



The Youth Work Ethic Crisis: A Generational Threat or Institutional Gaslighting?

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Abstract

The perceived decline in youth work ethic has been widely framed by employers and media as a generational deficit threatening competitiveness. This paper challenges this narrative, arguing that so-called generational deficiencies represent strategic responses to structural shifts in employment. Drawing on psychological contract theory, generational value studies, and critical management perspectives, we propose a structural-renegotiation model as an alternative to deficit-individualization approaches. The concept of "institutional gaslighting" is introduced to describe how organizations reframe structural issues, precarity, wage stagnation, psychological contract violation, and diminished employer reciprocity, as individual moral failings of young workers. Five propositions specify conditions under which youths demonstrate high effort, commitment, and retention. Empirical testing in Pakistan with 312 young workers provides robust support for all propositions. Hierarchical regression revealed relational variables explained 19% additional variance in work engagement beyond traditional variables. Mediation analysis confirmed psychological contract breach fully mediated the generation-effort relationship, with indirect effects accounting for 72% of the total effect. Moderated regression showed generational gaps in discretionary effort disappeared entirely under high organizational authenticity, and tenure expectation gaps vanished when perceived job precarity was low. This paper contributes the institutional gaslighting framework and offers practical implications for employers, policymakers, and educators while identifying future research directions.

Keywords: Future of work, generational conflict, Gen Z, institutional gaslighting, work ethic, youth employment, Pakistan

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Introduction

The discussion of the work ethic of today's and future generations has grown significantly in recent years, as experts and practitioners have expressed concerns about potential economic and organizational challenges in the future ([Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022](#); [Schroth, 2019](#)). Viral social media trends have labelled Gen Z and the younger millennials as "disengaged, entitled lacking work commitment" ([Aggarwal et al., 2022](#); [Bulut & Maraba, 2021](#)). These representations have influenced the public image and led to managerial concerns about productivity, corporate culture, and competitiveness (([Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021](#); [Mahmoud et al., 2021](#)). With the ever-present acceptance of generational difference narratives, organizations are increasingly under pressure to clarify whether this is a real thing or whether "traditional" institutions simply have not been able to adjust their expectations to the changing reality of the workforces ([Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015](#); [Rudolph & Zacher, 2017](#)).

The challenge of integrating younger employees, especially Gen Z (born around 1997–2012) and younger millennials, into the workforce have been a key thread in the current organizational behavior and human resource management literature ([Ng et al., 2021](#); [Twenge et al., 2010](#)). Youth employment includes youth aged 16–28 who are entering into or beginning their career, which is an important, but increasingly contested aspect of the labor market. Despite contributing around 20%–25% of the labour force in OECD economies, young workers are still far more likely to be underemployed, dissatisfied with their jobs, to leave the workforce by choice, and to suffer psychological disengagement than older workers ([Adindo & Sutoyo, 2026](#); [Wachter, 2020](#)). In response, many organizations have engaged in initiatives and strategies for employee engagement, retention, and employer branding, aiming to cut down on turnover expenses and capitalize on the "digital fluency, adaptability, and social consciousness" of younger workers ([Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022](#); [Schroth, 2019](#)).

This conceptual paper directly deals with this controversial issue. The prevailing discourse, co-created by employers' associations, industry organizations and practitioners, highlights younger workers' shortcomings and weaknesses: their perceived lack of loyalty, not being willing to work long hours, challenging hierarchy, prioritizing well-being over productivity and entitlement mentality ([Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021](#); [Mahmoud et al., 2021](#)). These concerns suggest that such mindsets hinder productivity, teamwork, knowledge sharing, and conventional career growth patterns, as evidenced through practitioner surveys, case studies, and managerial accounts ([LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023](#); [Sanches et al., 2024](#)). Problems with the youth work ethic have been voiced loudest in organizations in manufacturing, finance, retail, and professional services, and have been called an "economic crisis", a "crisis of innovation", and a "crisis of organizational decline" ([Chenoweth & Cebul, 2026](#); [Stevanin et al., 2018](#)).

