 2014). Therefore, a key factor in determining whether young people perceive unions as valid, cutting-edge, and in keeping with their interests is accept as true with (Hennebert et al., 2021).

Challenges Faced by Trade Unions in Attracting Young Members

Due to shifting work habits and expectations, trade unions are finding it more difficult to recruit younger members. Traditional unions are becoming less relevant because of the gig economy and the advent of digitalisation, which have changed job arrangements (Haake, 2017). Membership interest has declined because many young people no longer connect with the traditional full-time work paradigm that unions have historically represented. Additionally, employment structures have changed due to digitalisation, giving younger humans bendy obligations that they consider they are able to cope with on their personal without union protection (Liu, 2024). Furthermore, younger personnel regularly consider that internet structures and character negotiating offer enough liberty, thereby diminishing the significance of unions in modern paintings environments (Westover, 2025).

Other than that, lack of online interaction and presence has limited their ability to reach younger people who are highly dependent on online communication (Ju & Zhao, 2024). For membership and complaint processing, many unions lack interactive online platforms, mobile applications or updated websites, reducing their accessibility to youth accustomed to using digital devices (Lowery & Beadles, 2015). According to research, younger people count on that firms might interact with them the usage of social media, brief-form material, and interactive

gear, but unions regularly hold to rely upon conventional offline way. Consequently, the gap among unions and potential youthful members has grown due to the antiquated communication approach (Hodder & Houghton, 2019).

The unfavourable opinion of unions as being too bureaucratic or politically driven presents another difficulty. Instead of using group forums, young professionals typically use social media or individual channels to voice their concerns about the workplace (Costa & Carneiro, 2021). Many young people agree with that unions are ruled by means of strict policies and hierarchical structures that do not align with present day place of business norms (Westover, 2025). According to research, young people often distrust unions because of their political affiliations or past controversies, which they see as unrelated to their current work-related issues. Additionally, younger employees could as a substitute use digital systems to voice place of business issues on an individual basis than engage in antiquated collective bargaining procedures (Ships, 2023).

Additionally, the generational gap between older union leaders and younger employees causes a lack of communication and agreement on boundaries. Because older members often control the union leadership structure, younger people rarely participate in the decision-making process (Wang, 2025). Unions need to replace their image and put into effect teens-focused processes like digital outreach, open management, and advocacy for reasons like bendy work schedules and mental fitness to live applicable (Smith & Duxbury, 2019). Low membership participation is the result of this disconnect, which gives the impression that unions do not fully understand or represent the concerns of young workers (Vandaele, 2012).

Impact of Young People's Views on Trade Unions

The attitude of youth towards trade unions has a serious impact on the collective strength of trade unions and the sustainability of trade union movements. If youth have an indifferent or negative attitude towards trade union organisations, trade union membership falls, thereby reducing trade union influence and representation (Høgedahl & Møberg, 2021). This results in reduced power when negotiating for fair compensation, safe working conditions, and employee rights. The decreasing union density among younger workers in Malaysia has raised concerns about the future of collective representation (Majid et al., 2021). Furthermore, a loss of youth participation impedes union leadership and innovation, main to and getting old membership shape that struggles to adapt to evolving place of work situations (Omar et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the lack of strong youth participation may also contribute to the weakening of worker solidarity, increasing the potential for exploitation of the entire workforce due to the lack of youth voice. The lack of energetic involvement with the exchange union influences the level of cognizance of the younger team of workers with reference to trade union rights and values of social justice. This leads to a passive workforce that is less inclined to participate in labor-related decision-making or to stand up to unfair employment practices (Jeknic, 2024). On the other hand, favourable opinions of trade unions among young people can have favourable impacts on the job market. Young personnel are much more likely to aid inclusive administrative centre regulations, obvious management, and truthful labour standards when they recognize the price of collective representation (Hennebert et al., 2021). Their involvement can provide trade unions with much-needed new ideas, online strategies and activity, making these relevant in addressing current issues including workplace mental health, workers' rights in the digital age and working at home. Ultimately, a positive youth perception

strengthens the continuity and adaptability of trade unions in an evolving employment landscape (Shields et al., 2021).

Beside that, the rate at which unions develop and use cutting-edge digital tactics is also influenced by youth perceptions. Unions find it difficult to defend their investments in new technologies such as digital membership systems, online participation or virtual training platforms when young workers see them as obsolete or irrelevant (Kovács et al., 2017). This hinders organisational modernisation and makes it extra hard for unions to compete in a process marketplace that prioritises virtual era. Positive youth involvement alternatively motivates unions to put into effect statistics-driven campaigns, digital recruiting, and social media advocacy that improve visibility and relevance (Fakude et al., 2024). Innovative ideas that make union activities more accessible, especially for gig workers and remote employees, are often spurred by the presence of tech-savvy youth in unions (Schoemann, 2018).

