



A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Career Outcome Expectations and Career Decision-Making Intentions of Generation Z

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Abstract

This conceptual paper examines the factors that influence Generation Z's (Gen Z) career decision-making intentions. Acknowledging that traditional career development models fall short in addressing the characteristics of this cohort, the study advances an integrated approach that unites cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions. Specifically, it conceptualises how these dimensions interact to shape the career outcome expectations and decision-making processes of Gen Z. By synthesising Social Cognitive Career Theory and Affective Events Theory, the study argues that Gen Z's career decisions are influenced by the interaction of self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, personal goals, and emotional experiences within their social environment. It further emphasises the impact of family and close networks, indicating a shift away from solely individualistic career models. By clarifying the multifaceted interaction of cognitive, emotional, and social factors, the paper guides the development of more realistic career development strategies tailored to the unique needs and expectations of Gen Z.

Keywords: Affective Events Theory, Career Decision-Making Intentions, Career Outcome Expectations, Generation Z, Social Cognitive Career Theory

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Introduction

Generation Z (Gen Z), commonly defined as individuals born between 1995 and 2012 (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Gomez et al., 2018; Stillman & Stillman, 2017), is rapidly entering the workforce. This cohort is poised to reshape professional environments significantly, with academic insights indicating their escalating presence; for instance, Gen Z is expected to account for nearly 30% of the workforce by 2025 (Dyvik, 2016; Koop, 2021), and 27% of the global Gen Z population is projected to be part of the labour force by the same year (GilPress, 2024). They bring with them unique career outcome expectations that challenge traditional career development models (Gentina, 2020; Robak & Albrychiewicz-Slocinska, 2019). Extensive research has explored this cohort's career outcome expectations, which are understood as an individual's beliefs and anticipations regarding their future career decisions, encompassing both subjective perceptions and objective considerations (Ahmad et al., 2019). These expectations, as highlighted by Ahmad et al. (2019), include factors such as financial compensation, professional reputation, and the alignment of work tasks with personal interests. Notably, there is a shift away from traditional external rewards like salary and promotions towards internal rewards, such as psychological success (Ng et al., 2018). Moreover, these career outcome expectations reflect an individual's envisioned career path, shaped by their understanding of realistic and attainable career pursuits (Perrone et al., 2010). As Gen Z enters professional roles, this divergence often conflicts with traditional norms, posing a significant challenge for human resources departments, which now face a knowledge vacuum in bridging the gap between these varying generational perspectives in terms of their career expectations (Diaconu & Dutu, 2020; Jha, 2021).

According to previous literature, most young adults are deeply concerned about their future careers, recognising the importance of aligning professional paths with personal preferences and interests (Khakwani et al., 2022). Career outcome expectations encompass desired outcomes such as financial compensation, professional reputation, and the alignment of work with personal interests (Ahmad et al., 2019). Gen Z exhibits a nuanced approach to these expectations, valuing both traditional extrinsic motivators and non-monetary benefits (Padhy & Ganguli, 2023). While monetary compensation remains important, there is a pronounced emphasis on work-life balance and flexible scheduling (Gomez et al., 2018; Padhy & Ganguli, 2023). Thus, Gen Z individuals strongly prioritise work that aligns with their personal

values, often seeking organisations that embody social responsibility and altruism, and are willing to invest considerable time to finding an organisational fit, even prioritising value alignment over financial stability (Cerabona & Romeo, 2024; Handshake, 2024). Furthermore, Gen Z's definition of job stability extends beyond traditional notions; they value flexibility, work-life balance, and growth opportunities very highly, sometimes even accepting lower pay for more fulfilling work roles (Bejtkovský, 2016; Gomez et al., 2018). Their preferences also extend to the work environment, favouring autonomy, collaboration, and continuous development over rigid hierarchies, and are prone to job hopping if these elements are lacking (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Kılınç & Varol, 2021). These expectations highlight that rewards, intrinsic values, altruistic values, job stability, and a values-driven work environment are powerful determinants of Gen Z's career outcome expectations and subsequent intentions.

Career decision-making intentions, which are shaped by an individual's response to internal and external stimuli, significantly influence the career decisions of Gen Z (Fuchs et al., 2024). Career decision-making intentions refer to an individual's inclination or readiness to make career-related choices, such as whether to stay in a job, switch roles, or seek new employment opportunities (Azhenov et al., 2023). Gen Z's approach to the workplace diverges notably from that of earlier generations, thereby disrupting traditional career development models. While empirical research reveals certain contradictory career decision-making intentions within Gen Z, such as a gravitation towards traditional, full-time career paths within a single organisation (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Stillman & Stillman, 2017), other studies indicate a preference for part-time employment and freelance work over regular full-time positions (Fodor et al., 2017; Randstad, 2016). Furthermore, studies suggest a higher likelihood of Gen Z employees leaving their jobs within the first two years, challenging the traditional attraction, selection, and attrition framework (Chillakuri, 2020; Cora, 2019; Gomez et al., 2018; Kodithuwakku et al., 2018).

Furthermore, family and close social networks play a pivotal role in shaping the career decisions of Gen Z. Prior research indicates that familial influence often serves as a key reference point in the career decision-making process (Fodor et al., 2017; Half, 2015; Kılınç & Varol, 2021), with 82% of Gen Z indicating that family guidance plays a crucial role in their own career decisions (Half, 2015). This highlights that Gen Z's career outcome expectations are not only influenced by their individual expectations

but are also moderated by the guidance and support provided by their family and social circles. In addition to family influence, learning experiences, defined as interactions promoting changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes, or understanding (Abe & Chikoko, 2020), are highly valued by Gen Z and have been identified as critical in shaping their career decisions. For instance, Mărginean (2021) reported that 94% of Gen Z respondents consider learning experiences crucial to their professional development. Exposure to diverse learning opportunities, including formal education, internships, and on-the-job training, often influences their career decision-making intentions, leading to dynamic career behaviours (Handshake, 2024; Udemy Business, 2024). Concurrently, individual appraisal of workplace events, defined as stimuli that trigger affective reactions filtered through individual perceptions (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), is critical in shaping emotional responses and subsequent career decision-making intentions. Existing literature suggests that learning experiences can significantly mediate the relationship between workplace events and career decision-making intentions, further impacting Gen Z's career decisions (Kim et al., 2021). Therefore, a realistic understanding of Gen Z's career decision-making requires examining the multifaceted interactions between their career outcome expectations, the influential roles of family and social networks, their emphasis on learning experiences, and the impact of workplace events.

