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WORK ENGAGEMENT AND ITS RELATED CONSTRUCT AMONG GENERATION Z: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW INTEGRATING JD-R, SET, AND SDT PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: This study conducts a systematic literature review of empirical research published from 2021 to 2025 to identify the key factors shaping work engagement among Generation Z employees. Drawing on the Job Demands, Resources Model, Social Exchange Theory, and Self-Determination Theory, 42 Scopus-indexed studies were examined using the PRISMA 2020 protocol. The synthesis shows that job resources, particularly empowering and ethical leadership, well-being, and flexible work arrangements, consistently predict higher engagement. Trust-based reciprocity and perceived organizational support further strengthen these effects, while autonomy, competence, and relatedness enhance intrinsic motivation. Engagement also emerges as a crucial pathway linking resources to outcomes such as innovation, retention, and commitment. By integrating three major theoretical lenses, this review offers a comprehensive model of Gen Z engagement and highlights practical strategies that emphasize autonomy, trust, ethical leadership, and developmental opportunities to improve loyalty and reduce turnover among younger workers.

Keywords: Work Engagement; Generation Z, Job Demands-Resources Model, Social Exchange Theory, Self-Determination Theory

INTRODUCTION

The entry of Generation Z into the global workforce marks a fundamental shift in how organizations must approach employee engagement. Born between 1995 and 2010, this cohort is projected to constitute nearly one-third of the global labor force by 2030 (Deloitte, 2022). As digital natives who came of age during periods of economic uncertainty, rapid technological change, and global crises, Gen Z brings distinct expectations and values that challenge traditional engagement models (Dimock, 2019; Schroth, 2019). Their workplace priorities center on meaningful work, continuous feedback, flexibility, and authentic leadership rather than the hierarchical structures and financial rewards that motivated previous generations (Goh & Lee, 2018; Turner, 2015).

Work engagement, defined as a positive and fulfilling work-related state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002), has well-established connections to critical organizational outcomes including productivity, innovation, and retention (Harter et al., 2002; Saks, 2006). However, conventional frameworks for understanding engagement, which often emphasize job stability, hierarchical control, and extrinsic rewards, appear insufficient for capturing what drives Gen Z employees. Recent evidence suggests this generation is more strongly influenced by organizational ethics, developmental opportunities, and autonomy than by traditional motivators (Kirchmayer & Fratričová, 2018; Lanier, 2017). Their engagement seems to operate through different psychological and relational mechanisms than those observed in older cohorts.

Emerging empirical research reflects this generational distinctiveness. Studies across diverse organizational contexts have identified unique engagement drivers for Gen Z, including empowering leadership (Dwidienawati et al., 2024), ethical leadership practices (Norina & Sary, 2025), perceived organizational support (Siti Munajah et al., 2024), and hybrid work structures (S. H. Lee et al., 2024). While these individual findings provide valuable insights, they remain theoretically fragmented. Researchers have examined Gen Z engagement through isolated theoretical lenses rather than considering how multiple frameworks might work together to explain this complex phenomenon. This fragmentation limits both scholarly understanding and practical guidance for organizations seeking to engage this crucial demographic.

Three established theoretical frameworks offer complementary perspectives on work engagement. The Job Demands-Resources Model (JD-R) explains how workplace conditions, specifically the balance between demands and resources, influence employee motivation and well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Social Exchange Theory (SET) illuminates how reciprocal relationships between employees and organizations, grounded in trust and perceived organizational support, shape commitment and effort (Blau, 2017; Saks, 2006). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) reveals how fulfillment of basic psychological needs, namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness, sustains intrinsic motivation and engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Each framework addresses different aspects of the engagement puzzle: JD-R identifies what contextual elements matter, SET explains how social processes mediate these effects, and SDT clarifies why certain conditions foster sustained motivation.

Despite the potential explanatory power of integrating these frameworks, no comprehensive review has systematically examined how JD-R, SET, and SDT work together to explain Gen Z engagement. Previous reviews have typically focused on single theories or have not specifically addressed the unique characteristics of this generational cohort. This represents a significant gap in the literature. Understanding Gen Z engagement requires moving beyond isolated theoretical perspectives toward an integrative model that captures how organizational structures,

social relationships, and psychological mechanisms interact within this demographic. Such integration is particularly important given evidence that Gen Z employees respond differently to workplace factors than previous generations (Christopher Lee & Lim, 2024; Osorio & Madero, 2025).

This systematic literature review addresses three interconnected research questions. **First,** what are the key factors influencing Generation Z's work engagement as identified in empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025? **Second,** how do these identified factors align with and illuminate the complementary roles of the Job Demands-Resources Model, Social Exchange Theory, and Self-Determination Theory? **Third,** how can an integrative conceptual model explain the connections between contextual resources, social reciprocity processes, and psychological need satisfaction in fostering Generation Z's engagement?

This review makes important contributions to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it provides the first comprehensive integration of JD-R, SET, and SDT specifically for understanding Gen Z engagement, demonstrating how these established frameworks intersect to create a more complete picture than any single theory can offer. The resulting integrative framework reveals mechanisms through which organizational resources trigger trust-based exchanges that fulfill psychological needs, creating a reinforcing cycle of engagement and positive outcomes. Practically, this synthesis offers evidence-based strategies for organizations navigating the challenge of attracting, engaging, and retaining Gen Z talent. By clarifying how structural conditions, relational dynamics, and psychological processes jointly influence this demographic's engagement, the review provides actionable guidance for designing workplace practices that resonate with Gen Z's distinctive values and expectations.

The following sections present the theoretical foundations underlying this integrative approach, describe the systematic methodology used to identify and synthesize relevant empirical studies, present findings organized around the three theoretical frameworks and their integration, discuss theoretical and practical implications, and conclude with recommendations for research and practice. Through this systematic synthesis of recent empirical evidence viewed through multiple theoretical lenses, we aim to advance understanding of how organizations can effectively engage the generation that represents the future of work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations of Work Engagement

Work engagement, defined as a positive and fulfilling work-related state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002), has demonstrated consistent relationships with critical organizational outcomes including productivity, innovation, and retention (Harter et al., 2002; Saks, 2006). Understanding its antecedents requires examining multiple levels of influence, from structural workplace conditions to relational dynamics and psychological mechanisms. This review synthesizes empirical evidence through three complementary theoretical frameworks that together provide a comprehensive explanation of what drives engagement among Generation Z employees.

