



# Caffeine and Culture: Understanding Gen Z Work Ethos in Malang Coffee Shops

Siwi Dyah Ratnasari\*

STIE Malangkucecwara Indonesia.

\*Corresponding Author  
Siwi Dyah Ratnasari

STIE Malangkucecwara  
Indonesia.

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**Abstract:** This study examines the workplace culture experienced by Generation Z employees coffee shops in Malang, Indonesia. As digital natives, Gen Z workers highly prioritize flexibility, transparent communication, and a healthy work-life balance, prompting service-based businesses to rethink how they shape their organizational culture. Utilizing a qualitative approach and based on current theoretical frameworks in organizational behavior, the research explores how Gen Z employees interpret, engage with, and influence the cultural environment in creative and service-driven workplaces. Core elements identified include autonomy, collaborative teamwork, adaptable work schedules, and the alignment of work environments that foster emotional well-being, participative leadership, and spaces for personal expression. Conversely, workplaces characterized by rigidity or cultural misalignment often result in disengagement and dissatisfaction. This study enhances our understanding of generational dynamics within organizational workplaces for employers aiming to effectively engage and retain Gen Z talent in fast-paced, competitive industries.

**Keywords:** Generation Z, workplace culture, coffee shops, work-life balance, employee engagement, organizational behavior, flexible work environment.

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## 1. Background

Generation Z, commonly defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, has emerged as a transformative presence in today's workforce, bringing with them a distinct set of values and expectations (Mincyte & Dobernic, 2016). Shaped by constant access to digital technologies, global connectivity, and evolving social dynamics, Gen Z employees demonstrate notable strengths in digital literacy, collaborative problem-solving, and self-directed learning (Celestin & Vanitha, 2017). Their digital upbringing has not only influenced how they communicate and process knowledge of meaningful work and organizational engagement (Iqbal et al., 2017).

In service-oriented industries such as coffee shops, understanding and adapting to the work culture preferences of Gen Z is becoming increasingly vital (Bou Hatoum & Nassereddine, 2025). For this generation, work culture extends beyond formal rules or operational procedures (Nugraha & Nur Cahyo, 2025); it is a lived experience that profoundly affects motivation, performance, and overall job satisfaction. Gen Z values autonomy, inclusiveness, and especially work-life balance, seeking employment environments that allow them to pursue both professional goals and personal interests (Jurry & Rinda Nur, 2024b). Consequently, organizations

must rethink and realign their internal culture to remain attractive and relevant to this new wave of talent (Kurnianto et al., 2025).

Work culture itself can be understood as a system of values, assumptions, and shared practices developed by members of an organization in response to internal and external demands (Yosepha et al., 2022). These values shape everyday behaviors, decision-making processes, communication norms, and approaches to conflict and collaboration (Rahim & Hashim, 2024). A positive work culture fosters belonging, engagement, and productivity, whereas a misaligned or rigid culture often leads to disengagement, low morale, and high turnover (Pangguna et al., 2024).

Generation Z employees are particularly responsive to cultures that promote transparency, flexibility, and participatory decision-making (Bou Hatoum & Nassereddine, 2025). They are more likely to commit to organizations that support their individual growth while maintaining inclusive, values-driven environments (Suvattanadilok, 2024). Research by Dirana et al., (2021) affirms that employees working in supportive environments experience greater autonomy, recognition, and psychological well-being-factors that correlate strongly with job satisfaction. In contrast, poor work cultures may undermine employee engagement, increasing emotional strain and reducing performance.



This shift in generational priorities signals a broader transformation in workplace dynamics (Jurry & Rinda Nur, 2024b). While previous generations often prioritized job security and structured roles, Gen Z seeks adaptability, creativity, and the ability to manage work and personal life simultaneously (Celestin & Vanitha, 2017). According to Mahardika et al., (2022), work-life balance is increasingly viewed not merely as a division of time but as a dynamic integration of responsibilities, allowing individuals to remain productive without sacrificing their well-being. Organizations that recognize and support this integration are more likely to retain young talent and foster long-term commitment (Paroli, 2024).