From a theoretical perspective, traditional career development theories, when applied in isolation, struggle to fully encapsulate the multifaceted career decision-making intentions of Gen Z, particularly their digitally influenced expectations and nuanced approach (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Wang et al., 2022). While the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2019) provides a robust framework for understanding the cognitive components of career development, encompassing self-efficacy, outcome expectations, learning experiences, and contextual factors, it primarily emphasises rational appraisals and decision-making processes. SCCT has been widely applied in understanding career decisions in traditional employment settings; however, its applicability to the non-linear career paths, strong preference for career flexibility, entrepreneurial ventures, and multi-career experiences predominantly pursued by Gen Z remains relatively underexplored (Chillakuri, 2020; Fodor et al., 2017; Khakwani et al., 2022; Randstad, 2016; Rezky & Rasto, 2024). This gap is particularly significant as Gen Z's career intentions are shaped by a comprehensive understanding of stability that incorporates security,

growth, and lifestyle factors. Consequently, SCCT alone often falls short in adequately explaining the role of emotional reactions to social and environmental cues, which are increasingly being recognised as significant drivers of career choices for this generation (Khakwani et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). To address this theoretical limitation, the study uses the SCCT jointly with the Affective Events Theory (AET). AET offers a complementary lens by explaining how specific workplace events trigger discrete affective reactions in individuals, which in turn influence attitudes and subsequent behaviours (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). A notable gap in the literature is the limited exploration of AET in predicting career decision-making intentions, particularly in relation to Gen Z. While AET has been widely applied to study employee satisfaction and organisational behaviour, its application to career decision-making, especially among Gen Z, where emotions play a significant role in shaping outcome expectations, remains underexplored (Christensen et al., 2023). By applying these two theories together, this research conceptualises that Gen Z's career decision-making involves multifaceted processes including cognitive factors (as explained by SCCT) and emotional reactions to workplace and social events (as elucidated by AET). Thus, the conceptual model proposed in this paper may lay the groundwork for future empirical research that validates the multifaceted nature of career expectations and decision-making of Gen Z.

Literature Review

Characteristics and Career Outcome Expectations of Generation Z

Gen Z, typically defined as those individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s (Gentina, 2020; Robak & Albrychiewicz-Slocinska, 2019), represents the newest cohort entering the workforce, bringing with them unique characteristics and career outcome expectations shaped by their upbringing in a digital era (Jayatissa, 2023; Said et al., 2020). This generation is characterised by their digital nativity, value-driven approach, and entrepreneurial mindset (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Beyond these attributes, Gen Z demonstrates a strong sense of autonomy, preferring flexibility, independence, and opportunities to make self-directed career choices (Half, 2015; Handshake, 2024). Gen Z individuals are also marked by social consciousness and a pronounced orientation towards diversity, equity, and inclusion, expecting workplaces that respect and celebrate individual differences (Bulut & Maraba, 2021). Their preference for meaningful work is deeply intertwined with their desire to engage in socially responsible and purpose-driven roles, where they can see tangible

contributions to societal well-being (Agarwal & Vaghela, 2018; Bejtkovský, 2016). These multifaceted traits collectively shape how Gen Z approaches career outcome expectations and decision-making intentions.

Gen Z demonstrates a varying set of career outcome expectations that often surpass those of previous generations, emphasising both tangible and intangible benefits (Jayatissa, 2023). They prioritise work-life balance, seeking flexible work arrangements that allow them to pursue personal interests alongside their careers (Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018; Half, 2015). Unlike previous generations, Gen Z places a strong emphasis on purpose-driven work, often seeking and valuing organisations that demonstrate authentic ties with the community and social responsibility (Agarwal & Vaghela, 2018; Chillakuri, 2020). Their career outcome expectations are characterised by a desire for rapid advancement, continuous learning, and diverse experiences, often leading to a preference for non-linear career paths (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018). Interestingly, while Gen Z values financial stability, they are often willing to accept lower pay to work for a company or cause they are passionate about (Bejtkovský, 2016; Gomez et al., 2018). They often seek meaningful work that aligns with their values and allows them to make an impact, preferring collaborative work environments and disliking rigid organisational structures (Said et al., 2020). Gen Z also values diversity and inclusion, often seeking to work in global environments (Sidorcuka & Chesnovicka, 2017).

As observed in the literature, Gen Z's career outcome expectations present a stark contrast from those of previous generations. While Millennials notably prioritise work-life balance, Gen Z often seeks purpose-driven work, rapid advancement opportunities, and roles that align with personal values (Gomez et al., 2018). This contrasts sharply with Baby Boomers, who generally prioritised professional success and long-term commitment, and are often characterised as workaholics (Arar & Yuksel, 2015; Prawitasari, 2018; Tolbize, 2008). Generation X, conversely, exhibits a more balanced approach, recognised for their hard work while also placing significant emphasis on work-life balance (Arar & Yuksel, 2015; Tolbize, 2008). This clear generational divergence in career expectations necessitates a critical re-evaluation of traditional career development models to effectively accommodate Gen Z's unique perspectives.

Career Decision-Making Intentions of Generation Z

Career decision-making reflects an individual's readiness to make goal-oriented choices regarding their career path (Abdullah, 2019). However, the career decision-making intentions of Gen Z presents a complex picture marked by diverse expectations. Their approach to career decision-making is influenced by both cognitive factors, such as self-efficacy and outcome expectations, and affective elements, including emotional responses to work-related events (Kim et al., 2021). This unique combination of characteristics and expectations necessitates a novel approach to understanding Gen Z's career behaviours, particularly in developing economies where traditional career models may not fully capture the nuances of this generation's expectations (Jayatissa, 2023).

