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Adaptation Strategies of Generation Z Employees to Traditional Organizational Culture: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract : *Generation Z now constitutes a significant component of the global workforce, yet faces substantial adaptation challenges when entering companies with traditional, hierarchical, and procedural organizational cultures. This study aims to explore the adaptation strategies developed by Generation Z employees in response to tensions between their personal values and the cultural demands of traditional companies. Employing a qualitative approach with an interpretative phenomenological analysis design, this research involved 10 participants working in three established traditional companies within the Greater Jakarta area (Jabodetabek), each operating for a minimum of 25 years. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using a six-stage interpretative phenomenological analysis procedure. The findings identified five superordinate themes, including fundamental value clashes encompassing flexibility versus rigid procedures, transparency versus information hierarchy, and immediate feedback versus annual evaluations, passive resistance as an initial strategy manifested through quiet non-compliance, work-to-rule, and silent psychological exit, the critical role of direct supervisors as cultural buffers and determinants of personal loyalty, dual identity negotiation through selective conformity and authenticity strain, and reconstruction of loyalty's meaning from unconditional to conditional or reciprocal. This study also proposes a Three-Phase Adaptation Model for Generation Z in Traditional Companies consisting of disorientation, negotiation, and stabilization or exit. Theoretical contributions include enriching coping theory, extending social identity theory, and introducing the concept of authenticity strain, while practical implications encompass redesigning performance evaluation systems, cross-generational leadership training, and the development of reverse mentoring programs.*

Keywords : *Generation Z, Organizational Culture, Adaptation Strategy, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Workplace Dynamics*

Abstrak : Generasi Z kini menjadi bagian signifikan dari angkatan kerja global, namun menghadapi tantangan adaptasi saat memasuki perusahaan dengan budaya organisasi yang tradisional, hierarkis, dan prosedural. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi strategi adaptasi yang dikembangkan oleh karyawan Generasi Z sebagai respons terhadap ketegangan antara nilai personal dan tuntutan budaya perusahaan. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain interpretative phenomenological analysis yang melibatkan 10 partisipan di tiga perusahaan tradisional mapan di wilayah Jabodetabek yang telah beroperasi minimal 25 tahun. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan prosedur enam tahap interpretative phenomenological analysis. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi lima tema utama, yaitu benturan nilai fundamental, resistensi pasif sebagai strategi awal, peran krusial atasan langsung sebagai penyangga budaya, negosiasi identitas ganda, serta rekonstruksi makna loyalitas dari tanpa syarat menjadi kondisional atau resiprokal. Penelitian ini juga mengusulkan Model Adaptasi Tiga Fase yang terdiri dari disorientasi, negosiasi, dan stabilisasi atau keluar. Kontribusi teoretis mencakup pengayaan coping theory, perluasan social identity theory, serta pengenalan konsep authenticity strain, sementara implikasi praktis meliputi perancangan ulang sistem evaluasi kinerja, pelatihan kepemimpinan lintas generasi, dan pengembangan program reverse mentoring.

Kata Kunci : Generasi Z, Budaya Organisasi, Strategi Adaptasi, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Dinamika Kerja

INTRODUCTION

The global workforce demographic transformation has entered a new phase with the massive entry of Generation Z (born 1997–2012) into the professional world. In Indonesia, Generation Z is projected to comprise over 30 percent of the total workforce within the next five years (Alimbudiono & Tandianto, 2025). The fundamental characteristics of Generation Z, shaped by a hyper-connected digital environment, carry significant implications for Human Resource Management practices, particularly within established organizations possessing traditional work cultures. Generation Z possesses characteristics fundamentally distinct from previous generations. Twenge (2017) identified that Generation Z grew up as digital natives exposed to technology from an early age, shaping preferences for fast, visual, and informal communication. Dimock (2019) added that Generation Z values authenticity, transparency, and diversity, and has high expectations for work flexibility. Research by Gajda and Chrupała-Pniak (2025), published in the International Journal of Human Resource Management (Scopus Q1), revealed that young HR professionals from Generation Z expect a supportive work environment encompassing positive working relationships, flexibility, and workspaces that support concentration and collaboration. Chillakuri (2022) added that effective onboarding processes for Generation Z must include role clarity, social support, and opportunities to make meaningful contributions from the outset.