Theoretical Frameworks: An Integrative Perspective

The Job Demands-Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008) provides the structural foundation for understanding how workplace conditions shape employee well-being and performance. This framework categorizes occupational characteristics into demands, such as workload and time pressure, that deplete energy, and resources, such as autonomy and social support, that fulfill needs and motivate achievement. The model proposes dual pathways whereby resources initiate motivation leading to engagement, while excessive demands trigger health impairment toward burnout. For Generation Z, whose workplace expectations center on flexibility and continuous development rather than traditional job security, the nature of salient resources appears distinct (Dwidienawati et al., 2024; S. H. Lee et al., 2024). This generation particularly responds to resources that provide autonomy, ethical leadership, and opportunities for growth. The JD-R framework guides our identification of which specific resources and demands most strongly influence Gen Z engagement and how they interact with the relational and motivational mechanisms discussed below.

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 2017; Saks, 2006) illuminates the relational foundation of engagement through the lens of reciprocity and trust. The theory posits that employment relationships operate as social exchanges governed by mutual expectations, where employees reciprocate perceived organizational support with increased commitment and effort. Trust emerges as the fundamental currency enabling these exchanges, reducing uncertainty and allowing individuals to invest energy with confidence that their contributions will be valued (Mayer et al., 1995). For Generation Z, who demonstrate heightened sensitivity to organizational authenticity and ethical conduct (Schroth, 2019), trust-based reciprocity may operate differently than for previous cohorts. Evidence suggests this generation expects transparent communication, fair treatment, and alignment between organizational values and actions (Brown, 2025; Norina & Sary, 2025). When organizations fulfill these expectations, Gen Z employees respond with engagement; when psychological contracts are breached, they rapidly disengage or exit (Xueyun et al., 2023). Social Exchange Theory thus helps explain how organizational practices translate into engagement through relational mechanisms of trust and reciprocity.

Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) reveals the psychological mechanisms sustaining engagement through satisfaction of three basic needs: autonomy, the need for volition and self-direction; competence, the need to feel effective and masterful; and relatedness, the need for connection and belonging. Work environments that support these needs foster autonomous motivation and engagement, whereas environments that thwart them lead to diminished motivation and well-being. For Generation Z, autonomy needs manifest through strong preferences for flexible work arrangements and participative decision-making (S. H. Lee et al., 2024; Osorio & Madero, 2025). Competence needs connect to their desire for continuous learning and skill development (Bautista & Cahigas, 2024), while relatedness needs link to expectations for inclusive, diverse workplaces (Yunyi et al., 2024). Recent research suggests that traditional SDT may require extension to capture Gen Z motivation fully, with purpose and achievement emerging as additional psychological needs relevant to this cohort (Popaitoon, 2022; Salvadorinho et al., 2024). The theory guides our examination of how workplace practices either satisfy or frustrate these psychological needs, thereby enabling or inhibiting engagement.

These three frameworks offer complementary rather than competing explanations of Gen Z engagement. The JD-R Model identifies which contextual elements matter, Social Exchange Theory explains how these elements operate through relational processes, and Self-Determination Theory clarifies why certain conditions sustain motivation. Their integration reveals interconnected mechanisms whereby job resources create conditions for trust-based exchanges that enable psychological need satisfaction. For instance, flexible work arrangements (a JD-R resource) signal organizational trust (SET mechanism) that supports autonomy needs (SDT mechanism). Similarly, empowering leadership (JD-R resource) builds reciprocal relationships (SET) while fulfilling competence and relatedness needs (SDT). These synergistic effects suggest that Gen Z engagement emerges from the alignment of structural conditions, relational dynamics, and psychological experiences.

Despite growing empirical research on Gen Z in the workplace, existing literature remains theoretically fragmented. Previous reviews have examined engagement through single frameworks or have not focused specifically on generational differences. While meta-analyses have established the robustness of the JD-R model across populations (Mazzetti et al., 2023) and confirmed the importance of social exchange processes in engagement, no systematic review has integrated these perspectives to explain engagement specifically among Generation Z. This fragmentation limits both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for organizations seeking to engage this demographically significant cohort. By synthesizing recent empirical evidence through the complementary lenses of JD-R, SET, and SDT, this review addresses a critical gap in understanding how structural resources, social reciprocity, and psychological need satisfaction jointly shape engagement among employees whose values and expectations differ markedly from previous generations.
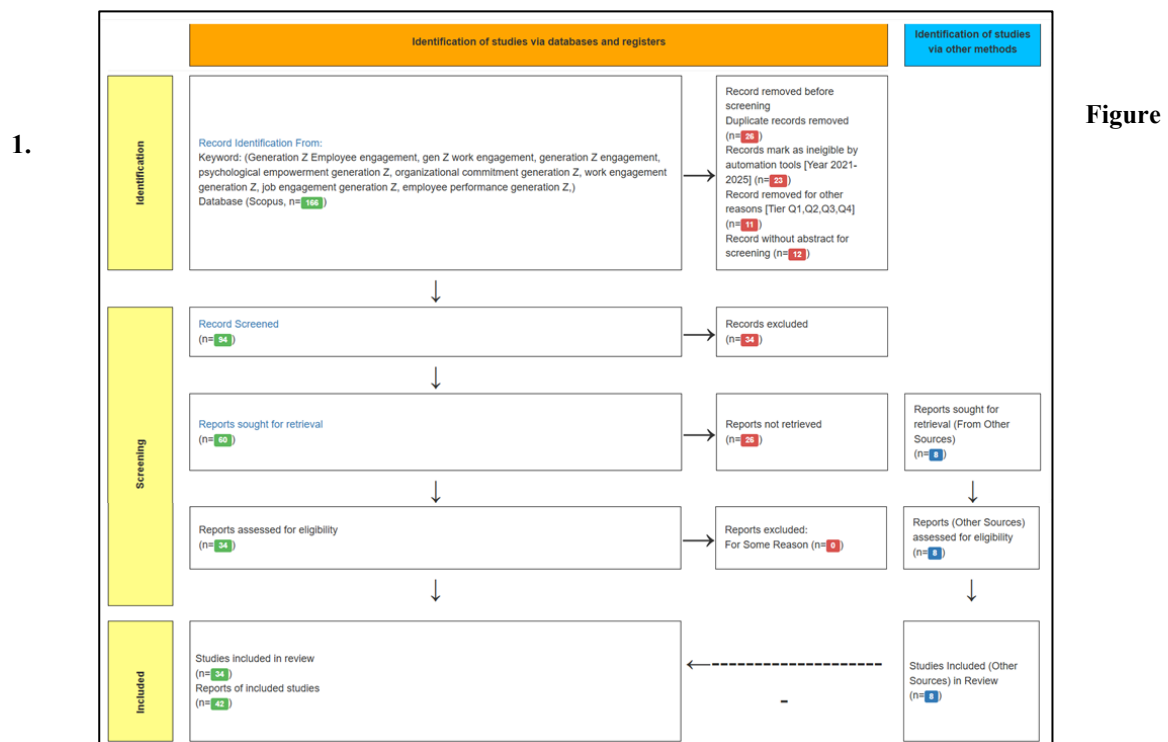
METHODOLOGY

