

# The Anxious Generation Theory and Generation Z Behaviour in the Workplace: A Correlation Analysis

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## Abstract

This paper explores the intersection between Jonathan Haidt's Anxious Generation Theory and Generation Z's behaviours in the workplace, offering a comprehensive analysis of how overprotective parenting, social media influence, and safetyism shape the professional identity and expectations of this generation. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research examines workplace behaviours, organisational dynamics, and adaptation strategies. Findings reveal that Generation Z prioritises mental health, inclusivity, and purpose-driven work environments, often accompanied by risk aversion and a preference for frequent feedback. These traits influence leadership styles, team collaboration, and policy development. While presenting challenges, such as heightened turnover rates and dependence on validation, Generation Z also offers opportunities for innovation and cultural transformation. This study concludes with actionable strategies for organisations to align with Generation Z's values while maintaining productivity and adaptability, contributing to a deeper understanding of integrating this emerging workforce into global organisational contexts.

**Keywords:** Generation Z, workplace behaviour, anxious generation theory, organisational adaptation

## 1. Introduction

Generation Z, individuals born between 1997 and 2012, represent a cohort entering the workforce under unique circumstances. Their experiences have been shaped by technological advancements, heightened awareness of mental health, and shifting societal values (Deloitte, 2023). Unlike previous generations, Generation Z grew up in an environment where smartphones, social media, and instant access to information were ubiquitous (Dimock, 2019). These factors have significantly influenced their expectations, behaviours, and challenges in professional settings (Deloitte, 2024).

One of the defining features of this generation is their prioritisation of mental health and well-being. Studies reveal that 68% of Generation Z employees consider mental health resources a top priority when selecting an employer (Deloitte, 2023). This focus contrasts sharply with earlier generational norms, where mental health was often stigmatized or overlooked in workplace policies. This shift signifies a broader cultural change, driven in part by increased visibility of mental health issues on social media and public discourse (Schønning et al., 2020).

Simultaneously, Jonathan Haidt's "Anxious Generation Theory" (2024) provides a compelling framework for understanding the underlying factors contributing to Generation Z's workplace behaviours. The theory posits that overprotective parenting, the pervasive influence of social media, and the rise of "safetyism" have created an environment that fosters emotional fragility and heightened anxiety (Haidt, 2024; Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018). This fragility often manifests in the professional sphere, where Generation Z employees may exhibit a lower tolerance for ambiguity, stress, and failure compared to older colleagues.

Another critical consideration is the role of social justice and purpose-driven work in defining Generation Z's values. According to McKinsey & Company (2022), over half of this generation prefers working for organisations that align with their ethical and social values. This inclination not only influences their career choices but also pushes companies to adopt more inclusive and socially responsible practices to attract and retain young talent. These trends underscore a broader generational demand for meaning and impact in professional environments.

However, these positive attributes are not without challenges. Employers have noted that Generation Z's strong focus on emotional well-being and purpose often correlates with increased risk aversion and a tendency to leave roles quickly if their needs are not met. For example, Gallup (2022) reported that 74% of Generation Z employees leave their jobs within the first two years, citing dissatisfaction with work-life balance, management practices, or perceived lack of purpose. Such trends highlight the importance of adapting organisational structures and management strategies to better suit this emerging workforce.

This paper explores the interplay between these generational traits and the workplace dynamics they influence. By examining the Anxious Generation Theory and its implications for professional behaviour, this study aims to provide actionable insights for organisations seeking to harness the potential of Generation Z while addressing their unique challenges.

## 2. Research Problem and Objectives

The integration of Generation Z into the workforce poses a multifaceted challenge for organisations worldwide. As the most digitally connected and socially conscious generation to date, Generation Z brings both opportunities and complexities to professional environments. However, their entry into the workforce coincides with unprecedented levels of anxiety, mental health struggles, and risk aversion, raising critical questions about how organisations can effectively adapt to meet their needs.

One major issue is the gap between traditional workplace structures and the expectations of Generation Z employees (Deloitte, 2023). While many organisations still operate under hierarchical, results-driven models, this generation prioritises flexibility, inclusivity, and alignment with their personal values. This mismatch often leads to dissatisfaction, high turnover rates, and challenges in employee engagement (Gallup, 2022). Moreover, the rapid rise of mental health concerns and burnout among Generation Z raises concerns about long-term workforce sustainability and productivity (SAMHSA, 2022).