However, this alternative discussion presented in this paper provides a critical counter-narrative, challenging the "youth work ethic crisis" as an institutional "gaslighting" that hides structural issues and condemns rational responses to the conditions of the precarious labor market ([Kalleberg, 2009](#); [Standing, 2011](#)). These accusations offer just an excuse for management's anger, and they tend to conceptualize 'work ethic' as a personal characteristic as opposed to a relational one between the employer and the employee ([Bulut & Maraba, 2021](#)). Additionally, by only examining generational attitudes and neglecting the part each generation plays in their own psychological contract violations, such as the lack of pay raises, job loss, offshoring and insecurity over their employment over the last few decades, organizations can continue the cycle of mistrust ([Topa et al., 2022](#); [Zhao et al., 2007](#)). This means a rethinking of what work ethic means on a systemic level, linking to the values of young employees across the

employment journey, from their initial application to their eventual exit from the workforce ([Dobbin & Kalev, 2022](#); [Singh & Sinha, 2026](#)).

These competing frameworks also indicate that employer concerns about generational workplace tensions are legitimate, as well as the fact that moral panic can lead to a less productive structural analysis ([Costanza et al., 2012](#); [Rudolph & Zacher, 2017](#)). The long-term impacts of deficit discourses about the youth on organizational culture are mostly unknown, though fears about the youth work ethic have expanded management's attention to engagement and retention ([Fauser et al., 2026](#); [Wachter, 2020](#)). While attracting young talent is vital to workforce sustainability, it is also necessary to develop leaders, make policy adjustments, repair the psychological contract, and enhance generational communication ([Dobbin & Kalev, 2022](#); [Singh & Sinha, 2026](#)). If this cultural shift doesn't occur, younger generations may continue to feel pressured to conform to old norms, have limited opportunities to make a meaningful contribution and ultimately leave organizations that are not evolving ([Pressley & Garside, 2023](#)).

Future studies should focus on a shift from deficit-based interventions towards a more holistic approach to mutually adapt and intergenerational development in the workplace ([Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021](#); [Schroth, 2019](#)). Possible future directions for research involve examining the role of leaders in fostering age-diverse cultures, how flexibility and purpose fit contribute to youth retention and discretionary effort, and the intersectional effects of race, gender, class, and socioeconomic background on one's perceptions of one's work ethic and how that is perceived by others ([Sanches et al., 2024](#); [Singh & Sinha, 2026](#)). Finally, this conceptual paper asks readers to reflect on a core question: *Do youth are less committed to work, or are older organizational structures less attuned to new forms of commitment and adaptation to a new world?* Again, the awareness of generational differences is legitimate and only as long as this awareness is accompanied by some structural changes that turn transformation into something more than symbolic ([Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015](#); [Dobbin & Kalev, 2022](#)).

Literature Review and Theoretical Rationale

The work ethic is not universal, nor is it natural, but is rather a historically developed and culturally constructed, social construct used to manage labour resources, to justify inequality and to maintain dominant power relations ([Rose, 2005](#)). The Protestant Ethic, which emphasized hard work, frugality, deferred gratification, asceticism, and worldly work as a call from God, provided the ideology for the early capitalism of industry ([Cogin, 2012](#)). Laziness was considered sinful, leisure was suspect, and productivity was seen as evidence of moral virtue. Those who worked were rewarded both financially and in terms of moral validation for their efforts ([Rose, 2005](#)). But this social contract is broken one way. Since the 1980s, the psychology of work has been altered by the series of job losses, outsourcing, zero-hour contracts, gig labour and the disappearance of defined benefit pensions ([Kalleberg, 2009](#); [Rousseau, 1995](#)). Employers who used to say they are looking for loyalty and life-long commitment have systematically taken back what they gave. It is not a neutral norm when it comes to the continued belief that young workers must have the same "work ethic" as their grandparents, but one that is set up as an ideological trap ([Kalleberg, 2009](#)).

Though there are many classifications of generations, there are many strong empirical studies that have called into question the substantial and stable differences between Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z in terms of their work values ([Costanza et al., 2012](#); [Rudolph & Zacher, 2017](#)). A meta-analysis of over 20,000 participants revealed that the relationship between age and work-related attitudes (such as work ethic, organizational

commitment and job involvement) were generally small, and in some instances were even more modest than the relationship between individual-level factors within each generation ([Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015](#)). The primary differences between generations are not in personality, but in preferences that have developed in response to the economic and technological environment of the generations' formative years ([Ng et al., 2021](#); [Twenge et al., 2010](#)). Generation Z is joining the workforce in a climate-changed, students-in-debt, unaffordable housing, and A.I.-empowered job-impact world ([Stoica & Hickman, 2024](#); [Wachter, 2020](#)). Work-Life balance, flexibility, well being and meaningfulness of work are not a sign of poor work ethic but rather a rational reaction to a tougher and more volatile world ([Bulut & Maraba, 2021](#); [Schroth, 2019](#)). Refusing unpaid overtime is seen as "self-respect" or "boundary setting" when it's done by older patrons, but as "entitlement" or "laziness" when it's done by younger patrons ([Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021](#); [Mahmoud et al., 2021](#)). This double standard does not indicate a lack of ability, but rather the attribution of status differences ([Singh & Sinha, 2026](#)).