Gen Z appears to prioritise personal fulfilment and career growth, seeking a balance between traditional career paths and more flexible, experience-driven approaches (Half, 2015). While career outcome expectations set the stage for an individual's career, it is the intentions that directly precede and inform actual behaviour in the workplace (Fuchs et al., 2024). Gen Z's known preferences for flexibility, purpose-driven work, and a higher propensity for job mobility make the study of their intentions vital for predicting their engagement, retention, and overall impact on organisational dynamics (Chillakuri, 2020; Jha, 2021). This broad spectrum of career decision-making intentions within Gen Z presents a unique and pressing puzzle for researchers seeking to understand contemporary workforce trends.

Work Events, Learning Experience, and Career Decision-Making Intentions of Generation Z

Gen Z's career decisions are further influenced by their emotional responses to work events and their cognitive processing of learning experiences. Extensive research highlights the significant influence of organisational events on individual behaviour, demonstrating that these events shape perceptions of learning experiences and subsequently impact employee actions (Shochet et al., 2013). AET posits that emotional reactions to specific work events significantly influence workplace attitudes and behaviours (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). For Gen Z, encountering challenges, successes, or even daily occurrences within a work setting can trigger emotional responses that shape their overall perception of the job and its desirability (Barhate et al., 2024). These emotional experiences, whether positive or negative, can either

enhance or hinder their openness to learning and engagement, ultimately impacting their career decisions (Abe & Chikoko, 2020; Osuizugbo et al., 2022).

SCCT complements the cognitive perspective of Gen Z by emphasising the role of background, contextual factors (family and close network), cognitive personal variables/ outcome expectations (career outcome expectations), and learning experiences in career decision-making. Gen Z's learning experiences, both within and outside formal education systems, contribute significantly to their self-efficacy beliefs, their confidence in their ability to perform specific tasks or succeed in particular roles (Abe & Chikoko, 2020; Osuizugbo et al., 2022). Positive learning experiences, such as mastering a new skill or receiving constructive feedback, can boost their confidence and encourage them to pursue related career paths (Maloni et al., 2019). Conversely, negative experiences can undermine their confidence and lead to career indecision or avoidance of certain fields.

Furthermore, Gen Z's learning experiences shape their beliefs about potential consequences, thereby influencing choice goals/intentions to pursue specific career paths (career decision-making intentions) (Nguyen Ngoc et al., 2022). Exposure to diverse work environments, whether through internships, part-time jobs, or mentorship opportunities, provides them with valuable insights into the realities of different professions and industries (Graczyk-Kucharska & Erickson, 2020). These experiences inform their expectations regarding job satisfaction, work-life balance, and career progression, ultimately influencing their career decision-making. For instance, the increasing importance of learning experiences for Gen Z is evident in Half (2015), a study which found that 64% of Gen Z viewed growth opportunities as the number one factor influencing their decision to accept a full-time job offer, highlighting their potential impact on career decisions. Furthermore, 85% of Gen Z consider learning and development an important factor when evaluating job opportunities (Handshake, 2024). Therefore, creating work environments that foster positive emotional climates and provide enriching learning opportunities shapes the relationship between career expectations and career decision-making intentions of Gen Z.

The Influence of Family and Close Networks on the Career Decision-Making Intentions of Generation Z

The concept of role models is central to the career decision-making process, with parents, other family members, and close peers serving as influential figures

who shape career decisions (Fouad et al., 2015). Role models provide guidance, inspiration, and support, helping individuals navigate career-related uncertainties and challenges. Osuizugbo et al. (2022) highlight the significant impact of such role models, emphasising how both familial and peer influences can guide young and early-career individuals in making informed career decisions. Research suggests that parental influence, stemming from both upbringing styles and parental role models, can have either a positive or negative impact on career decisions (Chifamba, 2019; Fodor et al., 2017). This influence is rooted in the close relationships Gen Z maintain with their Generation X parents, who have often experienced similar career-related challenges. Previous studies indicate that family pressure significantly impacts Gen Z's career decisions, with a majority of Gen Z individuals reporting that their families influence their post-graduation career choices (Half, 2015; Kilinc & Varol, 2021).

Familial influence extends beyond parents to encompass a broader network of close family members who serve as key influencers in career decisions. Ultimately, the existing literature underscores a key concern for Gen Z: ensuring that their chosen career path aligns with the expectations of their family and close networks (Olmos-Gómez et al., 2021). For instance, studies indicate that 65% of Gen Z professionals work in fields that their parents preferred, highlighting the strong influence of parental expectations on career decisions (Perna, 2021). Moreover, when Gen Z individuals choose a career path different from their parents' expectations, they often do so after careful consideration (Perna, 2021). This underscores the need to understand the role of family involvement in influencing the emotional and cognitive aspects of Gen Z individuals when making career decisions, as Gen Z's unique perspectives create a complex dynamic which determines the extent to which they incorporate parental influence into their career decisions.

Career Decision-Making Theories

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT)

SCCT, developed by Lent et al. (1994), posits that self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals influence career choices. SCCT has been widely applied to understand career decision-making processes across various populations (Lent & Brown, 2013). The framework helps explain three interrelated aspects of career development: (a) how academic and career interests are formed, (b) how academic and career choices and options are made, and (c) how academic and

career success is achieved (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT incorporates three variables from Bandura's social cognitive theory: (a) self-efficacy, (b) outcome expectations, and (c) personal goals (Brown, 2002), and emphasises the influence of these three elements in career decision-making. In the context of Gen Z, SCCT offers valuable insights into how digital self-efficacy and expectations of rapid career progression might influence career choices. However, the theory's limitation lies in its primary focus on cognitive factors, potentially overlooking the significant role of emotions in Gen Z's decision-making processes (Nye et al., 2012). The Career Self-Management (CSM) model drawn from the SCCT (Lent & Brown, 2013) provides a robust framework for understanding career-related behaviours.

The CSM model, an extension of the SCCT, focuses specifically on how individuals manage their careers across their lifespan (Lent & Brown, 2013). Key components of the CSM model relevant to Gen Z's career decision-making include self-efficacy beliefs (Gen Z's confidence in their ability to perform career-related tasks), outcome expectations (anticipated consequences of career-related actions), career-related intentions that motivate behaviour, and contextual supports and barriers (environmental factors that influence career decisions). In the context of Gen Z, the CSM model helps explain how factors such as digital literacy, desire for work-life balance, and emphasis on personal growth influence career decisions. For example, Gen Z's high level of digital literacy may contribute to strong self-efficacy beliefs in technology-related careers. At the same time, their desire for work-life balance may shape their outcome expectations for different career paths. However, the application of the CSM model to Gen Z, particularly in non-Western contexts, remains under-researched.