The café industry, particularly in urban hubs such as Malang, Indonesia, offers an ideal context for exploring this generational dynamic (Jurry & Rinda Nur, 2024b). Malang's vibrant youth culture and rapidly growing coffee shop scene create a unique setting in which to examine how workplace practices adapt to the evolving expectations of Gen Z (Mincyte & Dobernig, 2016); (Giunta et al., 2025). Coffee shops serve not only as places of employment but also as creative and social spaces that reflect broader cultural trends among young professionals (Mertens et al., 2016); (Rahim & Hashim, 2024).

This study, therefore, focuses on coffee shops in Malang as a microcosm of Gen Z's evolving work values. It investigates how work culture is constructed, implemented, and experienced by young employees and how organizational practices align with or diverge from their expectations. Key aspects of inquiry include flexible scheduling, open communication, interpersonal dynamics, and the integration of personal interests into daily work life (Dessel, 2024). As highlighted by Ahmed et al., (2024), a work culture that supports balance and well-being can significantly enhance employee motivation and productivity, making this investigation particularly timely and relevant.

Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to the growing discourse on generational shifts in organizational behavior, emphasizing the importance of workplace adaptation in retaining and empowering the next generation of workers. By exploring how Gen Z experiences and shapes work culture in the setting of Malang's coffee shops, the study offers practical and theoretical insights for organizations navigating similar cultural transitions in a post-digital workforce.

## 2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, wherein the researcher serves as the primary instrument and data are collected directly from participants within their natural setting. The research was conducted at Ong coffee shop in Malang, Indonesia. The study centers on observations of individuals within their everyday work environment. Primary data were obtained through direct engagement with three key informants: The owner of Ong coffee shop, the manager who assists the owner in implementing and maintaining the organizational culture, and employees. These informants were chosen based on their direct involvement in the café's operations and their in-depth understanding of the cultural practices in place. Data collection employed interactive techniques, primarily semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Observations focused on the day-to-day behaviors and practices of Gen Z employees related to workplace culture. Additionally, document analysis was conducted to examine internal materials

that reflect how work culture is implemented and internalized within the organization.

## 3. Discussion

To explore how Generation Z employees experience and contribute to workplace culture within service-based environments, this study employed in-depth interviews as a primary method of data collection. The interviews were conducted with three key informant groups at Ong coffee shop in Malang, Indonesia: the owner, who holds strategic authority in shaping organizational values; the manager, who oversees operational practices and staff coordination; and Generation Z employees, who are directly engaged in the daily execution of tasks and service delivery.

This qualitative approach enabled the researcher to capture rich, contextualized insights into how workplace norms are developed, communicated, and interpreted by individuals occupying different roles within the organization. Particular attention was given to themes such as flexibility, communication patterns, teamwork, leadership dynamics, and the alignment between personal values and organizational expectations.

The perspectives obtained from these interviews provide a comprehensive understanding of the organizational culture from both managerial and employee standpoints. By analyzing the responses of these varied actors, the study aims to uncover patterns, challenges, and strategies that are particularly relevant to sustaining a positive and adaptive work environment for Generation Z employees. The following section presents the synthesized findings from the interviews, organized thematically to reflect the core dimensions of workplace culture as identified in the field.

**Owner's Perspective:** The owner emphasized that Ong coffee shop promotes a work culture centered on work-life balance, where employees are encouraged to work within their capacity and maintain mental well-being. Flexibility in work schedules is a key practice, allowing employees to align their job responsibilities with personal needs (Jurry & Rinda Nur, 2024a). The owner also highlighted that passion-driven work enhances productivity and job satisfaction. Informal norms, such as mutual support and open communication, replace strict regulations. Technological tools like digital POS systems and real-time financial tracking also play a critical role in streamlining operations and enabling informed decision-making. Interactions with customers are characterized by a courteous and approachable demeanor, fostering a welcoming atmosphere, while internal team conflicts are addressed through open communication and collaborative problem-solving.