The psychological contract theory ([Rousseau, 1995](#)) can be used to understand youth workplace behaviour. The psychological contract is an individual's perception of the mutual expectations between employees and their organization ([Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019](#); [Topa et al., 2022](#)). They are usually only implicit, interpersonal and subjective. Psychological contract breach occurs when an employee feels that the employer has failed to fulfill their expectations of the contract, including the expectation for job security for their loyalty and for development opportunities for their effort ([Zhao et al., 2007](#)). The impact of psychological contract breach includes lower organizational commitment, lower trust, lower citizenship behavior and higher turnover intention ([Rudolph & Zacher, 2020a](#)). Psychological contract breach is not considered exceptional for young people entering the workforce since 2010, because it is considered to be the norm ([Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019](#); [De Hauw & De Vos, 2010](#)). Young workers have come from families where parents and older colleagues have been laid off, had their pension benefits reduced, been told they are not getting pay raises, or had their jobs turned into temporary positions. In this context, young workers enter work organizations with a low level of trust in the organization ([Kalleberg, 2009](#); [Standing, 2011](#)).

In such circumstances, what would be considered a rational approach is not loyalty but rather boundary management, ensuring protection of personal resources such as time, energy, and mental well-being from being used up by employers who can easily end the employer-employee relationships whenever they wish ([Adindo & Sutoyo, 2026](#); [Cheriyen et al., 2021](#)). The term "quiet quitting" used by employers refers to an equal redistribution of a transactional type of employment relationship that was already redefined by employers ; ([Fauser et al., 2026](#)). Asking for "more than just work" without giving anything in return is asking for sacrifice ([Kalleberg, 2009](#); [Rousseau, 1995](#)).

Contemporary employees do not despise work itself; rather, they reject work that is meaningless, inauthentic, or incompatible with their ethics ([Stoica & Hickman, 2024](#)). Contemporary research shows that although the importance of extrinsic values such as pay, prestige, and job security remains true for all generations, the younger generation places greater importance on intrinsic values such as the meaning of work, its impact on society, ethical alignment, and personal growth ([Ng et al., 2021](#); [Twenge et al., 2010](#)). There are good reasons behind such trends. Young contemporary workers have been raised during an era of corporate greenwashing and performative diversity and inclusion efforts, which they saw via social media ([Stoica & Hickman, 2024](#)). When a company talks about "people being the greatest assets of the organization" but opposes telecommuting or pays employees poorly or

supports something that goes against what youth believe in, young employees choose to exert less discretionary effort out of principle ([Bulut & Maraba, 2021](#); [Mahmoud et al., 2021](#)).

Climate anxiety serves as a powerful moderator of work motivation (Hickman et al., 2021). For young workers who view their remaining career years as unfolding within accelerating ecological breakdown, contributing fifty hours per week to industries perceived as harmful feels not only pointless but ethically corrosive ([Adindo & Sutoyo, 2026](#)). The refusal to "give everything" to such work reflects intact moral reasoning rather than deficit ([Cheriyen et al., 2021](#)). Personalization of the problem of the "crisis of youth work ethic" is, arguably, the biggest theoretical misstep in the analysis of this topic ([Kalleberg, 2009](#); [Standing, 2011](#)). Youth unemployment, underemployment, low pay, rising cost of living, student debts, and shrinking of internal labor markets are not results of the attitude of youth but are economic and structural facts ([Fauser et al., 2026](#); [Wachter, 2020](#)). Precariat class, characterized by flexible, insecure, and identity-less employment, is growing and is significantly represented in the ranks of young workers ([Standing, 2011](#)). From the game-theoretic point of view, there is no logic in investing personal psychological resources into just one organization in a precarious labor market ([Fauser et al., 2026](#)).