Affective events theory (AET)

AET, introduced by Weiss and Cropanzano (1996), emphasises the role of workplace events and resulting emotional reactions in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviours. These emotional reactions, whether positive or negative, directly influence the attitudes and behaviours that employees exhibit in the workplace, emphasising the impact of the work environment on employees' affective states (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). While traditionally applied to job satisfaction and performance, AET has potential to be used for understanding Gen Z's career-related emotional experiences. The integration of AET in career decision-making models is particularly relevant for Gen Z, given their reported emphasis on workplace culture

and emotional well-being (Schroth, 2019). However, the theory's application to career choice processes remains underexplored, presenting an opportunity for theoretical advancement. Key components of AET relevant to Gen Z's career decision-making include work events (experiences that evoke emotional responses), affective reactions (emotional responses to work events), work attitudes (evaluations of job satisfaction and organisational commitment) and affect-driven behaviours (actions influenced by emotional states). For Gen Z, AET can help explain how experiences such as internships, part-time jobs, or even observations of parents' work experiences can evoke emotional responses that influence career intentions. For instance, positive experiences with socially responsible companies may evoke positive emotions, leading to stronger intentions to pursue careers in such organisations.

The current conceptual model proposed in this paper is developed based on the joint theorization of SCCT and AET, addressing limitations in applying each theory in isolation to Gen Z's career decision-making. In the literature, SCCT has been widely used to explain career choices in traditional employment settings; while its applicability to the non-linear, flexible, and multi-career phenomenon often pursued by Gen Z remains underexplored (Khakwani et al., 2022; Rezky & Rasto, 2024). Gen Z's preferences for entrepreneurial ventures, career mobility, and dynamic work experiences (Chillakuri, 2020; Fodor et al., 2017; Randstad, 2016) highlight the need for a framework that integrates cognitive factors such as career outcome expectations, learning experiences, and personal goals with the emotional and contextual influences emphasised by AET. By combining SCCT and AET, the model captures how cognitive expectations and affective experiences jointly shape Gen Z's career decision-making intentions, offering a novel explanation of their decision-making in employment contexts.

Recent scholarship underscores the importance of incorporating these emotional and adaptive processes into contemporary career theories (Akkermans et al., 2018; Hirschi & Läge, 2008). AET, developed by Weiss and Cropanzano (1996), posits that workplace events, whether positive or negative, trigger emotional reactions that significantly impact employees' job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and long-term career decisions. These affective events not only shape emotional responses but also profoundly influence goal setting and perceptions of support and barriers. A notable gap in the literature is the limited exploration of AET in predicting career decision-making intentions, particularly among Gen Z. The current paper aims to

address this gap by applying AET to investigate how emotional reactions to workplace events influence Gen Z's career decision-making behaviours. By combining SCCT and AET, the model captures how cognitive expectations and affective experiences jointly shape Gen Z's career decision-making intentions, offering a novel and comprehensive explanation of their career choices in contemporary employment contexts.

Proposed Conceptualisation and Conceptual Framework

Career Outcome Expectations and Career Decision-Making Intentions

Career outcome expectations represent an individual's beliefs and anticipations regarding their future professional decisions, integrating both subjective perceptions and objective considerations (Ahmad et al., 2019). These expectations typically involve anticipated growth and development within an organisation, encompassing crucial factors such as rewards, work values, and the work environment (Metz et al., 2008).

Rewards represent the tangible and intangible outcomes individuals anticipate from their work, encompassing both financial and non-financial returns. Financial rewards include salary, benefits, and job security, while non-financial rewards involve recognition, growth opportunities, and meaningful work experiences (Gomez et al., 2020;Half, 2024). Within the SCCT, rewards are conceptualised as outcome expectations that shape the career choices of individuals based on perceived returns. When Gen Z employees expect that a career will provide desirable financial security alongside personal meaning and value congruence, they are more likely to form strong intentions toward such paths. Accordingly, it can be proposed that Gen Z's career decision-making intentions are influenced by the interplay between expected financial and non-financial rewards.

Intrinsic values refer to the internal satisfactions individuals derive from the nature of their work, such as enjoyment, personal growth, and self-determination (Hampton & Welsh, 2019; Sidorcuka & Chesnovicka, 2017). Observed through the lens of the SCCT, intrinsic values function as outcome expectations. When Gen Z employees expect that their careers will provide meaningful and self-fulfilling experiences, they are more likely to develop favorable attitudes and intentions toward those career paths (Barhate & Dirani, 2021). Accordingly, it can be proposed that Gen Z employees' career decisions are positively influenced by the anticipated fulfilment of intrinsic values.

Altruistic values reflect concern for the well-being of others and the desire to make a positive social impact through one's work (Maloni et al., 2019). From an SCCT perspective, these values also operate as outcome expectations, directing individuals toward career paths that they believe will allow them to contribute to others or society. When work is perceived as a vehicle for helping others or advancing social good, Gen Z individuals are more likely to form strong intentions to pursue such roles (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Maloni et al., 2019). Thus, it can be proposed that Gen Z employees' career intentions are shaped by the degree to which their work is expected to satisfy altruistic motives.

A supportive work environment refers to organisational conditions that foster employee growth, inclusion, and well-being through positive leadership, developmental opportunities, and a healthy organisational culture (Handshake, 2024; Lazar et al., 2023). Within SCCT, such an environment functions as a contextual influence that shapes the confidence and outcome expectations of individuals related to career choices. When Gen Z employees perceive the work environment as being supportive, providing alignment with their values, learning needs, and career aspirations, they are more likely to form favorable career decision-making intentions (Xin et al., 2020; Mărginean, 2021). Accordingly, it can be proposed that perceived support within the work environment positively influences Gen Z employees' career decision-making intentions by reinforcing their expectations of personal growth and success.