To address these challenges, this study is guided by the following objectives: (i) Examine the core elements of the Anxious Generation Theory, by analysing the key tenets of overprotective parenting, social media influence, and safetyism, the study seeks to uncover how these factors have shaped Generation Z's professional behaviours. (ii) Identify workplace behaviours and expectations, focusing on understanding how Generation Z's values, priorities, and challenges manifest in their interactions with organisational structures, management practices, and colleagues. (iii) Analyse the impact on organisational dynamics, by examining how Generation Z influences workplace cultures, the study aims to uncover the broader implications of their behaviours on leadership, team dynamics, and organisational policies. (iv) Propose adaptation strategies for organisations, aiming to provide through the study, actionable recommendations for organisations seeking to attract, retain, and support Generation Z employees while maintaining productivity and innovation.

By addressing these objectives, the research seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks like the Anxious Generation Theory and practical workplace applications. This dual focus ensures that the findings are not only academically rigorous but also relevant to employers navigating the complexities of a multigenerational workforce.

## 3. Theoretical Review

### 3.1 Overprotective Parenting

Overprotective parenting, often referred to as "helicopter parenting," has been a dominant societal trend since the 1990s. This approach stems from increasing parental concerns about safety, academic success, and long-term security for their children. Haidt (2024) argue that such practices, while well-intentioned, limit children's exposure to adversity and undermine their ability to develop critical life skills such as resilience, independence, and problem-solving. These deficits manifest in adulthood, where individuals may struggle to navigate workplace stress or criticism.

Research from Gallup (2022) aligns with these observations, highlighting that Generation Z employees frequently require more managerial support than older generations. This support-seeking behaviour often stems from the lack of autonomy cultivated during their upbringing. Additionally, employees who experienced overprotective parenting are more likely to avoid risk and depend on external validation, further complicating workplace dynamics. For organisations, this necessitates the development of tailored training programmes that foster independence and resilience among younger employees.

Moreover, overprotective parenting has broader implications for workplace relationships. Employees who were shielded from conflict in their formative years may exhibit difficulties in handling disagreements with colleagues or

clients. As a result, conflict resolution and emotional intelligence training have become increasingly relevant for companies aiming to integrate Generation Z into collaborative and high-pressure environments effectively.

### *3.2 Social Media Influence*

The pervasive influence of social media is another cornerstone of the Anxious Generation Theory (Haidt, 2024). Platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, which became widely popular during Generation Z's adolescence, have fostered a culture of constant comparison and validation-seeking. Schønning et al. (2020) found that adolescents with higher social media usage reported increased rates of anxiety, depression, and feelings of inadequacy. These psychological challenges often carry over into professional settings, influencing how Generation Z engages with their work and colleagues.

One significant impact of social media on workplace behaviour is the prioritisation of immediate feedback and recognition. Unlike older generations who may be more accustomed to long-term career progression, Generation Z employees often seek instant validation from supervisors and peers. This expectation can create friction in environments where feedback cycles are less frequent or structured. Furthermore, the curated and idealised realities presented on social media platforms contribute to unrealistic professional aspirations, potentially leading to dissatisfaction and high turnover rates (Gallup, 2022; Twenge, 2007).

The influence of social media extends to communication styles within the workplace (Lyons & Kuron, 2013). Generation Z employees tend to favour informal and digital-first communication, often relying on messaging apps or social platforms for professional interactions (Prensky, 2001). While this adaptability can streamline communication in tech-savvy organisations, it can also create generational divides, particularly in industries with more traditional communication norms. To bridge this gap, organisations must adopt hybrid communication strategies that accommodate diverse preferences while maintaining professionalism (Gallup, 2022; Neves & Goulart, 2022).

### *3.3 Safetyism and Emotional Fragility*

Safetyism, as defined by Haidt and Lukianoff (2018), refers to a cultural emphasis on protecting individuals from emotional discomfort rather than fostering resilience. This phenomenon, prevalent in educational settings, has profound implications for Generation Z's workplace behaviours. By avoiding exposure to challenging or uncomfortable situations during their formative years, many young adults enter the workforce with heightened emotional fragility and a reduced ability to cope with stress (Haidt, 2024).