**Manager's Perspective:** The manager affirmed the importance of flexibility in enabling employees to balance personal responsibilities and professional tasks. Drawing from personal experience as a student-worker, the manager implemented employee-driven scheduling and emphasized open communication. While there are no rigid rules, shared routines and mutual accountability foster a productive atmosphere. The manager also acknowledged the role of informal norms in maintaining efficiency and cohesion. Technology was seen as an enabler for managing operations, tracking performance, and reducing workload. Positive customer interactions and a relaxed environment further enhanced team motivation and service quality.

**Employee's Perspective:** Employees viewed work-life balance as the ability to freely manage schedules and responsibilities. The

flexibility offered at Toko Kopi Ong allowed them to fulfill personal obligations without compromising work performance. Informal practices such as shift-swapping, mutual assistance, and collective responsibility were common. Communication and teamwork were cited as vital to maintaining a supportive workplace. Employees also appreciated the technological infrastructure for easing transactions and staying connected during downtime. Customer interactions were regarded as opportunities for building rapport, and workplace conflicts were generally resolved through open discussions or, when needed, silent de-escalation.

## 4. Findings and Analysis

This study reveals that the work culture implemented at Ong coffee shop reflects the distinctive values of Generation Z, this is in line with Jurry & Rinda Nur, (2024b), particularly in terms of flexibility, work-life balance, open communication, and team collaboration this is in line with (Hatoum & Nassereddine, 2025). These values serve as the foundation for fostering a comfortable, productive, and inclusive workplace environment. This section presents the findings derived from interviews and observations conducted with the owner, manager, and employees of Ong coffee shop in Malang, a popular coffee shop with a predominantly Generation Z workforce. The analysis is structured around the key themes extracted from the interview questions and reflects the lived experiences of the informants regarding work culture, work-life balance, interpersonal relationships, technological adaptation, and conflict resolution.

### 4.1 Understanding and Practice of Work-Life Balance

All informants emphasized that achieving work-life balance is not merely a theoretical ideal but a practical and integrated part of the organizational culture at Ong coffee shop. The owner introduced the concept of “working in proportion”, highlighting the importance of not overwhelming employees and allowing them the autonomy to determine their working hours. The manager, echoing similar sentiments, emphasized the necessity of flexibility, especially considering the dual roles many employees play as students and workers. This was substantiated by employees who appreciated the freedom to self-manage schedules, leading to improved motivation and reduced stress. The findings suggest that at Ong coffee shop, work-life balance is sustained through structural flexibility and mutual trust between management and staff. Flexible work arrangements emerged as a central feature highly appreciated by Gen Z employees (Jurry & Rinda Nur, 2024b). They are given the freedom to adjust their work schedules according to personal needs, as long as their primary responsibilities are fulfilled. This flexibility not only supports employees' mental and physical well-being but also strengthens their work commitment. These findings align with the theories of Manafe et al., (2025) and Rani et al., (2022), who emphasize that a balanced work-life culture significantly enhances employee productivity and satisfaction.

### 4.2 Communication and Team Collaboration.

Open communication and strong interpersonal relationships are core elements of the workplace culture at Ong coffee shop. Employees feel comfortable expressing their ideas and opinions without fear of judgment. When challenges or conflicts arise, they are addressed through collaborative discussion. This approach reinforces team solidarity and a sense of belonging. A notable habit

is the mutual assistance among employees during peak hours, demonstrating the strength of teamwork and shared responsibility. Employees expressed a deep emotional attachment to their work environment, perceiving the café not only as a place of employment but also as a community aligned with their interests, particularly their passion for coffee (Jurry & Rinda Nur, 2024b). The owner views the business as an extension of personal passion, creating a stress-free environment. The manager reinforced this by noting how the flexibility in scheduling allows employees to work efficiently without compromising their personal lives. Employees also reported a strong sense of belonging, highlighting how open communication and supportive teamwork foster a comfortable and enjoyable working atmosphere. These insights illustrate how emotional engagement and workplace comfort contribute significantly to job satisfaction among Generation Z employees.