Based on this relationship between career outcome expectation factors and career decision-making intentions of Gen Z, the following propositions are made:

- *Proposition 1: There is a positive relationship between perceived rewards and Gen Z's career decision-making intentions.*
- *Proposition 2: There is a positive relationship between intrinsic values and Gen Z's career decision-making intentions.*
- *Proposition 3: There is a positive relationship between altruistic values and Gen Z's career decision-making intentions.*
- *Proposition 4: There is a positive relationship between perceptions of a supportive work environment and Gen Z's career decision-making intentions.*

Work Events and Career Decision-making Intentions of Gen Z

Workplace events, defined as specific occurrences or experiences within a professional setting, act as stimuli capable of eliciting a range of emotional responses, from negative emotions such as anger, guilt, and disgust to positive ones like pleasure, happiness, and pride (Ghasemy et al., 2020). Crucially, these events are not objective realities but are inherently contextual and subjective, filtered through individual perceptions and influenced by stable work environment features (Mignonac & Herrbach, 2004; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). AET posits that this individual appraisal of an event, for instance, perceiving a heavy workload as a challenge versus a source of stress, critically shapes the resulting emotional responses and subsequent judgment-driven behaviours, such as enhanced engagement, absenteeism or turnover (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996; Wegge et al., 2006). Events tied to coworkers and supervisors, in particular, hold significant sway, triggering pronounced pleasure when positive and anger when negative (Mignonac & Herrbach, 2004). This mechanism highlights the fact that workplace events play a fundamental role in shaping an individual's career behaviour. For Gen Z, this is particularly salient; research underscores the importance of positive colleague relationships, with negative interactions often cited as a primary reason for their job departure (Adobe, 2023). However, while AET explains emotional responses, its application to understanding how Gen Z's subjective interpretations of specific workplace events directly influence their career decision-making intentions remains an underexplored and critical gap (Christensen et al., 2023; Mahapatra et al., 2022). Addressing this gap is vital to comprehending how the emotional consequences of work events ultimately navigate Gen Z's career choices and decisions. Based on this, the following hypothesis is advanced:

- *Proposition 5: Workplace events significantly influence Gen Z's career decision-making intentions.*

Learning Experience

Learning experiences, defined as any interaction or activity that fosters changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes, or understanding, are highly valued by Gen Z (Abe & Chikoko, 2020; Fergusson, 2022). This emphasis is evident in statistics revealing that 94% of Gen Z respondents consider learning experiences crucial for their professional development, with 73% expressing willingness to remain with an employer who offers consistent growth opportunities (Mărginean, 2021; Stillman & Stillman, 2017).

However, while Gen Z seeks challenging and meaningful work, excessive challenges can lead to attrition, highlighting a complex interaction where learning experiences can either foster commitment or drive disengagement (Mahapatra et al., 2022; Postolov et al., 2017). Workplace events play a critical role in facilitating these learning experiences. Distinct from stable job features, these specific occurrences trigger cognitive and emotional responses that shape a Gen Z employee's learning orientation and career outlook (Chen et al., 2020; Ghasemy et al., 2020). For Gen Z, who exhibit a high learning orientation, the impact of these events is particularly significant; 93% value working with managers they can learn from (Half, 2018). Positive events, such as recognition or skill development opportunities, can strengthen career confidence and commitment, while negative experiences, like a lack of support or overwhelming challenges, may prompt a reconsideration of career decisions (Kim et al., 2021). This implies that the nature of workplace events directly influences learning outcomes, which, in turn, steer Gen Z's career intentions.

Furthermore, learning experiences do not operate in isolation but interact dynamically with an individual's broader career expectations (Chen et al., 2020). The extent to which an individual's career expectations (e.g., regarding rewards, intrinsic values, work environment) translate into concrete decision-making intentions can be significantly influenced by the learning opportunities or setbacks encountered (Half, 2018). For instance, the expectation of professional growth is only sustained if actual learning experiences are fulfilling and not overwhelming (Mahapatra et al., 2022). This suggests that the impact of career expectations on decisions is contingent upon the quality and nature of the learning experiences provided within the professional setting (Bieleń & Kubiczek, 2020). Based on this, it can be posited that:

- *Proposition 6: Learning experience mediates the relationship between workplace events and Gen Z's career decision-making intentions.*
- *Proposition 7: Learning experience moderates the relationship between Gen Z's career expectations and their career decision-making intentions.*

Family and Close Network Influence

The family and close social networks of Gen Z serve as a foundational context for individual development, significantly shaping not only early socialisation but also profound career decisions and expectations (Olmos-Gómez et al., 2021). Research consistently highlights the impact of family on career choices, with studies indicating

that family considerations can often outweigh other factors, including career expectations (Abe & Chikoko, 2020; Taylor et al., 2004). For Gen Z, this influence is particularly salient; they place significant importance on family alongside personal values in their career decision-making (Flaherty, 2024). Evidencing this, 65% of Gen Z professionals have been found to work in fields preferred by their parents, and 82% acknowledge some parental or guardian influence on their career decisions upon graduation (Half, 2015; Perna, 2021). Particularly when diverging from parental expectations, Gen Z often weighs these decisions very carefully, underscoring the deep integration of familial perspectives (Perna, 2021).

This familial impact is further reinforced by parental styles and role modelling, which shape work-related values and expectations (Chifamba, 2019). Gen Z actively seeks career advice from their close networks, with 52% consulting family and friends, as revealed by Croll (2023). Moreover, some Gen Z individuals may seek guidance from external figures, particularly when parental career paths have not met expectations or when perceived mismatches arise between parental advice and their own expectations, highlighting the relationship among familial influence, individual agency, and external factors (Flaherty, 2024; Fodor et al., 2017; Fouad et al., 2015; Perna, 2021). Therefore, the family and close network do not merely exert a direct influence on career intentions; rather, they serve as a powerful moderator of the relationship between an individual's career expectations and their subsequent decision-making intentions. The concern of Gen Z regarding how their families perceive their chosen careers further emphasises this, suggesting that the drive to fulfill personal career expectations is filtered through the lens of familial and close network approval and influence (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Gomez et al., 2018). This highlights a relationship where the strength and direction of the link between a Gen Z individual's expectations and their career choices are contingent upon the context provided by their family and close network.