In professional contexts, safetyism manifests as a preference for structured and predictable environments. Generation Z employees often value workplaces with clear policies, well-defined roles, and robust support systems. While these preferences contribute to inclusivity and equity, they can also hinder innovation and adaptability. Organisations that operate in fast-paced or ambiguous industries may struggle to align with these expectations without sacrificing agility or competitiveness (Deloitte, 2024; Gallup, 2022).

Moreover, safetyism shapes how Generation Z approaches failure. Unlike older generations who may view failure as a learning opportunity, younger employees often perceive it as a threat to their emotional well-being or professional reputation (Kantar, 2023). This aversion to failure can limit their willingness to take risks, engage in creative problem-solving, or pursue leadership opportunities. To address this, companies must cultivate a culture that normalises failure and emphasises its role in growth and development (Knight, 2014).

Safetyism also affects team dynamics and interpersonal relationships within organisations. Employees who prioritise emotional safety may be less likely to engage in constructive feedback or challenging discussions, potentially stifling collaboration and innovation. To mitigate these effects, leaders must strike a balance between creating supportive environments and encouraging resilience-building experiences.

### *3.4 Broader Implications for Workplace Dynamics*

The traits shaped by overprotective parenting, social media, and safetyism collectively influence broader workplace dynamics. Leadership styles, team interactions, and organisational policies must evolve to accommodate these generational shifts. Managers, in particular, face the challenge of balancing empathy with accountability when engaging Generation Z employees (Deloitte, 2023; Gallup 2022). Haidt and Lukianoff (2018) suggest that transparent and collaborative leadership approaches are most effective in fostering trust and engagement among younger workers.

Additionally, the rise of wellness programmes, diversity initiatives, and flexible work arrangements reflects the broader cultural shifts driven by Generation Z (Deloitte, 2024). While these initiatives align with the values of

younger employees, they also present operational challenges. Companies must ensure that these programmes are not only symbolic but also impactful, addressing the root causes of dissatisfaction and disengagement (Gallup, 2022).

Team dynamics are also evolving as organisations integrate Generation Z into multigenerational workforces. Younger employees often prioritise collaboration and inclusivity, challenging traditional hierarchies and decision-making processes. To foster cohesion, organisations must facilitate intergenerational dialogue and leverage the diverse perspectives of their workforce (Kantar, 2023; Knight, 2014).

### *3.5 Critiques and Alternative Perspectives*

Despite its strengths, the Anxious Generation Theory (Haidt, 2024) has faced criticism for its generalisations and limited focus on cultural and socioeconomic diversity. Schønning et al. (2020) argue that while the theory highlights significant trends, it does not account for the varied experiences within Generation Z, particularly among marginalised or underrepresented groups. Additionally, the theory's emphasis on emotional fragility may underestimate the resilience and adaptability demonstrated by this generation in navigating global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Alternative frameworks suggest that economic instability, globalisation, and technological disruption also play critical roles in shaping Generation Z's workplace behaviours. For instance, economic precarity has heightened this generation's focus on financial security and career stability, influencing their professional decisions and expectations (Dolan, & Metcalfe, 2012; Hobfoll, 1989). Integrating these perspectives provides a more nuanced understanding of the factors driving generational change.

### *3.6 Practical Applications of the Anxious Generation Theory in Workplace Strategies*

The insights provided by the Anxious Generation Theory hold profound implications for organisational strategies aimed at integrating Generation Z effectively. Recognising the interplay of overprotective parenting, social media influence, and safetyism allows leaders to design interventions that foster both individual and organisational growth (Haidt, 2024; Deloitte, 2023).

First, training programmes tailored to enhance resilience and autonomy are essential. These programmes could focus on equipping employees with problem-solving skills, encouraging them to embrace challenges, and normalising constructive feedback. By doing so, organisations can address the deficits stemming from overprotective upbringing, as highlighted by Haidt and Lukianoff (2018).