Strategies to Increase Youth Awareness and Participation in Trade Unions

To attract more young people to join guilds, guilds should change their strategies from traditional methods to more modern ones, as contemporary young people are more receptive to online communication (Hodder & Houghton, 2019). Unions should actively use online tools such as social media and leverage these tools to extensively publicize union activities to increase employee awareness of unions (Barnes et al., 2018). Today's young people are constantly connected to and influenced by the internet; therefore, using social networks for promotion aligns better with their habits and increases brand awareness (Carneiro & Costa, 2020).

Furthermore, labor unions can collaborate with the education sector to incorporate labor union-related courses into the curriculum, allowing students to better understand the role of labor unions before entering the workforce (Delgado-Algarra et al., 2020). Unions can offer lectures, seminars, and consciousness programs that teach students about their employment rights, workplace troubles, and the cost of collective illustration by taking part with universities, polytechnics, and vocational establishments. These applications should consist of cooperative studies tasks concentrated on new staff developments, profession discussions approximately labour norms, and internships interior unions (Stewart et al., 2021). Early exposure to the idea of unionism will increase the probability that scholars might see its advantages and consider joining after they begin working (Harcourt et al., 2021).

Flexible membership systems are probably any other a hit strategy for attracting young members, especially people with non-conventional employment arrangements. Given the growing number of freelancers, gig workers and telecommuters, unions should adopt more comprehensive setups designed to suit different work arrangements (Cini & Tassinari, 2022). For example, unions could implement tiered membership, which would be based online, making it much easier for gig workers to join without having to join the union as members on a full-time basis (Fakude et al., 2024). Additionally, individuals who do not need full traditional union coverage can be drawn in by customized benefits such as microinsurance, online training tools, and digital dispute assistance. This adaptability ensures that youth are not deprived of collective support and representation in contemporary work systems, allowing unions to reach a wider audience of non-traditional workers (Gaspareniene et al., 2024).

Besides that, increased transparency within union management, together with members-most effective online systems, could make the union extra truthful to young people. Unions may

additionally resolve these troubles by using putting in vicinity obvious communicate techniques that permit contributors recognise exactly how choices are made, cash is distributed, and leaders are chosen (Hau, 2022). Young employees may be made extra trusting and less suspicious with the aid of publishing yearly performance reports, making financial summary without problems reachable, and holding common member discussions (J. Westover, 2024). Unions can also restore consider and portray themselves as modern-day, straightforward organizations which could constitute the interests of younger generations by means of showing duty in their operations (Cha et al., 2018). Finally, one of the most important ways to guarantee the viability and relevance of unions is to promote youth leadership. Unions may also absorb new ideas and remedy problems which are maximum essential to the younger personnel by designating management seats or committee posts exclusively for young individuals (Wu, 2023). Fair pay for entry-level employees, mental health services, flexible work schedules, workplace discrimination and difficulties in the gig economy are just a few examples of these issues (Cini & Tassinari, 2022). Young people are more inclined to participate, interact and trust the union's direction when they feel represented in decision-making bodies. Significant representation makes certain that younger human beings' evaluations are heard and allows create a union movement this is extra inclusive and targeted at the future (J. Westover, 2024).

Conclusion

As a conclusion, the belief of the younger generation regarding alternate unions plays a completely sizeable position in figuring out the destiny of alternate unions. As the labour marketplace continues to conform, pushed by way of globalization, digitalization, and flexible paintings preparations, the relevance of unions relies upon on their capacity to adapt to and entice a brand-new technology. Findings from numerous studies show that knowledge, professional experiences, family background and familiarity with trade union activities have a significant impact on how the younger generation is perceived. In the absence of these elements, youth tend to view trade unions negatively, resulting in the belief that they are unimportant.

The impact of technological advancements, negative media coverage, and intergenerational communication barriers are some of the factors cited by the union as contributing to the youth shortage. Unions also can repair their credibility by using embracing modernisation, growing transparency, and growing verbal exchange techniques that attraction to the values and lifestyles of younger generations. Future union revival must adopt a proactive approach that emphasizes innovation and diversity. Flexible trade union membership choices, online trade union engagement and youth involvement in trade union leadership are essential to attract and retain young people. Additionally, trade unions may experience a rebirth if they redefine themselves in terms of future workplace demands related to issues such as cyberspace or online labour rights, work-life balance and mental health in the workplace. In the end, attractive youth will ensure change union viability to make places of work fairer in Malaysia.

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