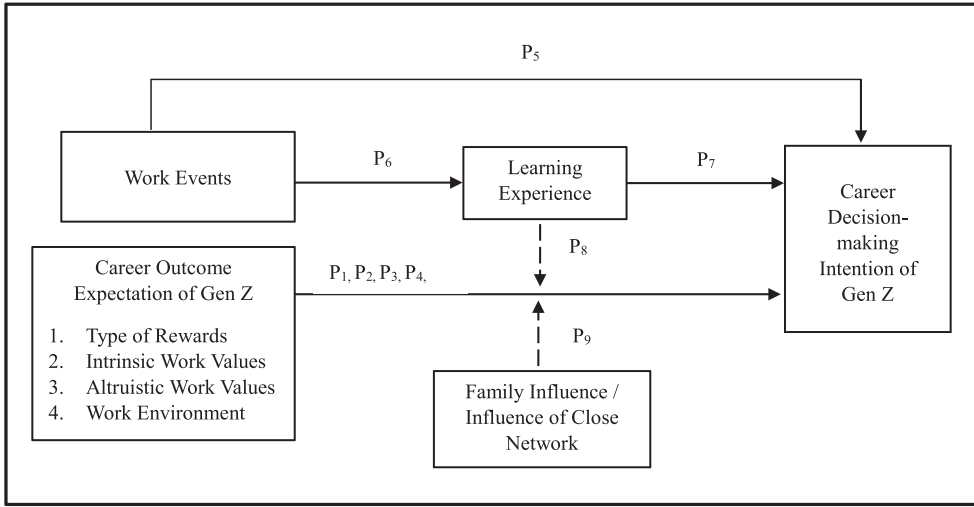
Based on this, the following is proposed:

- *Proposition 8: Family and/or close network moderates the relationship between Gen Z's career expectations and their career decision-making intentions.*

As illustrated in Figure 1, the conceptual research framework integrates SCCT and AET in order to examine the career decision-making intentions of Gen Z. This

integration provides a comprehensive understanding of how cognitive and affective factors shape Gen Z's career decisions, and the corresponding propositions are also depicted within the framework.

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework



Note. The above figure illustrates the conceptual research framework, which integrates SCCT and AET to examine the career decision-making intentions of Gen Z. SCCT contributes career outcome expectations (outcome expectations), learning experiences (experiential factors), and family and close network influence (background and contextual factors), while AET incorporates work events, emphasising the emotional aspects of career decision-making. This integration provides a comprehensive understanding of how cognitive and affective factors shape Gen Z's career decisions.

Discussion

In the present study, career decision-making intentions of Gen Z are posited to be influenced by distinct, yet interconnected pathways. Primarily, there is a potential direct influence where Gen Z's career outcome expectations actively guide and shape their career decision-making intentions (choice goals). This signifies that what Gen Z anticipates and desires from a career path serves as a fundamental driver of their subsequent career choices. Complementing this direct link, the broader SCCT framework suggests mediated and moderated influences. Specifically, learning experiences play a crucial role by shaping an individual's self-efficacy and outcome expectations, thereby indirectly impacting career intentions. Furthermore, family and close social networks provide a significant contextual backdrop, moderating or otherwise influencing these established pathways, highlighting the complex interaction

between individual cognitive factors, experiential learning, and social support in Gen Z's career decision-making process.

Additionally, AET contributes to the framework by incorporating work events, which highlight the emotional and affective dimensions of workplace experiences. AET, developed by Weiss and Cropanzano (1996), explores the emotional dimension of career decision-making intentions by providing a framework for understanding how workplace experiences, specifically workplace events, can evoke affective reactions that subsequently influence judgement-driven behaviours. These behaviours can encompass a range of responses, including decisions related to career paths. AET posits a causal relationship between workplace events and affective reactions. In other words, specific events encountered in the workplace can trigger emotional responses, which, in turn, influence an individual's judgements and subsequent behaviours. For instance, a positive work event, such as receiving recognition for a project, might evoke feelings of satisfaction and pride, potentially leading to increased commitment to a chosen career decision. Conversely, a negative work event like experiencing discrimination or harassment could evoke feelings of anger or frustration, potentially prompting a reconsideration of career decisions. Applying AET to the context of Gen Z's career decision-making allows for a deeper understanding of how workplace experiences shape their career decision-making intentions. By examining the types of workplace events encountered by this generation and the subsequent affective reactions evoked, we can gain insight into the emotional drivers influencing their career decisions. This approach acknowledges the significant role of emotions in shaping career decision-making intentions, moving beyond purely cognitive considerations to incorporate the affective dimension of workplace experiences.

The proposed conceptual framework integrates SCCT and AET to provide a broader understanding of Gen Z's career decision-making intentions. Within this framework, family and close networks are conceptualised as background contextual factors, providing social, cultural, and relational contexts that shape early career outcome expectations and influence subsequent cognitive appraisals. Learning experiences function as experiential factors, refining self-efficacy and outcome expectations by exposing Gen Z to educational, training, and work-related experiences that inform career perspectives. Career outcome expectations serve as the central cognitive-person variable, reflecting anticipated rewards, intrinsic and altruistic values, stability, and work environment, which directly influence career decision-making intentions,

the key choice goal in the SCCT framework. Complementing this cognitive pathway, work events, as posited by AET, act as proximal affective triggers, eliciting emotional responses that interact with self-efficacy and outcome expectations to shape intentions and behaviours. By explicitly mapping each variable within the SCCT-AET causal flow, the framework captures the influence of contextual, experiential, cognitive, and affective factors, providing a holistic and theoretically coherent explanation for how Gen Z navigates career decisions in complex and evolving social and organisational environments. This explicit mapping clarifies how these theories combine to provide a dynamic and holistic view of Gen Z's career behaviours, addressing the limitations of applying either theory in isolation, particularly with respect to the Gen Z community.

Implications and Contributions

Theoretical Contribution

This paper contributes to the advancement of career literature by introducing an integrated SCCT-AET framework that creates a tailor-made model to reflect the career outcome expectations and career decision-making intentions of Gen Z. While prevailing frameworks emphasise alignment between individual values and job roles (Ashwithi & Weerasinghe, 2019; De Cooman & Vleugels, 2022; Singh et al., 2016), they often lack a dynamic account of how emotional experiences shape, reinforce, or derail career intentions over time (Gustafsson & Kärreman, 2023). Similarly, traditional models focus heavily on stable cognitive assessments (e.g., satisfaction, motivation) and often assume rational decision-making, overlooking the affective volatility and social influence characterising Gen Z's career decision-making intentions.