This systematic review follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) framework (Page et al., 2021) to ensure methodological transparency and replicability. The review process was structured into four stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion, with a pre-defined protocol outlining objectives, search strategy, inclusion criteria, and analytical approach prior to commencing the review.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar to capture recent peer-reviewed publications. Search queries combined three clusters of keywords using Boolean operators: Generation Z terms ("Generation Z" OR "Gen Z" OR "post-millennial employees"), engagement terms ("work engagement" OR "employee engagement" OR "job engagement"), and theoretical terms ("job demands-resources" OR "JD-R" OR "social exchange theory" OR "self-determination theory" OR "motivation" OR "organizational support"). The search was limited to articles published in English between 2021 and 2025 within subject areas of Business, Management, and Psychology, focusing specifically on workplace rather than academic contexts.

Studies were included if they met several criteria: empirical research employing quantitative or mixed-methods designs where employee engagement was a central outcome; explicit focus on Generation Z employees (born 1995-2010) within workplace contexts; foundation in one or more of the theoretical

frameworks (JD-R, SET, or SDT), whether explicitly stated or implicitly reflected in measured constructs; and peer-reviewed articles indexed in major databases. Exclusion criteria encompassed conceptual papers and literature reviews lacking primary data, studies combining generational samples without separate Gen Z analysis, research on student populations in non-employment settings, non-English publications, and unpublished works such as theses and conference proceedings.

The initial database search yielded 166 records. After removing 26 duplicates, 23 records marked as ineligible by automation (outside the 2021-2025 range), 11 records for other reasons, and 12 records without abstracts, 94 records remained for screening. During preliminary screening, 34 records were excluded as they did not meet predefined criteria, primarily due to inappropriate population focus or study design. Subsequently, 60 reports were sought for retrieval, with 34 articles successfully obtained and advanced to eligibility assessment. A significant number (26 records) could not be retrieved despite exhaustive efforts. To ensure comprehensive coverage, 8 additional articles from alternative Scopus-indexed sources were incorporated, bringing the total to 42 studies for final inclusion.

Figure 1.

PRISMA Report of Identification, Screening and Including Studies

Data extraction involved systematic recording of key information for each study: bibliographic details (author, year), methodological attributes (research context, sample size), underlying theoretical framework, variables analyzed, and summary of key findings. Quality appraisal was conducted using criteria adapted from the Methodological Quality Checklist for Quantitative Studies (Grant & Booth, 2009), assessing studies across five dimensions: design clarity, sample adequacy ($n \geq 100$), construct validity (CFA $\alpha \geq 0.70$), theory integration, and reporting transparency. Overall methodological quality was high, with average scores exceeding 2.5 on a 3-point scale across criteria. Most studies (approximately 85%) met the sample adequacy criterion, ensuring reliable statistical estimation, while a few qualitative or exploratory papers with smaller samples were retained due to their theoretical relevance and methodological rigor.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis Framework: Coding Structure Development

Main Theme (Framework)	Sub Theme	Description	Exemplar Constructs	Representatives Citation
Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model	Job Resources	Organizational aspects that support goal achievement, reduce demands, and stimulate growth	Empowering leadership, career development, flexibility, training opportunities, supportive environment	Dwidienawati et al. (2025), Lee et al. (2024), Ali et al. (2024)
	Job Demands	Physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects requiring sustained effort	Workload, time pressure, emotional demands, role ambiguity, job insecurity	Chen et al. (2023), Nguyen & Petchsawang (2024)

	Personal Resources	Individuals' psychological capacities to control environment	Psychological capital, emotional stability, mindfulness, self-efficacy	Tran et al. (2024), Islam et al. (2025), Singh et al. (2022)
	Leadership Dimension	Specific leadership components with varied effects	Charismatic, inspirational, individual consideration, empowering, ethical	Lee & Lim (2024), Norina & Sary (2025), Sigaeva et al. (2022)
Social Exchange Theory	Trust & Reciprocity	Mutual expectations of fairness and reciprocal exchange	Leader trust, organizational trust, cognitive trust, affective trust	Norina & Sary (2025), Leung et al. (2021), Katsaros (2025)
	Organizational Support	Organizational Support Employee perceptions of organizational valuation	Perceived organizational support, recognition, fair treatment	Kgarimetsa & Naidoo (2024)
	Authentic Communication	Genuine, transparent organizational messaging	Internal marketing authenticity, transparent communication, value alignment	Brown (2025), Borzillo et al. (2025)
	Breach of Reciprocity	Violations of psychological contract	Quiet quitting, turnover intentions, cynicism	Xueyun et al. (2023), Kuzior et al. (2022)
Self-Determination Theory (SDT)	Autonomy	Need for volition and psychological freedom	Work flexibility, job autonomy, decision-making input	Lee et al. (2024), Popaitoon (2022), Osorio & Madero (2025)
	Competence	Need for effectiveness and mastery	Skill development, feedback, career growth, achievement	Bautista & Cahigas (2024), Ali et al. (2024)
	Relatedness	Need for connection and belonging	Inclusive culture, teamwork, supervisor support, workforce diversity	Chong et al. (2024), Jasmine & Utomo (2024)
	Purpose & Meaning	Extended SDT needs for Gen Z	Work meaningfulness, CSR, ESG, value congruence	Popaitoon (2022), Pandita & Khatwani (2022), Lulewicz-Sas et al. (2025)
Cross-Framework Integration	JD-R → SET Pathways	How resources trigger social exchange	Leadership integrity → trust, organizational support → reciprocity	Norina & Sary (2025), Dwidienawati et al. (2025)
	SET → SDT Pathways	How social exchange fulfills psychological needs	Trust → autonomy support, recognition → competence	Katsaros (2025)
	Integrated Outcomes	Multi-theoretical mechanisms driving results	Leadership → trust → psychological needs → engagement	Multiple studies across frameworks
Moderating Conditions	Individual Differences	Personal characteristics affecting engagement	Personality traits, work values, gender differences	Singh et al. (2022), Ali et al. (2024)
	Cultural Context	Geographic and organizational cultural influences	Country differences, organizational culture, generational cohorts	Surugiu et al. (2025), Ivasciuc et al. (2022)
	Technological Factors	Digital workplace influences	AI adoption, digital tools, technostress	Islam et al. (2025), Borzillo et al. (2025)

