

Work Motivation as a Moderator Between Work Environment and Ethical Leadership on Generation Z Employee Loyalty in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

As a generation that grew up in the digital era with rapid technological advances and fast access to information, this affects their perspective on the workforce, shaping their expectations and values. This study focuses on the phenomenon of minimum loyalty from Generation Z employees in Indonesia, highlighting that their loyalty is significantly influenced by factors such as the work environment and ethical leadership. This research utilizes a quantitative approach, drawing on data from literature reviews and the distribution of questionnaires. This study employs Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), specifically the Smart Partial Least Squares (SmartPLS) method, to examine the direct relationship and mediating effects among variables. The results of this study suggest that the work environment has a significant impact on employee loyalty and work motivation. Additionally, there is a relationship between the work environment and ethical leadership, which fosters employee loyalty through increased work motivation. In conclusion, all hypotheses in this study are accepted, indicating that a good work environment and ethical leadership can enhance employee loyalty. The work environment and ethical leadership are closely correlated, enhancing work motivation and potentially leading to greater employee loyalty.

KEYWORDS

employee loyalty; ethical leadership; generation Z; work environment; work motivation



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INTRODUCTION

As a generation that grew up with the presence of digital technology and has had wide access to the internet since childhood, Generation Z displays unique workforce dynamics (Kahraman, 2020). However, the ease of obtaining information has created a new dynamic, especially in the world of work, where the behavior and preferences of the younger generation influence their choices and decisions about staying in the workplace. Generation Z, which is the generation born from 1998 to 2012, shows different characteristics from the previous generation (Hendrastomo & Januarti, 2023). Generation Z is also known as a generation that is adaptive to change, but this generation has very flexible work preferences, prioritizing meaningfulness rather than just long-term work stability.

Based on research Anjum (2024), it is relevant that the career preferences of Generation Z often change, influenced by the need for flexibility, learning opportunities, and personal values that align with work. As a result, the loyalty of Generation Z employees to the organization tends to be low. According to Fajriyanti (2023), approximately 31% of Generation Z employees survive working for only 1–2 years in one company. For organizations, low loyalty can be a challenge and can disrupt organizational productivity (Akanbi & Obafemi, 2024). For Generation Z itself, this can hinder their career development. Loyalty itself, according to Siagian in (Wellyanto & Halim, 2017), is defined as the tendency of employees to remain in an organization because they have a commitment to give their best abilities to achieve organizational goals.

One factor that has been proven to increase employee loyalty is the quality of the work environment (Hafiyyan et al., 2023; Ramadhanty et al., 2020). According to Afandi (2018), the work environment is defined as everything around employees that has the potential to influence the implementation of tasks. This aligns with research conducted by Rumadaul (2023) & Syihhabudin (2023), which states that a safe and supportive work environment can increase employee comfort, encourage productivity, and foster long-term loyalty. This means that the conditions of a comfortable work environment can provide a smooth experience for employees in carrying out their duties, which can ultimately increase employee loyalty (Sukawati & Suwandana, 2021).

In addition to the work environment, ethical leadership also plays an important role in increasing employee loyalty. According to Iswahyudi (2023), ethical leadership is defined as the ability of leaders to lead an organization by upholding applicable moral and legal values. Therefore, it can be concluded that ethical leadership is not only a fulfillment of moral standards but also involves the ability to influence others to act ethically.

However, low work motivation among Generation Z is also a central issue. Based on research Yasmine (2024), work motivation is the primary driver of achieving organizational goals and a crucial determinant in fostering employee loyalty. In Herzberg's two-factor theory, which divides factors into motivators (such as achievement, recognition, and meaningful work) and hygiene factors (such as working conditions, salary, and relationships with superiors), motivation plays a role in increasing employee satisfaction and engagement, thereby impacting long-term loyalty. The low work motivation of Generation Z is supported by a survey conducted by Holopainen (2019), which states that as many as 50% of companies that terminate employment with Generation Z employees do so because of low motivation among these employees. Research by Lestari (2024) states that work motivation plays an important role and can increase productivity. Therefore, work motivation is one of the essential factors that can drive individuals to thrive, contribute, and demonstrate commitment to the organization.

This study was conducted because limited research has explored how work motivation acts as a mediating variable between the work environment and ethical leadership, influencing employee loyalty, especially among Generation Z. Previous studies have found a relationship between the role of work motivation in mediating the influence of social support and ethical leadership on work loyalty. Therefore, based on the phenomena discussed, this study aims to explore further the role of work motivation in mediating the influence of the work environment and ethical leadership on employee loyalty among Generation Z in Indonesia.