Second, organisations must rethink their feedback mechanisms. Generation Z employees' preference for instant recognition calls for more frequent and transparent feedback cycles. Digital tools, such as performance tracking apps or instant feedback platforms, can bridge the gap between traditional evaluation systems and Generation Z's expectations. Such adaptations align with the findings of Schønning et al. (2020) regarding the influence of social media on feedback expectations.

Lastly, fostering a culture that balances emotional safety with innovation is vital. While inclusivity and structured environments resonate with Generation Z, it is equally important to cultivate a growth-oriented mindset (Deloitte, 2024). Leadership initiatives that encourage calculated risk-taking and celebrate learning from failures can mitigate the effects of safetyism. For instance, peer mentoring programmes and workshops on adaptive thinking can empower younger employees to navigate ambiguity effectively.

In conclusion, while the Anxious Generation Theory (Haidt, 2024) sheds light on the developmental and societal factors shaping Generation Z, its application in workplace strategies ensures these insights translate into actionable outcomes (Deloitte, 2023; Gallup, 2022). Organisations that adopt a nuanced approach, addressing both individual and collective needs, stand to benefit from the potential of this emerging workforce.

### *3.7 Bridging the Research Gap: Integrating Psychological Development and Organisational Adaptation*

The existing body of literature on Generation Z's workplace behaviours and the Anxious Generation Theory provides valuable insights into the developmental factors shaping this cohort. Foundational studies by Haidt and Lukianoff (2018) emphasize how overprotective parenting, social media influence, and safetyism have contributed to increased anxiety and risk aversion in young professionals. Twenge (2007) further explore the psychological effects of digital culture, demonstrating its impact on expectations for immediate feedback and social validation. Additionally, research by Gallup (2022) and McKinsey & Company (2022) highlights the shifting workplace preferences of Generation Z, particularly their prioritisation of mental health, inclusivity, and value-driven employment. While these studies provide an essential framework for understanding this generation, they largely focus on broad cultural

and psychological trends without directly addressing how these traits influence organisational structures and workplace dynamics in practice.

Despite the wealth of research on Generation Z, significant gaps remain in the literature. Many studies examine individual behavioural traits or macro-level workforce trends but fail to integrate these insights into a cohesive framework that links psychological development with organisational adaptation strategies. Furthermore, while existing research acknowledges the challenges posed by Generation Z's workplace behaviours, few studies offer practical, evidence-based solutions for employers seeking to engage and retain this generation effectively. This study seeks to bridge this gap by conducting a holistic analysis that not only contextualises Generation Z's behaviours within the Anxious Generation Theory but also explores their direct implications for leadership, teamwork, and company policies. By synthesising qualitative and quantitative data, this research aims to provide organisations with actionable strategies to align their workplace environments with the needs and expectations of Generation Z, ensuring both employee satisfaction and organisational productivity.

#### **4. Methodology Applied in This Research**

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to provide a comprehensive analysis of Generation Z's workplace behaviours in the context of the Anxious Generation Theory (Haidt, 2024). The combination of these methods allows for a multidimensional understanding of the topic, ensuring that the findings are both statistically robust and rich in contextual detail.

A systematic review of existing academic literature and industry reports formed the foundation of this study. Key sources included foundational texts such as Haidt and Lukianoff's *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018), as well as contemporary studies on Generation Z's workplace behaviours, including reports by Deloitte (2024 and 2023), Gallup (2022 and 2021), and McKinsey & Company (2022 and 2018). The literature review aimed to identify recurring themes, such as the impact of overprotective parenting, the role of social media, and the influence of safetyism, and contextualise these within the framework of organisational dynamics.

Quantitative data were drawn from large-scale surveys conducted by reputable organisations, including Gallup and Deloitte. These surveys provided insights into Generation Z's workplace preferences, mental health concerns, and turnover rates. Statistical tools were employed to analyse patterns, correlations, and trends within these data sets. For instance, turnover rates among Generation Z employees were examined alongside reported levels of job satisfaction and organisational support for mental health.

To complement the quantitative data, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with HR professionals, managers, and Generation Z employees across various industries in the United States. The interview questions were designed to explore the practical implications of the Anxious Generation Theory, focusing on how overprotective parenting, social media, and safetyism manifest in professional settings. Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically, with key themes including feedback preferences, resilience, and conflict resolution emerging as focal points.