Rather than conducting meta-analysis, a thematic synthesis method (Noblit & Hare, 1999; Xiao & Watson, 2019) was adopted to preserve theoretical richness while enabling translation of findings across studies. Extracted findings were organized into thematic domains aligned with the three theoretical frameworks: JD-R dimensions (job resources, job demands, personal resources, leadership styles), SET processes (trust and reciprocity, organizational support, authentic communication, breach of reciprocity), SDT needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness, purpose and meaning), cross-framework integration pathways (how JD-R triggers SET mechanisms, how SET fulfills SDT needs), and moderating conditions (individual differences, cultural context, technological factors). This structure enabled systematic comparison while maintaining the contextual and theoretical nuances essential for understanding Gen Z engagement.

Table 2. Descriptive Profile of Included Studies (N=42)

Characteristic	Category	Number of Studies	Percentage
Publication Year	2021	4	9,5%
	2022	6	14,3%
	2023	5	11,9%
	2024	16	38,1%
	2025	11	26,2%
Geographical Context	Asia	21	50,0%
	Europe	14	33,3%
	America	3	7,1%
	Africa	1	2,4%
	Multiple Region	3	7,1%
Industry Sector	Hospitality & Tourism	9	21,4%
	IT & Telecom	4	9,5%
	Healthcare	1	2,4%
	Manufacturing/Engineering	3	7,1%
	Banking	1	2,4%
	Agriculture	1	2,4%
	Creative Industry	1	2,4%
	Multiple/Mixed Sectors	22	52,4%
Research Methodology	Quantitative	33	78,6%
	Qualitative	5	11,9%
	Mixed Methods	4	9,5%
Theoretical Foundation	JD-R Model	18	42,9%
	SET	10	23,8%
	SDT	8	19,0%
	Integrated Multiple Theories	6	14,3%

The final sample comprised 42 publications from 2021 to 2025, with pronounced concentration in recent years: 2021 (n=4), 2022 (n=6), 2023 (n=5), 2024 (n=16), and 2025 (n=11). Geographically, the literature was dominated by Asian contexts (50%), followed by Europe (33.3%) and the Americas (7.1%). Industry sectors included hospitality (21.4%), IT and telecommunications (9.5%), healthcare, manufacturing, banking, agriculture, and creative industries (2.4% each), with a substantial portion (52.4%) involving mixed-sector samples. Research methodologies comprised quantitative (78.6%), qualitative (11.9%), and mixed methods (9.5%) approaches.

RESULTS

The thematic synthesis of 42 empirical studies revealed a complex landscape of factors influencing Generation Z's work engagement, which we have organized according to the three theoretical frameworks and their integration. The findings within these domains, capturing key factors, constructs, and their empirical support, are synthesized in Appendix 1.

JD-R Dimension: Job Resources, Demands, and Personal Resources
1. Leadership as a Potent Organizational Resource

Our synthesis confirms the multidimensional nature of leadership effects on Gen Z engagement. Empowering leadership demonstrates both direct effects and indirect effects through enhanced well-being and career opportunities (Dwidienawati et al., 2024), supporting the JD-R motivational pathway. Transformational and transactional leadership demonstrate generational variations, with Gen Z showing strongest responses to charismatic and inspirational components during the COVID-19 pandemic (Christopher Lee & Lim, 2024). Servant and authentic leadership styles also show significant positive effects on engagement and satisfaction (Islam et al., 2025; Sigaeva et al., 2022). Participative leadership combined with flexible work arrangements significantly enhances engagement and productivity while reducing burnout (Febriana & Mujib, 2024). However, the individual consideration dimension may have negative effects when perceived as micromanagement (Christopher Lee & Lim, 2024), revealing important nuances in leadership application for this generation.

2. Well-being, Career Development, and Flexible Work Arrangements

Well-being programs emerge as critical resources that directly influence engagement while also serving as mediators in the leadership-engagement relationship (Dwidienawati et al., 2024; Katsaros, 2024). Career development operates recursively, both as antecedent and outcome of engagement, with skill development and advancement opportunities ranking among the strongest predictors (Bautista & Cahigas, 2024; Bińczycki et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2024). In agriculture, flexibility and social benefits attract Gen Z interest, with digital HR practices improving engagement (Heřmanová et al., 2024). Workplace flexibility consistently enhances engagement across generations, with Gen Z showing preference for hybrid models in South Korean deluxe hotels (Jung & Yoon, 2021). Teleworking provides flexibility and autonomy that boost productivity and work-life balance for Gen Z, though effects vary across generations (Ivasciuc et al., 2022).

3. Job Demands: Challenge and Hindrance Effects

The dual role of demands is clearly evidenced: challenge demands like time pressure can stimulate engagement through mastery motives (Nguyen & Petchsawang, 2024), while hindrance demands like role ambiguity and excessive workload undermine it, leading to burnout (Chen et al., 2023). This supports the JD-R model's health impairment pathway while highlighting contextual influences on demand appraisal. Emotional exhaustion particularly weakens the relationship between resources and service behavior (Chiang & Chen, 2024).

4. Personal Resources: The Internal Amplifiers

Psychological capital (hope, efficacy, resilience, optimism) consistently correlates with engagement (Islam et al., 2025; Tran et al., 2024), while work values and personality traits (extraversion, openness) serve as important moderators (Singh et al., 2022). Gen Z nurses' job satisfaction stems from autonomy and teamwork values, with generational differences significantly influencing engagement and retention outcomes (Kim et al., 2024). These personal resources amplify the motivational pathway by influencing how Gen Z employees perceive and utilize job resources. Work values significantly moderate relationships between personality traits and engagement outcomes (Singh et al., 2022).

SET Dimension: Reciprocity, Trust, and Organizational Support
1. Trust as the Social Currency of Engagement

Trust functions as the central mediator in social exchange processes, with ethical leadership promoting trust that explains 77% of variance in engagement (Norina & Sary, 2025). The cognitive-affective trust distinction reveals contextual dependence: unemployed Gen Z relies more on affective trust (emotional), while employed Gen Z emphasizes cognitive trust (rational) in employment decisions (Leung et al., 2021). Person-organization fit enhances trust and organizational attractiveness, with COVID-19 knowledge moderating trust relationships in hotel industry recruitment (Leung et al., 2021).