In contrast, the framework proposed by the current study explicitly incorporates both cognitive processes from SCCT and emotional triggers from AET, offering a dual-lens perspective rarely found in career management. This integration is especially critical given that Gen Z employees navigate a rapidly shifting world of work, where moment-to-moment emotional experiences can significantly influence long-term career decisions (Racolța-Paina & Irini, 2021). By accounting for how affective events interact with self-regulatory career behaviours, the framework extends the boundaries of career development theory and helps explain why traditional retention, engagement, and development strategies often fail with this new generational cohort. Ultimately, this paper proposes a novel theoretical foundation that better aligns with the emergent characteristics of contemporary workforce entrants. It offers scholars and practitioners

a more holistic model for understanding and responding to the unique psychological and emotional dynamics that drive Gen Z's career decisions in real time.

While SCCT and AET have traditionally been explored in separate domains, cognitive career development and emotional workplace experiences, respectively, their integration offers a powerful lens through which to understand the career decision-making processes of Gen Z. The Affect Infusion Model (AIM) further enriches this perspective by emphasising how affective states can infuse judgements and decisions through heuristic or substantive processing strategies (Forgas, 1995). For Gen Z, whose career decisions often involve navigating complex and varying scenarios, AIM suggests that their emotional states, whether positive or negative, may significantly shape the way they evaluate opportunities, interpret workplace experiences, and make long-term career decisions. This idea is supported in recent research demonstrating that emotional intelligence and positive affect are strongly linked to better career outcomes among Gen Z, while negative emotional states like anxiety and frustration correlate with decision-making difficulties and career indecision (Barhate et al., 2024). This integration underscores the influence of cognition and emotion in shaping career decisions.

AET posits that discrete emotional reactions to workplace or academic events, such as receiving unexpected negative feedback during an internship, can significantly shape attitudes and behaviours (Dimotakis et al., 2010). These emotional reactions, in turn, influence cognitive evaluations central to SCCT, such as beliefs about personal competence (self-efficacy) and anticipated results of actions (outcome expectations). For example, a Gen Z student experiencing frequent praise and mentorship in a co-op programme may develop higher self-efficacy for roles in that industry and stronger expectations of satisfaction and success, thereby increasing their intentions to pursue that particular career path. Conversely, repeated exposure to emotionally negative work environments, such as micromanagement or lack of recognition, may diminish career-related self-efficacy and reduce outcome expectations, leading to career indecision or redirection (Bano et al., 2021). This illustrates a bidirectional influence: while SCCT provides the structural components of intentions formation, AET introduces the affective catalyst that either strengthens or disrupts these mechanisms.

SCCT emphasises the role of proactive career behaviours guided by self-efficacy, goal setting, and contextual supports (Lent et al., 2016). When integrated with AET,

the SCCT model becomes more temporally responsive, accounting not only for long-term cognitive developments but also for immediate emotional stimuli. Affective events serve as micro-level influencers that can shift self-management strategies in real-time (Lent & Brown, 2013). For instance, a Gen Z employee who witnesses ethical misconduct at work may experience emotional discomfort, which challenges their outcome expectations about remaining in that organisation and may trigger a career re-evaluation process. This dynamic illustrates how affective experiences shape the feedback loop within career self-management over time. Therefore, this integrative lens provides a richer understanding of how emotional experiences and cognitive appraisals interact in shaping Gen Z's career pathways. For Human Resources (HR) professionals, this suggests that career development programmes should not only build skills and confidence (SCCT) but also focus on cultivating positive emotional experiences in early career stages (AET). Incorporating affective insights into onboarding, feedback, and mentorship programmes could significantly improve talent alignment and retention among Gen Z employees.

Practical Contribution

The proposed framework serves as a novel insight for practitioners by highlighting the necessity of addressing both cognitive and affective factors in career decision-making. As Gen Z enters the workforce, HR professionals must develop strategies that resonate with their unique characteristics and expectations. This cohort's distinct approach to career decisions, influenced by both rational and emotional factors, necessitates a shift from traditional HR practices to more tailored strategies (Dwivedula et al., 2019; Kodithuwakku et al., 2018).

Specifically, the integration of SCCT and AET into Human Resource Management (HRM) practices can facilitate a deeper understanding of Gen Z's career intentions, thereby enhancing talent acquisition, retention, and engagement efforts (Jayathilake, 2019). This implies tailoring recruitment practices to emphasise clear growth paths and purpose-driven work that aligns with Gen Z values, rather than focusing solely on traditional benefits. For engagement practices, understanding how specific positive (e.g., recognition, meaningful projects) and negative (e.g., unfair treatment, lack of autonomy) workplace events trigger affective responses is crucial for fostering an environment where Gen Z feels valued and motivated. Effective retention strategies for Gen Z must move beyond mere compensation to include continuous learning opportunities, flexible work arrangements, and a supportive

culture that mitigates negative affective experiences. Furthermore, robust mentoring and grooming practices, which provide personalised guidance and skill development from managers they can learn from, are paramount. These practices, informed by both their developing career self-efficacy and their emotional responses to daily interactions, are essential for cultivating Gen Z's commitment and ensuring their sustained professional development within the organisation. Traditional HR practices are often insufficient to meet the specific needs of this new cohort, underscoring the requirement for innovative and adaptive strategies (Arar & Öneren, 2018; Chillakuri, 2020; Goh & Okumus, 2020).

The following implications are particularly relevant for key HRM functions, including recruitment, engagement, retention, mentoring, grooming, and career development.

Emotionally intelligent onboarding practices: To leverage the integrated SCCT-AET framework, HR managers should prioritise emotionally intelligent onboarding practices. Drawing directly from AET's focus on affective event-triggered reactions, onboarding can be intentionally designed as a series of positive affective events that elicit favourable emotional responses from Gen Z employees. Practices such as structured peer support (e.g., assigning onboarding "buddies"), value-aligned welcome rituals, and emotionally affirming mentorship are critical. These strategically designed affective events contribute to a psychologically safe and resonant initial experience. Through these positive emotional experiences, Gen Z's outcome expectations (e.g., beliefs about a supportive work environment and growth potential) and self-efficacy beliefs (e.g., confidence in their ability to succeed within the organisation), which are key cognitive-person variables within SCCT, are reinforced. For instance, value-based storytelling in orientation sessions can generate emotional resonance, while peer support fosters a sense of belonging, both directly influencing Gen Z's cognitive appraisals of their fit and future success within the organisation, ultimately enhancing their commitment.