This research addresses critical theoretical and practical imperatives through three primary objectives: (1) to empirically examine the direct effects of work environment quality and ethical leadership on Generation Z employee loyalty within the Indonesian organizational context, thereby validating whether relationships documented in Western settings generalize to Asian collectivist cultures; (2) to investigate work motivation as a mediating psychological mechanism through which work environment and ethical leadership influence loyalty outcomes, testing whether motivational states serve as the proximal determinant through which distal organizational factors exert their effects; and (3) to develop an integrated theoretical model that synthesizes environmental, leadership, and motivational determinants of Generation Z loyalty, providing a comprehensive framework that transcends the fragmented single-predictor models characterizing existing literature.

The theoretical contributions of this investigation are substantial, advancing understanding of generational workplace dynamics by elucidating the unique loyalty determinants and mediating processes specific to Generation Z employees, thereby challenging universalist assumptions underlying traditional retention theories. Practically, findings offer critical guidance for Indonesian organizations navigating the challenges of managing Generation Z talent, providing evidence-based recommendations for environmental design, leadership development, and motivational intervention strategies that can enhance retention rates, reduce costly turnover, and cultivate sustainable organizational commitment among this demographically significant and increasingly influential workforce segment. Given that Generation Z will constitute most Indonesian workers by 2030, with approximately 68 million individuals entering the labor market over the next decade, understanding and effectively managing their loyalty dynamics represents not merely an academic exercise but an urgent organizational imperative with far-reaching implications for national economic productivity and competitiveness.

METHOD

This study was conducted among Generation Z employees in Indonesia, with the purpose of determining the role of motivation in mediating the influence of the work environment and ethical leadership on the loyalty of Generation Z employees in Indonesia. In this study, a non-probability sampling technique was employed, using a purposive approach, which means that respondents were selected based on specific criteria to represent the population and provide relevant and accurate results. The sample criteria that can describe this study are (1) employees aged 18-28 years (Generation Z) and (2) currently working in Indonesia. In this study, since the population size is not known with certainty, the sample calculation for determining the number of samples from research population, using the formula proposed by Sarstedt (2021) is as follows.

$$S = \text{number of indicators} \times 5 \sim 10$$

$$S = 20 \times 10 = 200$$

Therefore, the determination of the sample in this study is at least 200 respondents. In this study, the primary data used are from a questionnaire administered to 274 Generation Z respondents working in Indonesia. The questionnaire indicators are measured using a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In this study, data analysis was conducted using the Structural Equation Model (SEM), specifically the Smart Partial Least Squares (SmartPLS) method.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of Respondent

In this study, a total of 274 Generation Z employees working in Indonesia were surveyed. The characteristics needed in the study include region, gender, age, level of education, and length of service.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics (N = 274)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Region	West Java	89	32.5
	DKI Jakarta	76	27.7

	West Sumatra	45	16.4
	Other Provinces	64	23.4
Gender	Female	181	66.0
	Male	93	34.0
Age	<20 years	16	6.0
	20-28 years	258	94.0
Education Level	High School	11	4.0
	Diploma	71	26.0
	Bachelor's (S1)	173	63.0
	Master's (S2)	19	7.0
Length of Service	<1 year	25	9.0
	1-2 years	131	48.0
	>3 years	118	43.0

Source: Researcher Processed Data (2025)

The study's results on the characteristics of respondents showed that, based on region have three provinces had the most respondents included West Java, DKI Jakarta, and West Sumatra. Respondents with characteristics based on gender were 66% female and 34% male. Furthermore, based on age, 94% of respondents were 20-28 years old, and 6% were under 20 years old. Moreover, the characteristics of respondents, based on their educational level, were as follows 63% with a bachelor's degree (S1), 26% with a diploma, 7% with a master's degree (S2), and 4% with a high school education. In addition, the characteristics of respondents based on length of service were 48% with 1-2 years of work experience, 43% with >3 years of work experience, and 9% with <1 year of work experience.

Analysis Output SEM-PLS

In testing using Structural Equation Modeling Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS), it is divided into two main components, namely the outer model and the inner model. According to Haji-Othman (2022), the outer model aims to explain the relationship between latent constructs and indicators and is used to test the validity and reliability of measurement instruments. In contrast, the inner model functions to show the structural relationship between latent constructs, including the direction and strength of influence between variables.