2. Perceived Organizational Support and Recognition

Perceived organizational support demonstrates direct effects on engagement, with recognition systems and empathetic supervision reinforcing reciprocal relationships. The combination of acknowledgment and flexible work arrangements correlates with higher retention, particularly in demanding sectors (Kgarimetsa & Naidoo, 2024). Turnover intention among Gen Z software employees is mediated by work engagement, with organizational justice and psychological empowerment as key antecedents (Gaan & Shin, 2023).

3. Authentic Communication and Breach of Reciprocity

Authentic internal marketing enhances satisfaction and retention when perceived as genuine organizational investment. Internal marketing strategies addressing Gen Z's psychological needs while fostering positive social exchanges are crucial for satisfaction and retention (Brown, 2025). Conversely, breaches of psychological contract through poor work conditions, low support, and limited career development increase burnout and "quiet-quitting" intentions, while the Great Resignation represents mass demonstration of reciprocity failure (Kuzior et al., 2022).

SDT Dimension: Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness
1. Autonomy Through Flexibility and Meaningful Work

Autonomy satisfaction emerges as central to Gen Z engagement, with workspace and scheduling flexibility significantly enhancing engagement through autonomy support (Christopher Lee & Lim, 2024; Osorio & Madero, 2025). Skill variety, autonomy, and task significance increase work meaningfulness and retention intention among Gen Z employees ($\beta = 0.66$) (Popaitoon, 2022). Gen Z values autonomy, flexibility, and

technology-mediated collaboration, viewing hybrid work as identity-driven engagement (Osorio & Madero, 2025).

2. Competence Through Development and Feedback

Continuous learning and feedback cultivate competence satisfaction, with skill development and recognition ranking highest among engagement predictors (Bautista & Cahigas, 2024; Bińczycki et al., 2023). Training and clear role definitions are vital for retention, though with significant gender variations, women value training more, while men emphasize role clarity (Ali et al., 2024). Digitalization and learning opportunities are main motivators for Gen Z engagement in Industry 4.0 contexts (Bińczycki et al., 2023).

3. Relatedness Through Inclusion and Purpose

Inclusive cultures and workforce diversity fulfill relatedness needs while enhancing both engagement and organizational citizenship behavior. In the Indonesian creative industry, engagement mediates transformational leadership and work-life balance effects on affective commitment, emerging as the most crucial driver (Amirah Jasmine & Utomo, 2024). CSR initiatives, particularly toward customers, strongly predict engagement (Pandita & Khatwani, 2022), though only social and governance ESG dimensions demonstrate significant effects, not environmental aspects (Lulewicz-Sas et al., 2025). Workforce diversity is the strongest predictor of engagement and organizational citizenship behavior (Yunyi et al., 2024).

4. Extending SDT: Purpose, Flow, and Achievement

The proposed SDT extension identifies purpose, flow, and achievement as complementary motivational drivers for Gen Z, reflecting this generation's orientation toward meaning and self-growth beyond the classic three needs. This six-factor extension provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding Gen Z motivation in manufacturing contexts (Salvadorinho et al., 2024). Collective consciousness shapes Gen Z's values of universalism, benevolence, and autonomy, which in turn drive engagement and motivation (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021).

Cross-Theory Integration: Interlinkages and Mechanisms

1. Mediating Processes

Empirical evidence demonstrates dynamic interplay across frameworks. The JD-R → SET pathway shows empowering leadership (JD-R) enhancing engagement through reciprocal support (SET) (Dwidienawati et al., 2024), while ethical leadership (JD-R) builds trust (SET) that explains most variance in engagement (Norina & Sary, 2025). Engagement mediates between job resources and performance, with job demands negatively affecting well-being.

The SET → SDT pathway reveals how trust enables psychological need satisfaction, with trust creating safety for autonomy expression and recognition validating competence (Katsaros, 2025b; Kgarimetsa & Naidoo, 2024). Creativity mediates and work engagement moderates the link between inclusive leadership and adaptive performance (Katsaros, 2025a).

Integrated outcomes demonstrate multi-theoretical mechanisms where leadership generates trust that fulfills psychological needs to drive engagement, with inclusive leadership fostering adaptive performance through creativity and engagement (Katsaros, 2025b). During major cultural shifts, transformational, inclusive, and adaptive leadership enhance adaptive performance through promotive/prohibitive voice behavior in tourism settings (Katsaros, 2025a).

2. Moderating Conditions and Boundary Effect

Based on the findings from our systematic literature review, we identified that the engagement dynamics of Generation Z are significantly shaped by various moderating conditions that create important boundary effects. At the individual level, work values serve as crucial moderators between personality traits and engagement outcomes, with extraversion and openness demonstrating the strongest effects when aligned with compatible work values (Singh et al., 2022). Gender emerges as another significant moderator, revealing distinctive preferences: women place greater value on supportive environments and training opportunities, while men emphasize role clarity and fair reward systems (Ali et al., 2024).

Beyond individual characteristics, cultural context establishes important boundary conditions that challenge universal assumptions about Gen Z values. Romanian Gen Z shows strong preference for recognition, skill development, and well-being, coupled with low loyalty and high autonomy orientation (Surugiu et al., 2025), suggesting that cultural specificity must inform engagement strategies rather than relying on one-size-fits-all approaches. Gen Z shows lower organizational identification but higher task engagement compared to other generations (Šakytė-Statnickė et al., 2023).

Emerging technological factors introduce new moderating variables into the engagement equation. AI adoption, for instance, strengthens the relationship between servant leadership and key engagement dimensions, serving as an amplifier that enhances leadership effectiveness for this digitally native generation (Islam et al., 2025). Similarly, employment status moderates trust formation processes, with unemployed Gen Z relying more on affective trust (emotional connections) while employed Gen Z emphasizes cognitive trust (rational assessments) in their organizational relationships (Leung et al., 2021).

3. Outcomes of Engagement

Engagement serves as the pivotal mediator translating organizational resources into improved performance across multiple domains: it predicts proactive behaviors and innovation (Nguyen & Petchsawang, 2024), service excellence (Chiang & Chen, 2024), organizational citizenship behavior (Yunyi et al., 2024), adaptive performance (Katsaros, 2025b), and retention while mitigating "quiet quitting" intentions (Xueyun et al.,

2023). Engagement correlates with innovation and retention across generations (Šakytė-Statnickė et al., 2023). Hospitality talent management requires education-industry collaboration, with Gen Z prioritizing flexibility, career development, and teamwork while managers emphasize hierarchy and stability (El Hajal & Losekoot, 2025).