A notable phenomenon is the high turnover rate and employment terminations involving Generation Z workers in traditional companies. Throughout 2024, many firms reported terminating Generation Z employees due to adaptation difficulties (Setiyawan, 2025). Identified cases include the use of casual language in the office, mismatched expectations regarding job types, and value conflicts between Generation Z's espoused self-love priorities and corporate cultures focused on loyalty and tradition. Traditional organizational culture, as conceptualized by Schein (2010), is characterized by rigid hierarchical structures, binding formal procedures, clear chains of command, and an orientation towards loyalty and seniority. Research by Raziki, Hamrila, Ya'kob, and Zarkasih (2025) found that open leadership and flexible work structures significantly facilitate new employee adaptation, while authoritarian leadership and rigid structures hinder it. In the Indonesian context, Suzianti, Amaradhanny, and Fathia (2023) found that local cultural values such as collectivism and respect for seniority still strongly influence organizational dynamics, although younger generations are beginning to show value shifts. Dipoatmodjo (2025) in Makassar found that local cultural values such as Siri' na Pacce influence forms of passive resistance among Generation Z towards organizational demands that are not aligned with their personal values.

Existing quantitative research has successfully identified various determinants of turnover intention among Generation Z. Tumiwa and Lumentah (2025) found that organizational justice, perceived organizational support, and job embeddedness significantly influence employee turnover intentions, with generational differences acting as a moderator. However, existing studies tend to focus on problem identification without deeply exploring the actual adaptation strategies developed by Generation Z. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping theory distinguishes adaptation strategies into problem-focused coping (efforts to change the stressful situation) and emotion-focused coping (efforts to regulate emotional responses to pressure). In organizational contexts, research by Ke, Liu, and Gu (2025) found that Generation Z employees under authoritarian leadership are 25 percent more likely to exhibit counterproductive work behaviors. Research by Nguyen and Petchsawang (2026) identified that supervisory support, peer relationships, and work autonomy are three primary drivers of employee engagement for Generation Z. Kraght and Brøndum (2025) added that soft skills gaps and differing value perceptions between Generation Z and senior generations are primary sources of cross-generational conflict in the workplace.

Identified research gaps include: first, most studies use quantitative survey approaches that measure general preferences and attitudes but fail to capture the depth of subjective experience; second, existing studies are generally located in modern companies or startups, while traditional organizations have received less attention; third, there is minimal exploration of adaptation strategies as an active process developed by individuals. Based on the literature review, this

research is built on the premise that Generation Z's adaptation to traditional organizational culture is a complex process involving value negotiation, identity management, and the development of resistance and selective compliance strategies. This framework guides the phenomenological exploration of participants' subjective experiences.

Based on these gaps, this research is guided by the main question: "What are the adaptation strategies of Generation Z employees towards traditional company organizational culture?" Specifically, this study aims to: (1) explore the subjective experiences of Generation Z workers when entering traditional company work environments; (2) identify the adaptation strategies they develop; and (3) analyze the meanings constructed about the adaptation process and its influence on self-identity and organizational commitment.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design as developed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). IPA was chosen for its ability to explore how individuals make meaning of their personal experiences in specific contexts, with a commitment to idiographic analysis and a double hermeneutic perspective.

Research Participants

The study involved 10 participants recruited using purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria were: (1) born between 1997 and 2012; (2) have worked for a minimum of 6 months at their current company; (3) work for a company established for at least 20 years; (4) reported experiencing adaptation difficulties in their initial work period; and (5) voluntarily agreed to participate. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Code	Age	Gender	Tenure	Education	Company Sector
P-01	24	Male	14 months	Bachelor in Management	Manufacturing
P-02	23	Female	8 months	Diploma in Accounting	Distribution
P-03	25	Female	18 months	Bachelor in Psychology	Financial Services
P-04	22	Male	7 months	Bachelor in Industrial Engineering	Manufacturing
P-05	24	Female	12 months	Bachelor in Communication	Distribution
P-06	25	Male	20 months	Bachelor in Economics	Financial Services
P-07	23	Female	10 months	Bachelor in Design	Manufacturing
P-08	24	Male	15 months	Bachelor in Computer Science	Distribution
P-09	22	Female	6 months	Bachelor in Administration	Financial Services
P-10	25	Male	16 months	Bachelor in Law	Manufacturing

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting between 45 and 90 minutes per participant. Interviews were recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide was developed based on the operationalization of concepts covering adaptation strategies, organizational culture, and subjective experience.

Data analysis followed the six-stage IPA procedure (Smith et al., 2009): (1) reading and re-reading transcripts; (2) initial noting (descriptive, linguistic, conceptual); (3) developing emergent themes; (4) searching for connections across themes; (5) moving to the next case; and (6) looking for patterns across cases.