Outer Model Testing

Outer model is an evaluation phase designed to test the accuracy and reliability of the measurement instruments, as well as the indicator's ability to account for other factors that way affects the measurement. This test assesses the validity and reliability of the measurement instrument, as well as the indicator's capacity determine other variables. A reflective indicator is considered satisfactory if its correlation with the construct being assessed exceeds 0.70. This study uses a factor loading threshold of >0.70 to ensure the validity of the indicator.

Table 2. Outer Loadings

Variable	Item	Outer Loading	Description
Ethical Leadership	EK1	0,923	VALID
	EK2	0,823	VALID

Work Environment	EK3	0,801	VALID
	EK4	0,923	VALID
	LK1	0,761	VALID
	LK2	0,893	VALID
	LK3	0,898	VALID
Employees Loyalty	LK4	0,893	VALID
	LY1	0,712	VALID
	LY2	0,806	VALID
	LY3	0,804	VALID
	LY4	0,801	VALID
Work Motivation	LY5	0,780	VALID
	LY6	0,863	VALID
	LY7	0,776	VALID
	MK1	0,842	VALID
	MK2	0,858	VALID
	MK3	0,862	VALID
	MK4	0,805	VALID
	MK5	0,876	VALID

Source: Researcher Processed Data (2025)

Indicator validity testing involves assessing the correlation between item scores and construct scores. Indicators validity is considered good if the loading factor exceeds 0.70. According to the test results, all indicators have loading factors greater than 0.70, indicating adequate validity, which allows all variables to be retained in the model. Evaluation of reliability and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is crucial for assessing construct validity. Construct reliability is considered high if its value is ≥ 0.70 , while AVE is considered good if its value is > 0.50 . The following table presents the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value for all variables.

Table 3. Average Variance Extracted

Variable	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Description
Ethical Leadership	0,755	VALID
Work Environment	0,745	VALID
Employees Loyalty	0,628	VALID
Work Motivation	0,721	VALID

Source: Researcher Processed Data (2025)

As shown in the table above, all Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values are greater than 0.50, indicating that all variables are considered valid and meet the criteria for discriminant validity. In the discriminant validity test, this is achieved by checking the cross-loading value, where the correlation coefficient of the indicator with its compared to the correlation coefficient with other constructs. The indicator correlation coefficient value must be higher for its construct compared to other constructs.

Table 4. Cross Loading

	Ethical Leadership	Work Environment	Employees Loyalty	Work Motivation
EK1	0.923	0.079	-0.086	-0.102
EK2	0.823	0.063	-0.158	-0.057
EK3	0.801	0.083	-0.131	-0.020
EK4	0.923	0.073	-0.090	-0.097
LK1	0.060	0.761	-0.389	0.456
LK2	0.067	0.893	-0.569	0.626
LK3	0.092	0.898	-0.540	0.638
LK4	0.073	0.893	-0.501	0.616
LY1	-0.075	-0.431	0.712	-0.444
LY2	-0.173	-0.530	0.806	-0.567
LY3	-0.266	-0.478	0.804	-0.391
LY4	-0.032	-0.405	0.801	-0.430
LY5	-0.008	-0.359	0.780	-0.417
LY6	-0.095	-0.501	0.863	-0.507
LY7	-0.080	-0.495	0.776	-0.556
MK1	-0.089	0.629	-0.472	0.842
MK2	-0.089	0.545	-0.502	0.858
MK3	-0.070	0.555	-0.529	0.862
MK4	-0.072	0.593	-0.467	0.805
MK5	-0.016	0.584	-0.594	0.876

Source: Researcher Processed Data (2025)

Based on the results of the discriminant validity test after model modification, as shown in the table above, it can be seen that all indicators have a cross-loading value with each construct that is greater than the cross-loading value with other constructs, thus indicating validity. It can be concluded that all constructs have good discriminant validity. Discriminant validity can also be assessed by examining the value of the Composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha.

Table 1 Composite Reliability

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
Ethical Leadership	0.891	0.925
Work Environment	0.885	0.921
Employees Loyalty	0.901	0.922
Work Motivation	0.903	0.928

Source: Researcher Processed Data (2025)

The table shows that the composite reliability values for all constructs are >0.70 , and all Cronbach's Alpha value are greater than 0.70, indicating that all constructs in this model meet the discriminant validity criteria and are considered reliable.

Inner Model Testing

Inner model testing, also known as structural model testing, involves examining R-squared, effect size (F-squared), predictive relevance (Q-squared), relationship between constructs, and significance values.