DISCUSSION

Integrative Interpretation of Gen Z Engagement Dynamics

The evidence synthesized across 42 studies underscores that Generation Z's engagement emerges from the convergence of organizational resources, social reciprocity, and psychological need fulfilment, a complex system that no single theoretical framework can fully explain.

The Job Demands-Resources Model defines the structural foundation: when resources such as empowering leadership, career development, and flexibility outweigh job demands, employees channel energy into productive work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Dwidienawati et al., 2024; D. Y. Lee & Jo, 2023). Digitalization and learning opportunities serve as crucial resources in Industry 4.0 contexts (Bińczycki et al., 2023), while job resources buffer negative effects during organizational changes like downsizing (Dlouhy & Casper, 2021). However, our integration reveals that for Gen Z, JD-R resources are not motivating in isolation, they must be perceived as genuine organizational investments that align with their values of flexibility and autonomy (Ivasciuc et al., 2022; Osorio & Madero, 2025). The hospitality industry reveals significant expectation gaps where Gen Z seeks autonomy, flexibility, and well-being while managers emphasize hierarchy and stability (Borzillo et al., 2025).

Social Exchange Theory adds the crucial relational mechanism: engagement thrives when employees perceive their organization acts with fairness, recognition, and integrity, leading them to reciprocate with commitment and effort (Blau, 2017; Gaan & Shin, 2023; Saks, 2006). The power of this exchange is vividly demonstrated by (Norina & Sary, 2025), where trust mediated 77% of the relationship between ethical leadership and engagement. Collective consciousness shapes Gen Z's values of universalism, benevolence, and autonomy, which in turn drive engagement and motivation (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). The Great Resignation phenomenon reveals that ethical, cultural, relational, and personal dimensions explain 52% of turnover increases, with non-material factors driven by ethics and values being predominant (Kuzior et al., 2022). Conversely, breaches of this psychological contract explain contemporary phenomena like "quiet quitting" (Xueyun et al., 2023).

Self-Determination Theory completes the model by explaining the internal motivation that sustains engagement through autonomy, competence, relatedness, and increasingly, purpose (Christopher Lee & Lim, 2024; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Salvadorinho et al., 2024). Our review shows that SDT's core needs are operationalized through specific organizational practices: autonomy through flexibility (Osorio & Madero, 2025), competence through development (Bautista & Cahigas, 2024; Bińczycki et al., 2023), relatedness through inclusion (Yunyi et al., 2024), and purpose through meaningful work and ethical governance (Lulewicz-Sas et al., 2025; Popaitoon, 2022). While Gen Z demonstrates lower organizational identification, they show higher task engagement, suggesting a shift toward more immediate, task-specific motivation (Šakytė-Statnickė et al., 2023).

This integrative perspective reveals that engagement among Gen Z is not a singular state but a dynamic interaction of structural, social, and psychological forces. In contexts where leadership empowers, relationships are reciprocal, and individuals feel autonomous yet connected, engagement becomes self-reinforcing and resilient even under demanding conditions (Febriana & Mujib, 2024; Islam et al., 2025; Katsaros, 2025a; Nur Kholan Karima et al., 2025).

Theoretical Implications
1. Revisiting the JD-R Model for Gen Z

Our findings expand JD-R beyond its classical dual-path structure in several ways. First, the model now accommodates "meta-resources" like psychosocial safety climate (Inoue et al., 2023), digital empowerment (Borzillo et al., 2025), and Industry 4.0 technological resources (Bińczycki et al., 2023) that shape how job demands and resources interact for Gen Z. Second, JD-R should be viewed as a feedback system where engagement itself generates additional resources through improved performance and collaboration (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018; D. Y. Lee & Jo, 2023). Third, leadership must be understood dimensionally rather than monolithically, with components like individual consideration potentially counterproductive for Gen Z (Christopher Lee & Lim, 2024), while servant and authentic leadership show particular effectiveness (Sigaeva et al., 2022).

2. Advancing Social Exchange Theory

SET is refined from a transactional view of reciprocity to a relational and moral exchange model for Gen Z. Trust and authenticity emerge as the strongest relational currencies, outweighing hierarchical loyalty or material reward (Katsaros, 2025b; Leung et al., 2021; Norina & Sary, 2025). The theory also explains negative outcomes: when the psychological contract is violated through inconsistent internal marketing (Brown, 2025), perceived organizational hypocrisy (Borzillo et al., 2025), or poor work conditions (Xueyun et al., 2023), engagement erodes rapidly, manifesting as quiet quitting or turnover. Collective consciousness research reveals how shared values shape Gen Z's exchange expectations (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021).

The importance of social connections extends beyond immediate work relationships. Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro (2020) demonstrated that social resources and demands predict distinct engagement-burnout profiles, highlighting how SET mechanisms operate within broader social ecosystems.

3. Extending Self-Determination Theory

SDT gains further depth through integration with emerging Gen Z research. While autonomy, competence, and relatedness remain core (Ryan & Deci, 2000), dimensions like purpose, flow, and achievement are increasingly central. These additions reflect Gen Z's desire to link professional work with personal growth and societal contribution, highlighted in research on work meaningfulness (Popaitoon, 2022; Widodo et al., 2025). The six-factor SDT extension provides a more nuanced understanding of Gen Z motivation in contemporary work contexts (Salvadorinho et al., 2024). Social and governance ESG dimensions significantly drive engagement, while environmental aspects show non-significant effects, indicating Gen Z's distinct value priorities in corporate responsibility (Lulewicz-Sas et al., 2025). SDT thus evolves from a purely psychological framework to a holistic model bridging meaning, identity, and performance.