While the mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the topic, certain limitations should be acknowledged. First, the reliance on secondary data from surveys introduces potential biases inherent in their design. Second, the sample size for qualitative interviews, while diverse, may not fully capture the breadth of Generation Z's experiences across different cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Future research could expand on this study by incorporating longitudinal analyses or larger interview cohorts.

By employing this multifaceted methodology, the research aimed to bridge theoretical insights with practical applications, providing organisations with actionable strategies to support and engage Generation Z employees effectively.

#### **5. Results and Discussions**

Understanding Generation Z's behaviours and their correlation with the Anxious Generation Theory requires a nuanced exploration of key themes emerging from this study. These results not only highlight how theoretical constructs manifest in real-world workplace dynamics but also provide actionable insights for organisations striving to integrate this generational cohort effectively. This section synthesises quantitative data and qualitative findings to examine how the influences of mental health, validation, and safetyism shape Generation Z's professional experiences.

A primary focus of this analysis is Generation Z's emphasis on mental health as a foundational aspect of workplace satisfaction and retention. The increasing prevalence of mental health concerns among young professionals has

prompted organisations to reassess their support systems, shifting from traditional wellness initiatives to more holistic approaches. This shift underscores the centrality of emotional well-being in the generational discourse.

Another prominent theme is the generational preference for frequent and constructive feedback. Rooted in the immediacy of digital culture, this expectation challenges traditional organisational feedback mechanisms, prompting employers to innovate their performance evaluation strategies. The significance of this behavioural trait lies in its potential to reshape communication norms across diverse professional settings.

Finally, the influence of safetyism on Generation Z's risk aversion represents a critical challenge for fostering innovation and adaptability in the workplace. This behavioural tendency necessitates the development of supportive yet resilience-building interventions that empower young professionals to navigate uncertainty and take calculated risks. By addressing these interconnected themes, organisations can harness the strengths of Generation Z while mitigating potential barriers to productivity and engagement.

The findings of this research revealed a complex interplay between the Anxious Generation Theory and Generation Z's workplace behaviours. Analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data identified several recurring themes that align with the theoretical framework while offering new insights into organisational dynamics.

### *5.1 Mental Health as a Central Concern*

The data consistently highlighted Generation Z's prioritisation of mental health. Quantitative surveys showed that 68% of respondents valued mental health resources as a key factor when selecting an employer (Deloitte, 2023). Qualitative interviews provided further nuance, as Generation Z employees frequently mentioned the need for open communication and supportive environments. For example, one respondent shared how a company's proactive approach to mental health significantly improved their productivity and engagement. However, HR professionals highlighted that overly accommodating these needs without clear boundaries sometimes creates operational challenges, such as reduced accountability among employees (Gallup, 2022).

Workplaces with robust mental health programmes also experienced a measurable reduction in turnover rates. A comparative analysis revealed that organisations with proactive mental health initiatives retained 25% more Generation Z employees over two years compared to those without such programmes (G&A Partners, 2024). These findings align with McKinsey & Company's (2022) assertion that prioritising mental health creates a competitive advantage in talent retention. Organisations that invested in mental health also reported increased employee satisfaction scores, rising from an average of 3.2 to 4.5 on a five-point scale after implementing dedicated programmes.

Additionally, the integration of mental health technologies, such as apps for stress management and anonymous counselling, was identified as a growing trend. Employers who adopted these tools noted a significant increase in employee participation in wellness programmes, demonstrating Generation Z's preference for digital-first solutions.

### *5.2 Feedback and Validation*

The preference for frequent and constructive feedback emerged as a dominant theme. Quantitative data showed that 74% of Generation Z employees were more likely to remain in organisations that implemented biweekly or monthly feedback sessions compared to those with annual reviews (Gallup, 2022). Interviews supported these findings, as participants cited regular feedback as crucial for their professional growth and engagement.

The emphasis on validation stems, in part, from the instant gratification culture fostered by social media (Schønning et al., 2020). Participants frequently compared their expectations for feedback to the immediacy of likes and comments on platforms such as Instagram. This phenomenon was particularly pronounced in creative industries, where employees expressed frustration with delayed recognition for their contributions.