Retention strategies based on affective feedback loops: The integrated SCCT-AET framework highlights that Gen Z's career decisions are profoundly influenced not only by rational, cognitive appraisals but also by ongoing affective reactions to workplace events. To foster sustained career engagement and loyalty, HR teams must therefore proactively implement retention strategies centered on monitoring

and responding to these critical emotional moments. Utilising tools like regular surveys or AI-driven sentiment analysis can help organisations track emotional trends, identifying potential negative affective triggers arising from workplace events (e.g., disappointing project outcomes, perceived unfairness in feedback sessions, or internal mobility decisions). By acknowledging and addressing these triggers, HR can prevent the erosion of cognitive-person variables within SCCT, such as Gen Z's outcome expectations (e.g., beliefs about career expectations and fair treatment) and self-efficacy (e.g., confidence in their ability to navigate their roles effectively). Conversely, cultivating positive affective feedback loops, where favourable emotional responses are recognised and reinforced, can strengthen these SCCT-based cognitive appraisals, thereby sustaining cognitive career engagement and fostering long-term loyalty among Gen Z employees.

Personalised career development and learning pathways: Within the SCCT framework, learning experiences are paramount for fostering self-efficacy, shaping outcome expectations, and guiding goal setting in career self-management. Therefore, HRM practices should prioritise personalised career development initiatives that serve as rich learning experiences for Gen Z. This includes offering individualized learning paths, digital upskilling platforms, and regular career coaching, which directly enhance Gen Z's self-efficacy by enabling skill mastery and increasing confidence, while also strengthening their outcome expectations by demonstrating clear avenues for growth and reward. Integrating AET's insights further suggests that these development programmes, while building competencies through learning, must also intentionally curate emotionally fulfilling experiences. For example, providing Gen Z employees with opportunities to engage in socially impactful projects or passion-driven innovation labs creates positive affective events. These events elicit favourable emotional responses, directly contributing to a sense of purpose and psychological well-being. This emotional resonance, cultivated through impactful learning experiences, in turn, reinforces their outcome expectations regarding meaningful work and solidifies their career intentions, effectively enhancing the cognitive development fostered by learning experiences with the emotional satisfaction critical for sustained engagement.

Designing supportive work environments: The integrated framework strongly underscores the importance of family and social influences, a key contextual factor within SCCT, suggesting that Gen Z's career decisions are deeply embedded in a

broader socio-emotional context. To address this issue effectively, HR can design and foster inclusive work environments that serve as crucial learning experiences and positive affective events. By validating diverse value systems and encouraging open conversations about work-life balance, personal goals, and cultural influences, organisations can create a climate that supports Gen Z's holistic well-being. Strategic levers such as flexible work policies, emotional wellness initiatives, and intergenerational mentorship programmes are not merely benefits; they function as structured learning experiences that enhance Gen Z's self-efficacy in managing their personal and professional lives. Simultaneously, these initiatives act as positive affective events, eliciting emotional resonance and a sense of psychological safety. This combination directly reinforces Gen Z's outcome expectations regarding a supportive workplace, work-life integration, and alignment with their personal values, ultimately solidifying their engagement and career intentions within the organisation.

Strategic workforce planning and policy design: Finally, the integrated SCCT-AET framework provides a critical lens for aligning broader HR strategies with the psychological and emotional profiles of incoming talent, particularly Gen Z. From performance appraisal systems to leadership development pipelines, incorporating this dual lens ensures that policies are designed to address both the cognitive competencies and affective needs of this generational cohort. In particular, strategic workforce planning, informed by SCCT, should develop policies that create learning experiences to cultivate self-efficacy and realistic outcome expectations among Gen Z, guiding their career decisions and goal setting expertly within the organisation. Simultaneously, AET's perspective mandates that these policies are designed to minimise negative affective events and maximise positive emotional responses, fostering psychological safety and emotional well-being. For instance, performance appraisal systems can be structured to provide constructive, growth-oriented feedback (a positive learning experience) that also validates effort and progress (a positive affective event), thereby reinforcing self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations rather than triggering anxiety or disengagement. By considering both cognitive development and emotional experiences holistically, organisations can design policies that genuinely resonate with Gen Z, enhancing their engagement and retention.

Future Research Directions

This study provides several avenues for a future research agenda. First, future research should test the proposed conceptual model empirically by examining the

propositions derived in this study. Employing quantitative methodologies such as structural equation modelling would enable scholars to validate the hypothesised relationships among career expectations, workplace events, learning experiences, family and close network influences, and career decision-making intentions among Gen Z professionals. Such empirical testing would not only provide statistical evidence of the model's predictive validity but also strengthen its theoretical coherence by demonstrating how these interrelated factors collectively shape Gen Z's career decision-making processes. Secondly, to capture potential developmental differences, future studies should conduct multi-group analyses comparing Gen Z professionals at various career stages. Specifically, examining pre-entry Gen Z individuals (e.g., students), entry-level professionals, and those in early-to-mid career stages could reveal how the influence of career expectations, workplace events, and mediating/moderating factors evolves. This longitudinal perspective would illuminate critical sub-differences within the cohort. Furthermore, in the contemporary context of Gen Z, social media, digital networks, and online professional communities profoundly influence career decisions, serving as significant platforms for information, networking, and personal branding. However, these digital factors were not explicitly included as variables in the present study. This omission might overlook a key and increasingly prominent driver of career decision-making for this digitally native generation, potentially limiting the comprehensiveness of the model proposed. Therefore, future research should specifically investigate the role of social media engagement, digital network participation, and online professional community involvement as distinct factors influencing Gen Z's career expectations and decision-making intentions. Such studies could explore these digital factors as potential moderators or mediators within the proposed model, revealing new insights into how online interactions shape offline career decisions. Finally, research could explore the sequential effects within the model, particularly how initial career decisions or early career experiences feedback to reshape subsequent career expectations and decision-making intentions. Investigating the dynamic nature of these relationships would provide a broader understanding of Gen Z's long-term career development.

Conflict of Interest

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