4. Toward an Integrated Sustainable Engagement Framework

Combining JD-R, SET, and SDT yields what we term the Integrated Sustainable Engagement Framework (Figure 2). This dynamic, cyclical model explains how engagement among Generation Z is initiated, sustained, and reinforced through four interconnected layers, supported by empirical evidence from our systematic review.
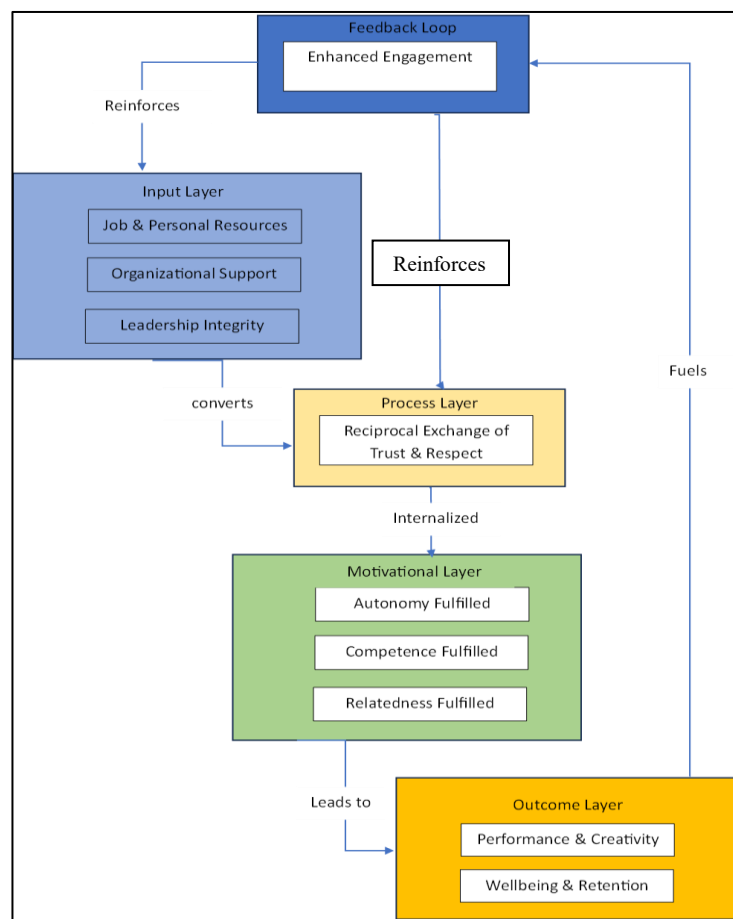
Figure 2. Integrated Sustainable Engagement Framework

The process begins with the Input Layer, where foundational resources are established. This combines Job and Personal Resources (autonomy, psychological capital), Organizational Support (perceived organizational value), and Leadership Integrity (ethical, trustworthy leadership). These interconnected elements create essential conditions for engagement, as demonstrated by multiple studies: empowering leadership and career development (Dwidienawati et al., 2024), psychological capital (Islam et al., 2025; Tran et al., 2024), and Industry 4.0 technological resources (Bińczycki et al., 2023) form the structural foundation for engagement.

These static resources activate the Process Layer through socio-psychological mechanisms. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory, this layer involves reciprocal exchanges where organizational provision of resources meets employee reciprocation of dedication. This crucial conversion transforms structural resources into personal investment, as evidenced by trust-mediated relationships where ethical leadership explains 77% of engagement variance (Norina & Sary, 2025) and organizational support triggers reciprocal commitment (Gaan & Shin, 2023; Widodo et al., 2025).

The trust-based exchanges then fuel the Motivational Layer, where core psychological needs outlined by Self-Determination Theory are fulfilled. Engagement becomes internalized when employees experience Autonomy (through flexibility as shown by S. H. Lee et al. (2024) and Osorio & Madero (2025), Competence (through mastery and development evidenced by Bautista & Cahigas, (2024) and Salvadorinho et al. (2024), and Relatedness (through inclusive connections demonstrated by Yunyi et al. (2024), increasingly complemented by Purpose (through meaningful work and ESG initiatives as found by (Lulewicz-Sas et al., 2025; Popaitoon, 2022).

The culmination manifests in the Outcome Layer, where internalized engagement generates mutually beneficial results: enhanced performance (D. Y. Lee & Jo, 2023), innovation (Nguyen & Petchsawang, 2024), organizational citizenship behavior (Yunyi et al., 2024) for organizations, and improved well-being, retention for employees (Kgarimetsa & Naidoo, 2024; Xueyun et al., 2023).

Managerial Implications

1. Redefining Leadership for Gen Z

To engage Gen Z effectively, leaders must shift from control-based supervision toward empowering, ethical, and inclusive leadership (Islam et al., 2025; Sigaeva et al., 2022). Our integration suggests emphasizing charismatic and inspirational communication while avoiding paternalistic "individual consideration" that may be perceived as micromanagement (Christopher Lee & Lim, 2024). Servant leadership approaches that emphasize emotional stability and support are particularly effective (Islam et al., 2025). Leaders should provide direction without micromanagement, encourage participative decision-making, and ensure fairness (Norina & Sary, 2025).

2. Building Cultures of Authentic Trust

Engagement cannot flourish without trust. Managers should institutionalize trust-building practices, consistent recognition, fair evaluations, and transparency about organizational goals. (Brown, 2025) demonstrates that Gen Z treats organizational communication as a proxy for overall integrity, making authentic internal marketing a strategic imperative rather than soft skill. Person-organization fit should be prioritized in recruitment to enhance trust foundations (Leung et al., 2021).

3. Supporting Autonomy Through Intelligent Flexibility

Hybrid and flexible work models are psychological necessities, not perks, for Gen Z (Christopher Lee & Lim, 2024; Ivasciuc et al., 2022; Osorio & Madero, 2025). They convey trust and respect for employees' ability to manage responsibilities. However, flexibility should be paired with clear expectations and regular connection points to maintain relatedness (Yunyi et al., 2024). Telework arrangements should be designed to enhance work-life balance and productivity across generational preferences (Ivasciuc et al., 2022).

4. Embedding Purpose Through Social and Governance ESG

Corporate Social Responsibility plays an increasingly strategic role, but with important nuance. (Lulewicz-Sas et al., 2025) found only social and governance ESG dimensions drive engagement, not environmental aspects. Organizations should prioritize ethical treatment, diversity, and transparent governance in their ESG strategies to align with Gen Z's values. CSR initiatives focused on customers and employees show the strongest engagement effects (Pandita & Khatwani, 2022).

5. Personalizing Engagement Strategies

Our review reveals significant individual and contextual variation in engagement drivers. Singh et al. (2022) showed personality and work values moderate engagement, while Ali et al. (2024) documented gender differences, women value supportive environments and training more, while men emphasize pay and role clarity. Cultural differences also necessitate tailored approaches, as seen in the highly individualistic Romanian context (Surugiu et al., 2025). Organizations should move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to engagement.

6. Leveraging Technology and AI

AI adoption can strengthen leadership effectiveness and emotional stability impacts on engagement (Islam et al., 2025). Organizations should integrate digital tools that support flexibility and collaboration while being mindful of potential technostress. In Industry 4.0 contexts, digitalization and learning opportunities are key engagement drivers (Bińczycki et al., 2023).