Table 2 R-Square

	R-Square	R-Square Adjusted
Employees Loyalty	0.442	0.436
Work Motivation	0.488	0.484

Source: Researcher Processed Data (2025)

The R-square value for the employee loyalty variable (Y) was obtained at 0.442. This result indicates that 44.2% of the employee loyalty variable can attributed to the influence of work environment and ethical leadership variables. In addition, the work motivation variable was found to be 0.488, indicating that 48.8% of the work motivation variables (Z) can be attributed to the influence of work environment and ethical leadership variables.

Table 3 F-Square

	Ethical Leadership	Work Environment	Employees Loyalty	Work Motivation
Ethical Leadership			0.037	0.037
Work Environment			0.073	0.942
Employees Loyalty				
Work Motivation			0.165	

Source: Researcher Processed Data (2025)

The work environment variable on employee loyalty has a value of 0.073, and the ethical leadership variable on employee loyalty has a value of 0.037, indicating a small effect size because the value is >0.02 . In addition, the work motivation variable's effect on employee loyalty has a value of 0.165, indicating a moderate relationship. On the other hand, the work environment variable on work motivation has a value of 0.942, indicating a large effect size, as the value is >0.35 . Then, the ethical leadership variable on work motivation has a value of 0.037, indicating a small effect size because the effect size is >0.02 . Therefore, the four statements associated with each variable play a crucial role in determining the endogenous variable.

Table 4 Q-Square

	Q²predict
Employees Loyalty	0.335
Work Motivation	0.477

Source: Researcher Processed Data (2025)

The Q-square results are $0.335 > 0$ and $0.477 > 0$. Therefore, this study demonstrates that employee loyalty and work motivation variables have predictive relevance, indicating that each model constructed has good predictive validity, particularly in explaining work motivation and employee loyalty.

Table 5 Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Connection	Path Coefficient	T statistics	P values	Description
1	Work Environment → Employees Loyalty	-0.282	4.538	0.000	Accepted
2	Ethical Leadership → Employees Loyalty	-0.147	2.750	0.006	Accepted
3	Work Motivation → Employees Loyalty	-0.424	6.682	0.000	Accepted
4	Work Environment → Work Motivation	0.697	20.523	0.000	Accepted
5	Ethical Leadership → Work Motivation	-0.137	2.489	0.013	Accepted
6	Work Environment → Work Motivation → Employees Loyalty	-0.295	6.028	0.000	Accepted
7	Ethical Leadership → Work Motivation → Employees Loyalty	0.058	2.377	0.018	Accepted

Source: Researcher Processed Data (2025)

The result of Bootstrapping from Structural Equation Modeling Partial Least Square (SEM-PLS) analysis, on the work environment variable (X1) has a p-value of $0.000 < 0.05$, the ethical leadership variable (X2) has a p-value of $0.006 < 0.05$, and work motivation (Z) has a p-value of $0.000 < 0.05$, meaning that all three variables have a significant influence on

employee loyalty (Y). In addition, the work environment (X1) obtained a p-value of $0.000 < 0.05$, and ethical leadership (X2) obtained a p-value of $0.013 < 0.05$, so that it has a significant influence on work motivation (Z). On the mediation path, it was obtained that the work environment (X1) with a p-value of $0.000 < 0.05$, and ethical leadership (X2) with a p-value of $0.000 < 0.05$, which means that it has a significant effect on employee loyalty (Y) through work motivation (Z).

Therefore, all hypotheses in this study can be accepted. But some have negative but significant path coefficients. According Sarstedt (2021), a path coefficient can be negative even though it is statistically significant, indicating a relationship between latent variables that operates in the opposite direction. This occurs because a decrease in one variable follows an increase in the other variable. In addition, a negative value in the path coefficient indicates an inverse relationship between the independent variable and dependent variable, where when the independent variable increases, the dependent variable tends to decrease and vice versa (Benitez et al., 2020). Thus, even though the relationship is negative, it can still have significant influence.

Discussion

The influence of work environment on employee loyalty

The results of the hypothesis test indicate that the work environment variable has a significant influence on employee loyalty, thereby supporting the acceptance of the first hypothesis. The results of this study align with previous studies on different objects, which have found a significant influence between the work environment and employee loyalty (Darwanto, 2022; Rumadaul & Mathori, 2023; Widyastuti & Prabowo, 2024). Previous research conducted by Rumadaul (2023), suggests that employees can work optimally when the workplace has a conducive work environment, which provides a sense of security and comfort. Therefore, this study finds a match where the work environment has a significant influence on increasing the loyalty of Generation Z employees.