Credibility was maintained through prolonged engagement, source triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Transferability was fulfilled through thick description. Dependability and confirmability were maintained through an audit trail and reflexivity journal (Amin et al., 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Primary Findings

Data analysis yielded five superordinate themes representing the essence of participants' adaptation experiences. Table 2 presents the complete thematic structure.

Table 2. Thematic Structure of Analysis Results

Superordinate Theme	Sub-themes	Frequency
Fundamental Value Clash	Flexibility vs. Rigid Procedures	9/10
	Transparency vs. Information Hierarchy	8/10
	Immediate Feedback vs. Annual Evaluation	10/10
Passive Resistance	Quiet Non-Compliance	7/10
	Work-to-rule	6/10
	Silent Psychological Exit	5/10
Critical Role of Direct Supervisors	Supervisor as Cultural Filter	8/10
	Coach vs. Commander Leadership	9/10
	Determinant of Personal Loyalty |	10/10
Dual Identity Negotiation	Two Selves: Personal vs. Professional	8/10
	Selective Conformity	7/10
	Authenticity Strain	6/10
Reconstruction of Loyalty's Meaning	Situational Loyalty	7/10
	Loyalty to Team, Not Company	6/10
	Reciprocity-Based Loyalty	8/10

Fundamental Value Clash

All participants (10 out of 10) experienced value clashes between their expectations and the reality of traditional company culture. The strongest clash occurred regarding feedback. Farhan (P-06, male, 25, financial services) stated: "I need to know whether my work is correct or not. Not once a year, but every week or every month. If I'm wrong, I want to be corrected immediately. But here, feedback only comes during the annual evaluation. And even then, it's usually just numerical scores without detailed explanation."

This finding aligns with Gajda and Chrupała-Pniak (2025), who identified that Generation Z views annual evaluation systems as outdated mechanisms irrelevant to their work rhythm. Kraght and Brøndum (2025) also found that expectation gaps between Generation Z and traditional organizations are primary predictors of job dissatisfaction.

Deeper analysis revealed that value clashes possess a distinct temporal dimension. Participants reported that the most acute tension occurred during the first 3-6 months of employment. Farhan continued:"The first three months were the hardest. Every morning I had to mentally prepare before leaving. I thought, do I fit here? But after the fourth month, I started finding my own rhythm."

This phenomenon indicates a characteristic adaptation curve for Generation Z, where the initial period is marked by acute culture shock followed by an adjustment phase.

Value clashes also occurred regarding flexibility. Gita (P-07, female, 23, manufacturing) expressed:"I'm used to working with deadlines as the main benchmark. But here, time is more important than results. I was once reprimanded for leaving at 4 PM even though my work was finished. They said, 'This is an office, not a cafe.'"

This study also identified that not all Generation Z values carry equal weight when clashing with organizational culture. There exists a value hierarchy where flexibility and immediate feedback are placed at the highest (non-negotiable) level, while aspects such as informal communication styles are more compromisable. Hadi (P-08) affirmed:"I can accept formal dress codes. I can accept having to address superiors as 'Sir' or 'Ma'am'. But I cannot accept it if my work results are never appreciated or commented on."

This value hierarchy aligns with Schwartz's (2012) value hierarchy theory, which states that individuals possess a tiered value structure where certain values are more central and difficult to compromise.

Passive Resistance as an Initial Strategy

Interestingly, participants did not respond to value clashes with open confrontation, but rather with various forms of passive resistance. Based on cross-case analysis, passive resistance can be categorized into three types with distinct psychological functions, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Typology of Generation Z Passive Resistance

Resistance Type	Behavioral Manifestation	Psychological Function	Example Quote
Quiet Non-Compliance	Doing tasks minimally, not to full capacity	Protection of psychological energy; subtle form of protest	"I do it minimally. Not to my full capacity." (Dimas, P-04
Work-to-rule	Following procedures literally, thus slowing down work	Exposing the irony of excessive procedures	"I will follow that procedure precisely. As a result, work becomes slow." (Eka, P-05)
Silent Psychological Exit	Physically present but emotionally absent	Conserving energy for subsequent job searching	"I no longer feel a sense of ownership toward this company. I'm just waiting for the right time." (Joko, P-10)

Dimas (P-04, male, 22, manufacturing) described quiet non-compliance behavior:"I still come on time, still leave on time. But if there's an instruction I find unreasonable, I do it minimally. Not to my full capacity. It's not because I'm lazy, but because I don't believe that instruction will produce results."