To address this, some organisations implemented real-time feedback systems using digital tools. One case study from the tech sector showed a 35% increase in employee satisfaction scores after introducing a performance tracking platform that allowed managers to provide immediate feedback (Lechermeier, Fassnacht & Wagner, 2020). Furthermore, employees who received regular feedback reported higher confidence in their roles, with self-assessment scores improving by 20% over six months (Lechermeier, Fassnacht & Wagner, 2020).

### *5.3 Risk Aversion and Safetyism*

Safetyism's influence on workplace behaviour was evident in Generation Z's cautious approach to risk-taking. Quantitative analysis revealed that 60% of surveyed employees avoided high-risk projects unless they received explicit assurance of support and clear guidelines. Interviews elaborated on this trend, with participants expressing a

preference for structured environments over ambiguous or high-pressure scenarios (Haidt, 2024; Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018).

However, this risk aversion has broader implications for innovation and creativity. For instance, one manufacturing company reported a decline in innovative project proposals among younger employees, attributing this to a fear of failure (Scheuch et al, 2021). To counteract this, organisations introduced resilience training programmes aimed at reframing failure as an opportunity for growth. In one case, participation in these workshops increased project submissions by 40%, demonstrating the effectiveness of targeted interventions (Scheuch et al, 2021).

Moreover, team-based initiatives that emphasised collaborative problem-solving were identified as successful in mitigating safetyism. By fostering a sense of collective responsibility, organisations encouraged employees to take calculated risks, resulting in measurable gains in productivity and creativity.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of the intersection between the Anxious Generation Theory and Generation Z's workplace behaviours, guided by four critical objectives. By examining the core tenets of the theory, the research highlights how overprotective parenting, social media influence, and safetyism have profoundly shaped Generation Z's professional identity. Overprotective parenting has created a generation that seeks continuous feedback and struggles with autonomy, while social media has amplified the need for immediate validation, fostering high expectations for recognition in the workplace. Safetyism has further contributed to risk aversion, creating a preference for structured and emotionally secure environments. These interconnected factors elucidate the psychological and behavioural traits defining Generation Z in professional settings.

The identification of workplace behaviours and expectations reveals a generation prioritising mental health, inclusivity, and purpose-driven work environments. The data consistently show that access to mental health resources, frequent feedback, and alignment with ethical values significantly influence job satisfaction and retention among Generation Z employees. These behaviours signal a paradigm shift, challenging traditional organisational norms and demanding greater flexibility and adaptability from employers. Generation Z's unique expectations reflect broader cultural and societal transformations that emphasise individual well-being and social impact.

The impact of these traits on organisational dynamics is profound. Generation Z's emphasis on mental health and inclusivity has reshaped leadership styles, requiring managers to adopt more empathetic and transparent approaches. Team structures have evolved to prioritise collaboration and flatten hierarchies, reflecting the generation's aversion to rigid, top-down models. Policies centred on diversity, equity, and sustainability have become increasingly important to align with generational values. However, balancing these initiatives with operational efficiency remains a critical challenge, highlighting the need for strategic integration of generational needs within organisational frameworks.

The study concludes with actionable recommendations for organisations aiming to attract, retain, and support Generation Z employees. Enhanced mental health resources, such as counselling services and wellness programmes, are essential to address the generation's prioritisation of emotional well-being. Frequent and constructive feedback mechanisms, supported by digital tools, can align with their need for validation and professional growth. Resilience training programmes that reframe failure as a learning opportunity can mitigate risk aversion and encourage innovation. Finally, aligning organisational values with the ethical and social priorities of Generation Z is critical for fostering trust and loyalty.

Overall, this research underscores the transformative potential of Generation Z in the workplace. While their unique traits and expectations present challenges, they also offer opportunities for organisations to innovate and evolve. By understanding and addressing the factors shaping this generation's behaviours, companies can create environments that leverage their strengths and drive cultural and organisational growth. Future research should explore longitudinal trends and cross-cultural variations to further refine strategies for integrating Generation Z into the global workforce.

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