The influence of ethical leadership on employee loyalty

The results of the second test show that the variable of ethical leadership has a significant influence on employee loyalty; therefore, the second hypothesis is accepted. This finding aligns with previous research Wiratama (2024), which suggests that ethical leadership have an impact on employee loyalty. To achieve organizational goals, leaders can influence employees by implementing clear ethical standards. In addition, previous research shows that ethical leadership not only influences employee loyalty, but can also affect other variables, such as employee performance (Susan et al., 2024). So that ethical leadership can demonstrate through leaders' daily behavior and inspire employees to achieve organizational goals.

The influence of work motivation on employee loyalty

The results of the third hypothesis indicate that the work motivation variable has a significant influence on employee loyalty, thereby supporting the acceptance of the fourth hypothesis. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Agustin et al., 2023; Chandra et al., 2024; Yasmine & Fanji, 2024), which state that high work motivation can encourage employee loyalty. Another study conducted by Sirait (2024), showed that higher work motivation can increase the level of discipline in carrying out tasks and following organizational rules. Employee loyalty can increase when employees have good work

motivation. Employees with work motivation are seen as more involved, responsible, and have a desire to stay in the organization in the long term. Therefore, management needs to foster a work environment that promote internal motivation through recognition, involvement, and appreciation for employee contributions.

The influence of work environment on work motivation

The fourth hypothesis test in this study indicates that the work environment has a significant impact on work motivation; therefore, the hypothesis is accepted. This finding aligns with Darwanto (2022) research, which states that the higher the quality of the work environment, the greater the work motivation felt by employees. Through a comfortable, safe, supportive, and conducive working environment, not only does it create a good working atmosphere, but it can also encourage employees to be more enthusiastic in carrying out their duties. This is reinforced by Fathiah (2021), who explain that work motivation is reflected in the employee's desire to give their best for their work. Therefore, to foster employee work motivation, it is necessary to create a positive work environment, both physically and non-physically, so that employees can contribute optimally to organizational goals.

The influence of ethical leadership on work motivation

The result of the fifth hypothesis test indicate that ethical leadership has a significant impact on work motivation, thereby supporting the acceptance of this hypothesis. This finding supports the research of Wiratama (2024), which states that leadership based on ethical values can encourage increased employee work motivation. Leaders who demonstrate honest, fair, responsible, and consistent attitudes in their actions and decision making will build trust and respect from their subordinates. In situations like this, employees feel valued, safe, and motivated to give their best contribution because they assume that the organization is run transparently and with integrity.

The influence of work environment on employee loyalty with work motivation as a mediating variable

The results of sixth hypothesis test indicated that work environment variables have a significant impact on employee loyalty through work motivation, serving as mediating variable; therefore, this hypothesis can be accepted. This means that work motivation acts as a bridge in connection the work environment with loyalty. Consequently, a good work environment can enhance employee motivation, which in turn leads to increased employee loyalty to the organization. However, these results contradict the research of Barri (2024) & Lestari (2024), which state that motivation cannot be a mediating variable for the work environment. The difference in results is likely due to differences in the characteristics of respondents and research objects.

The influence of ethical leadership on employee loyalty with work motivation as a mediating variable

The results of the seventh hypothesis test indicate that ethical leadership has a significant influence on employee loyalty through work motivation as mediating variable. Therefore, the hypothesis can be accepted. This means that work motivation can grow when leaders possess ethical value, such as honesty, fairness, integrity, and responsibility, which can ultimately increase employee loyalty. The result of this study align with those of Wiratama (2024), which suggest that ethical leadership not only enhances work motivation but also promotes employee

loyalty. Therefore, to increase employee loyalty, a leader who is based on ethics is needed along with individual work motivation.

CONCLUSION

Research shows that the work environment, ethical leadership, and work motivation significantly influence employee loyalty, with the work environment and ethical leadership also strongly linked to work motivation. Work motivation mediates the effects of the work environment and ethical leadership on employee loyalty, meaning Generation Z employee loyalty improves when supported by a positive work environment and ethical leaders who also boost their motivation. Practically, organizations employing Generation Z should focus on fostering supportive workplaces and ethical leadership to enhance loyalty and motivation. Future research could explore additional factors influencing Generation Z loyalty, possibly focusing on specific cities or studying employees within single organizations for more tailored insights.

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