The work-to-rule strategy was also identified. Eka (P-05, female, 24, distribution) explained:"The procedures here are very detailed. I know that. So when I disagree with something, I will follow that procedure precisely. Normally people might skip a few steps to speed things up. But I don't. As a result, work becomes slow."

These findings reinforce the results of Ke, Liu, and Gu (2025) that authoritarian leadership increases counterproductive behaviors among Generation Z employees. This study also shows that passive resistance among Generation Z is not merely maladaptive behavior but a deliberate adaptation strategy with specific psychological functions.

The Critical Role of Direct Supervisors as Cultural Brokers

One of the most significant findings is the central role of direct supervisors in participants' adaptation experiences. All participants (10 out of 10) stated that direct supervisors were the primary determining factor in their decision to stay with or leave the company. Deeper analysis revealed that direct supervisors function as cultural brokers—a bridge between Generation Z's value world and the traditional organization's value world.

Effective supervisors performed two main functions: buffering (protecting subordinates from excessively extreme cultural demands) and framing (reframing cultural demands to be more meaningful for subordinates). Citra (P-03, female, 25, financial services) described the buffering function:"Fortunately, my supervisor is an open person. He knows how the culture works in this office. But he also understands that I'm a new employee with a different way of working. So he acts as a kind of 'shield' for me. If there's some absurd policy from above, he filters it first. Sometimes he says, 'This is the rule, but you can do it this way instead.'"

Aditya (P-01, male, 24, manufacturing) affirmed that his loyalty was attached to his supervisor, not the company:"My loyalty is not to the company. The company is just an abstract entity. My loyalty is to my supervisor. Because he is the one who defends me, teaches me, gives me space. If he moves to another company, I will follow."

Based on analysis of participants with positive experiences with their supervisors, this study identified five characteristics of effective supervisors in facilitating Generation Z adaptation: (1)

generational empathy; (2) two-way communication; (3) consistency; (4) advocacy; and (5) situational flexibility.

This finding is consistent with research by Nguyen and Petchsawang (2026), who identified that supervisory support is a primary driver of employee engagement for Generation Z.

Dual Identity Negotiation

Participants reported experiencing psychological pressure due to the necessity of displaying "two different selves" at work and outside the office. This study identified three identity management strategies used by participants.

Strategy 1: Compartmentalization (Strict Separation) – Participants using this strategy consciously separated their "office self" from their "outside self." Bella (P-02, female, 23, distribution) described:"Outside the office, I am a relaxed, open, and critical person. But in the office, I have to put on a mask. I have to speak with excessive politeness, have to smile even if I disagree, have to nod even if inside I'm protesting. Sometimes I get tired of it myself. I feel like I'm not being myself."

Strategy 2: Integration (Gradual Integration) – Participants using this strategy slowly attempted to bring their personal values into the work environment. Farhan (P-06) explained: "I started with small things. For example, I try to use more relaxed language in internal team meetings. Once accepted, I try to suggest other changes. Little by little."

Strategy 3: Withdrawal – Participants using this strategy decided to "turn off" parts of their personal identity while at work. Some participants developed selective conformity strategies, consciously choosing which aspects of culture to follow. Hadi (P-08, male, 24, distribution) stated: "I choose my battles. If it's about dress code, I follow it. If it's about how to speak to superiors, I follow it. But if it's about how to work, I stick to my own way as long as the results are good."

This study introduces the concept of authenticity strain—the psychological pressure resulting from the inability to be "oneself" at work—as a new construct relevant for further study in the context of cross-generational management.

Reconstruction of Loyalty's Meaning

The fifth finding indicates that Generation Z reconstructs the meaning of loyalty in a fundamentally different way from previous generations. Table 4 presents a comparison of loyalty models across generations.

Table 4. Comparison of Loyalty Models Across Generations

Dimension	Baby Boomer & X Generations	Millennial Generation	Generation Z (This Study's Findings)
Loyalty duration	Lifetime	Medium-term (3-7 years)	Situational (as long as mutually beneficial)
Object of loyalty	The company	Company mission/vision	Direct supervisor and team
Basis of loyalty	Normative (moral obligation)	Affective (emotional attachment)	Calculative (cost-benefit analysis)
Expression of loyalty	Hard work, unpaid overtime	Engagement, active participation	Performance as per contract, explicit negotiation

Joko (P-10, male, 25, manufacturing) stated bluntly:: "It's simple. I give my time, energy, and thoughts. In return, I receive salary, experience, and network. If either party feels disadvantaged, this relationship is unhealthy. I will look elsewhere."