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its comprehensive nature, this review has several limitations. First, the geographical concentration in Asia may limit global generalization, though the inclusion of European, American, and multinational studies provides some balance. Second, the predominance of cross-sectional designs restricts causal conclusions. Third, measurement inconsistencies exist across studies, particularly for constructs like well-being and autonomy. Finally, potential publication bias could inflate positive relationships. Future research should pursue four critical paths:

1. Verify causality through longitudinal or experimental designs
2. Validate the Integrated Framework across diverse cultural settings
3. Integrate emerging constructs like AI autonomy, digital trust, and technostress (Borzillo et al., 2025; Islam et al., 2025)
4. Conduct multi-level analyses connecting individual engagement to organizational outcomes (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018)

5. Explore generational differences in engagement drivers more systematically (Šakytė-Statnickė et al., 2023)

6. Investigate Industry 4.0 specific factors affecting Gen Z motivation (Bińczycki et al., 2023)

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review, synthesizing 42 empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025, establishes that work engagement among Generation Z employees constitutes a multifaceted phenomenon emerging from the dynamic interplay of structural job conditions, reciprocal organizational relationships, and psychological motivation.

The findings demonstrate that at the contextual level, engagement is strengthened by empowering leadership, workplace flexibility, well-being initiatives, and career development opportunities, while being vulnerable to excessive job demands unless balanced by adequate resources. At the relational level, engagement operates as a social exchange outcome, where trust, fairness, recognition, and perceived organizational support convert resources into commitment. At the motivational level, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, increasingly complemented by purpose and personal growth, anchor the intrinsic motivation that enables Gen Z employees to internalize organizational goals.

Collectively, these insights culminate in the Integrated Sustainable Engagement Framework, which integrates JD-R, SET, and SDT into a coherent model where job resources initiate motivation, social reciprocity amplifies it, and psychological need satisfaction sustains it, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of engagement, innovation, and well-being.

This study makes significant theoretical contributions by expanding the JD-R framework through inclusion of meta-resources, reframing SET as a relationally authentic model centered on trust, and extending SDT to encompass contemporary drivers of purpose and achievement. Practically, organizations can implement these insights through empowering leadership practices, trust-based cultures, flexible work designs, and personalized development programs that collectively create engagement ecosystems aligned with Generation Z's distinctive aspirations.

As organizations navigate the complexities of engaging Generation Z in rapidly evolving work environments, this integrative framework provides both scholarly and practical guidance for building workplaces where the next generation can thrive, contribute, and remain.

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Appendix 1. Synthesized Findings on Gen Z Work Engagement

Theoretical Dimensions	Key Antecedent/Driver	Relationship With Engagement	Key Mediating Mechanism	Exemplary Supporting Study
JD-R → Outcomes	Empowering Leadership	Positive direct and indirect	Well-being, career opportunities	Dwidienawati et al. (2025)
	Transformational Leadership (Charismatic)	Strong positive	Learning climate, trust	Nguyen & Petchsawang (2024)
	Transformational Leadership (Individual Consideration)	Negative	Perceived micromanagement	Lee & Lim (2024)
	Flexible Work Arrangements	Positive, varies by generation	Autonomy satisfaction, work-life balance	Lee et al. (2024), Ivasciuc et al. (2022)
	Career Development Opportunities	Strong positive	Competence satisfaction, retention	Ali et al. (2024), Tran et al. (2024)
	Psychological Capital	Strong positive	Hope, efficacy, resilience, optimism	Tran et al. (2024), Islam et al. (2025)
SET → Outcomes	Ethical Leadership	Strong positive	Leader trust (77% variance)	Norina & Sary (2025)
	Inclusive Leadership	Positive	Employee voice, creativity	Katsaros (2025), Chong et al. (2024)

	Perceived Organizational Support	Positive	Reciprocal commitment, meaningfulness	Xueyun et al. (2023)
	Authentic Internal Marketing	Positive (when authentic)	Value alignment, trust	Brown (2025)
	Affective vs Cognitive Trust	Positive (context-dependent)	Emotional vs rational commitment	Leung et al. (2021)
SDT → Outcomes	Work Autonomy	Strong positive	Meaningfulness, retention	Popaitoon (2022), Jasmine & Utomo (2024)
	Skill Variety & Development	Positive	Competence satisfaction	Bautista & Cahigas (2024), Salvadorinho et al. (2024)
	Workforce Diversity	Strong positive	Relatedness satisfaction, OCB	Chong et al. (2024)
	Work Meaningfulness	Strong positive	Purpose fulfillment, retention	Popaitoon (2022),
	CSR (Social & Governance)	Positive	Value congruence, ethical alignment	Pandita & Khatwani (2022), Lulewicz-Sas et al. (2025)
JD-R → SET Pathways	Empowering Leadership → Trust	Positive	Social exchange reciprocity	Dwidienawati et al. (2025)
	Organizational Resources → POS	Positive	Perceived organizational investment	Ali et al. (2024)
	Ethical Leadership → Trust Strong	positive	Integrity demonstration	Norina & Sary (2025)
SET → SDT Pathways	Trust → Psychological Needs	Positive	Safety for need expression	Katsaros (2025), Islam et al. (2025)
	Recognition → Competence	Positive	Validation of capabilities	Kgarimetsa & Naidoo (2024)
	Supportive Environment → Relatedness	Positive	Belongingness fulfillment	Chong et al. (2024)
Integrated Pathways	Leadership → Trust → Needs → Engagement	Strong positive	Sequential mediation across frameworks	Multiple studies
	Resources → POS → Meaningfulness → Engagement	Positive	JD-R → SET → SDT chain	Widodo et al. (2025)
	Inclusive Leadership → Creativity → Adaptive Performance	Positive	SET → SDT → Outcomes	Katsaros (2025)

Negative Pathways	Poor Conditions → Burnout → Quiet Quitting	Strong negative	Resource depletion, reciprocity violation	Xueyun et al. (2023)
	Inauthentic Communication → Cynicism → Turnover	Negative	Trust erosion, psychological contract breach	Brown (2025), Kuzior et al. (2022)
Moderating Effects	Work Values	Mixed amplification	Values-personality alignment	Singh et al. (2022)
	Gender Differences	Context-dependent	Women: supportive environments; Men: clarity/rewards	Ali et al. (2024)
	Cultural Context (Romania)	Individualistic, financial focus	Low loyalty, high individualism	Surugiu et al. (2025)
	AI Adoption	Positive moderation	Enhanced emotional stability effects	Islam et al. (202
	Employment Status	Trust type preference	Unemployed: affective trust; Employed: cognitive trust	Leung et al. (2021)