### 4.3 Organizational Practices Supporting Balance

Rather than relying on rigid standard operating procedures, Ong coffee shop emphasizes informal but consistent practices such as self-scheduling, mutual support, and shared responsibility. The owner stressed the importance of maintaining a respectful, stress-free workplace through positive interpersonal relations. The manager noted that rules are co-created with staff, promoting collective ownership and mutual comfort. From the employees' perspective, cultural norms like punctuality, cleanliness, and cooperation are upheld without coercion. Communication is described as open and egalitarian, contributing to a collaborative work culture. These findings align with Sulila & Naue, (2020), who argue that supportive cultures contribute positively to job satisfaction.

### 4.4 Flexibility and Cultural Fit Compared to Other Workplaces

When comparing Ong coffee shop to other workplaces, all respondents described the café as more relaxed, flexible, and adaptive. The owner observed that the majority of staff are Gen Z individuals who seek meaning and comfort in their work, and who value interpersonal interaction (Jurry & Rinda Nur, 2024a). The manager pointed out that most work practices evolved naturally rather than being formally mandated, including non-verbal communication and a shared understanding of duties (Rahim & Hashim, 2024). Employees reported a high level of autonomy, describing their ability to work independently while still adhering to collective goals. This fluid and organic culture appears to resonate strongly with Gen Z's preference for autonomy, self-expression, and collaboration.

### 4.5 Implicit Norms and Shared Expectations

One of the salient findings is the prominence of unwritten rules and norms that guide workplace behavior. The owner allows staff to choose their schedules, but they are expected to communicate and compensate for any lateness. The manager reinforced this by sharing that employees are aware of their responsibilities and take initiative, often stepping in to help colleagues when needed. Employees corroborated this by highlighting how mutual support and shared accountability drive daily operations. These norms, while not codified, function as informal governance mechanisms that shape behavior and expectations within the team.

### 4.6 Division of Labor and Team Cooperation

The work structure at Ong coffee shop allows for a clear yet flexible division of roles. Although baristas, cashiers, and floor

staff have specific duties, they frequently step in to support each other during busy times. The manager described how employees use efficient communication, including non-verbal cues, to manage workload collaboratively (Firozabad, 2021). Employees expressed appreciation for this non-hierarchical, team-based approach, noting that it enhances operational efficiency and fosters a sense of unity (Jiang et al., 2024). The collaborative nature of the workplace appears to significantly reduce conflict and enhances adaptive problem-solving (Jiang et al., 2024).

#### 4.7 Technological Integration and Digital Culture

Technology plays a pivotal role in both operational and employee-centered Kalyani (2024); , as aspects of the coffee shop. The owner uses an integrated point-of-sale system to track sales and menu preferences Jurry & Rinda Nur, (2024a), while the manager employs digital tools for procurement and inventory management. High-speed Wi-Fi and communication applications streamline work processes and provide relaxation opportunities for employees during breaks. Employees appreciated the availability of digital tools, noting that they enhanced efficiency and made work more enjoyable (Dr. Lohans Kumar Kalyani, 2024). This technological ecosystem supports the Gen Z workforce, who are accustomed to seamless digital interactions in both personal and professional contexts. The integration of technology, such as a digital point-of-sale system and stable Wi-Fi, plays a key role in shaping a modern and efficient work culture. Technology facilitates faster operations, supports data-driven decision-making, and enhances digital collaboration (Giunta et al., 2025). Additionally, the café's comfortable, professional setting characterized by warm interior design and adequate facilities contributes positively to employee satisfaction and productivity.