Indah (P-09, female, 22, financial services) added that loyalty is more attached to the team than the organization:"I feel attached to my team. They are the ones who help me, who defend me. The company? That's too abstract. I don't have an emotional connection to this building or to the company owners."

Participants in this study explicitly stated that they view the employment relationship as a psychological contract that must benefit both parties. This perspective differs markedly from traditional loyalty concepts often associated with unlimited sacrifice and dedication.

Adaptation Model for Generation Z in Traditional Companies

Based on the synthesis of all findings, this study proposes a Three-Phase Adaptation Model for Generation Z in Traditional Companies:

1. Disorientation (Months 0-3)
   a. Characteristics: Acute culture shock, intensive value clashes, dominant negative emotions
   b. Initial strategies: Observation, boundary testing, seeking allies
   c. Determining factors: Support from direct supervisors and team members
2. Negotiation (Months 4-9)
   a. Characteristics: Development of adaptation strategies, testing various approaches
   b. Strategies: Selective conformity, measured passive resistance, formation of dual identity
   c. Determining factors: Organizational response to resistance, supervisor flexibility
3. Stabilization or Exit (Month 10+)
   a. Characteristics: Achievement of equilibrium or decision to exit
   b. Positive outcomes: Selective integration, commitment to supervisor/team, stable hybrid identity
   c. Negative outcomes: Silent psychological exit, turnover, or burnout

Comparison of Findings with Previous Research

Table 5. Comparison of Study Findings with Previous Research

Aspect	This Study's Findings	Previous Research	Consistency
Feedback preference	Generation Z desires continuous feedback, rejects annual evaluations	Gajda & Chrupała-Pniak (2025); Kraght & Brøndum (2025)	Consistent
Response to authoritarian leadership	Passive resistance (quiet non-compliance, work-to-rule)	Ke, Liu, & Gu (2025)	Consistent & Extends
Organizational loyalty	Conditional/reciprocal loyalty, attached to supervisor/team	Chillakuri (2022)	Consistent
Work flexibility	Flexibility as a non-negotiable need	LaborIQ (2025); Sigma Research Indonesia (2025)	Consistent
Dual identity	Authenticity strain due to compliance demands with traditional culture	Dipoatmodjo (2025)	Novelty
Value hierarchy	Generation Z values have a hierarchical structure (non-negotiable vs negotiable)	Schwartz (2012)	Novelty

The table shows that most findings align with prior studies, particularly regarding Generation Z's preference for continuous feedback, demand for work flexibility, and conditional organizational loyalty. The study also extends existing research by identifying passive resistance to authoritarian leadership. In addition, it offers novel contributions by revealing authenticity strain through dual identity and highlighting a hierarchical structure of Generation Z values.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully explores the adaptation strategies of Generation Z employees within traditional organizational cultures using a phenomenological approach. The five superordinate

themes identified—fundamental value clashes, passive resistance, the critical role of direct supervisors, dual identity negotiation, and the reconstruction of loyalty's meaning—capture a complex and multidimensional adaptation process that reflects both tension and adjustment in the workplace.

The study contributes to theory in several ways. It enriches coping theory introduced by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman by identifying specific forms of passive resistance unique to Generation Z. It also extends social identity theory developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, showing that identification among Generation Z is stronger at the micro level, such as supervisors and teams, rather than at the organizational level. In addition, the study introduces the concept of authenticity strain, defined as psychological pressure that emerges when employees cannot express their true selves in the workplace.

The findings offer clear implications for human resource management. Traditional organizations need to shift leadership styles from command-and-control toward coaching and mentoring practices. Performance evaluation systems should move from annual reviews to continuous feedback mechanisms. Work flexibility must be accommodated while maintaining organizational discipline. Retention strategies should prioritize strengthening relationships between employees, supervisors, and teams. Reverse mentoring programs can also support cross-generational knowledge exchange and improve mutual understanding within organizations.

This study has several limitations. The number of participants is limited to 10 individuals, and the geographical scope is confined to the Greater Jakarta area, which may restrict broader applicability. There is also a potential for retrospective bias in participants' accounts. Future research should address these gaps by conducting longitudinal studies that follow Generation Z employees over time, performing comparative studies across sectors and regions, implementing action research that tests managerial interventions, and applying quantitative approaches to examine causal relationships among the identified variables.

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