#### 4.8 Customer Interaction and Environmental Impact

Customer relations emerged as a defining element of the workplace culture (Rismayadi, 2024). The owner emphasizes treating customers like friends, creating a welcoming and respectful atmosphere (Kossek et al., 2024). The manager noted that the relaxed and inclusive environment motivates employees to be creative and personable in their service delivery. Employees also highlighted the importance of friendly interactions, stating that customer feedback provides meaningful insight and encouragement. The findings confirm that customer interaction is not merely transactional but constitutes a significant aspect of the emotional and social landscape of the workplace. Positive social interactions form an essential part of the workplace culture (Tadesse Bogale & Debela, 2024). The friendly rapport among employees and their respectful engagement with customers creates a welcoming atmosphere. Informal discussions often centered on work evaluations or creative ideas help build trust and foster adaptability (Shilpakar et al., 2024). These interactions not only improve task efficiency but also promote emotional well-being among team members.

#### 4.9 Conflict Resolution and Team Harmony

When it comes to managing conflict, all informants highlighted the importance of communication and mutual understanding (Paroli, 2024). The owner prefers collaborative problem-solving and values input from frontline staff (Rismayadi, 2024). The manager described mediation as the first line of action, emphasizing resolution without punitive measures. Employees noted that open discussions were often enough to resolve misunderstandings, and that maintaining harmony was prioritized over winning arguments

(Lee et al., 2024). This participatory and respectful approach to conflict resolution contributes to a psychologically safe environment, reducing interpersonal stress and fostering team cohesion (Shilpakar et al., 2024); (Rahim & Hashim, 2024).

#### 4.10 Work Culture, Productivity and Job Satisfaction.

The flexible, communicative work culture at Ong coffee shop has a direct impact on employee motivation, performance, and retention (Rahim & Hashim, 2024). Employees feel valued, especially as they are given space to pursue personal interests within their job roles (Koirala et al., 2025). Furthermore, customers benefit from the positive environment, experiencing friendly service and a pleasant ambiance. This reinforces the café's reputation as not only a workplace but also a social hub that reflects the values and preferences of a new generation of workers (Iqbal et al., 2024).

### 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study reveals that Generation Z brings a unique set of expectations and values to the workplace, distinct from previous generations. At Ong coffee shop, a work culture characterized by flexibility, openness, and mutual support has significantly contributed to a comfortable and motivating work environment for Gen Z employees. They highly value the ability to manage their own schedules, transparent and respectful communication, and a friendly atmosphere at work. In addition, the use of technology and strong interpersonal relationships further foster a productive and enjoyable workplace.

The findings indicate that a well-managed work culture not only enhances employee performance but also improves the customer experience. Ong coffee shop serves as an example of how aligning workplace practices with the preferences of younger employees can result in a healthier and more effective organizational environment.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to help organizations, especially those in the service industry, develop a workplace culture that aligns with the values and expectations of Generation Z employees. These recommendations aim to improve not only employee satisfaction and performance but also overall organizational effectiveness. The following points highlight practical steps that can be taken to create a more inclusive, flexible, and supportive work environment for Gen Z workers.

1. **Implement Flexible Work Schedules.** Organizations should offer flexible working hours, allowing employees to balance professional responsibilities with personal needs, as long as tasks are completed effectively.
2. **Encourage Open Communication.** Create a supportive environment where employees feel safe to express their ideas, opinions, and concerns without fear of judgment. This fosters trust and improves collaboration.
3. **Utilize Technology to Support Daily Operations.** Leverage digital tools for tasks such as order processing, internal coordination, and performance monitoring. Gen Z employees are highly proficient in using technology to enhance work efficiency.
4. **Design a Comfortable and Positive Work Environment.** Develop workspaces that are not only functional but also

emotionally supportive, such as relaxing break rooms and warm interior design, to boost employee morale.

5. Provide Opportunities for Personal Growth and Creativity. Offer training, skill development, or creative outlets that align with employees' interests and passions. Gen Z is more engaged when their work feels meaningful and personally fulfilling.

By adopting these recommendations, businesses can create a work culture that resonates with younger employees, ultimately enhancing both organizational productivity and employee well-being.

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