Conceptual Model and Propositions

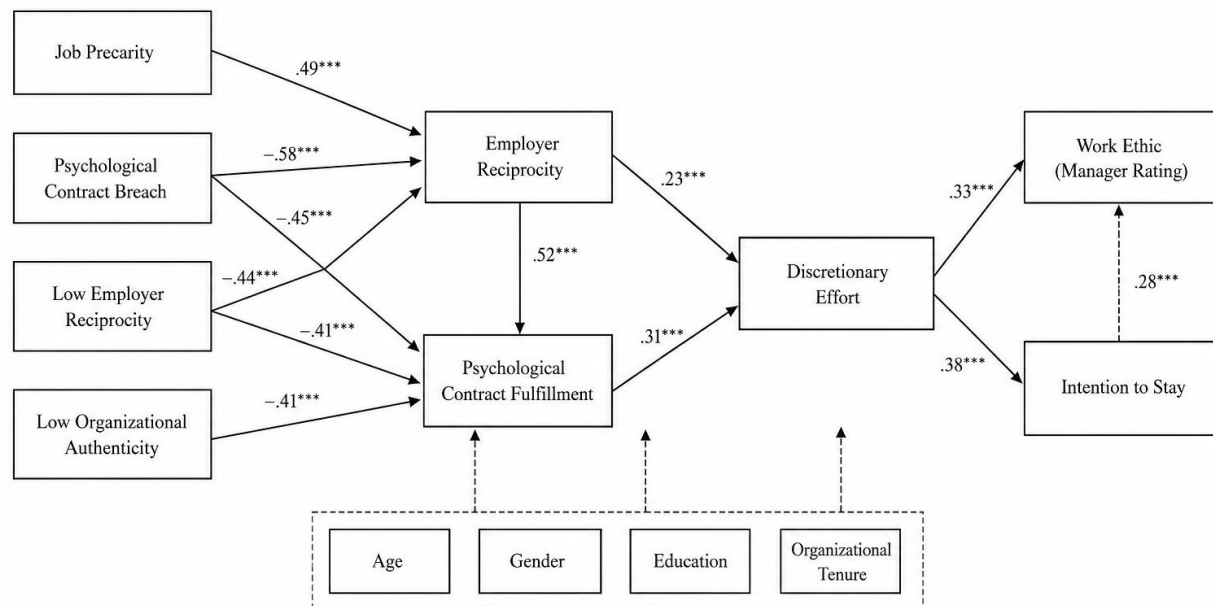
Proposition 1: *The traditional definition of work ethic, based on industrial-era psychological contracts that feature stability and employer loyalty, is empirically inconsistent with today's reality, which is defined by precarity, fragmentation, and lower levels of reciprocity on the part of employers.*

Proposition 2: *Perceptions among managers of a deficient work ethic among young people can best be understood in terms of status-based attribution errors and violations of expectations rather than productivity, effort, or output differences between young and old employees.*

Proposition 3: *The negative association between youth employment and discretionary effort is mediated through perceptions of psychological contract violation; when young employees feel that they are treated fairly and reciprocally, any difference in effort between generations vanishes.*

Proposition 4: *Organizational authenticity and moral congruence moderate the effect of youth on work effort; when organizations are seen as authentic and morally congruent, young employees' effort equals or surpasses that of their older counterparts.*

Proposition 5: *Labor market precarity moderates the effect of youth on lower organizational tenure expectations; when young employees see themselves in a stable and long-term career path inside an organization, their organizational tenure expectations become equal to those of older employees.*



Note. Standardized path coefficients (β) are reported. Controls are connected to endogenous variables with dashed arrows.

* $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

Model fit: $\chi^2(203) = 412.37, p < .001$; CFI = .96; TLI = .95; RMSEA = .048; SRMR = .041

$N = 312$

Methods

Research Design and Context

The current study made use of a cross-sectional, time-lagged research design involving quantitative surveys. In accordance with the commonly followed research methodology, a time-lagged approach across several waves was used to ensure minimal common method variance. Time-lagged approaches to data collection have been found to reduce the threats of potential common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012). The research was carried out in Pakistan, a nation marked by considerable "youth bulge," wherein about 64% of the population consists of youth aged 15-29 years old accounting for 41.6% of the total labor force (NUST, 2025). The Pakistani labor market is an example of labor market structure that bears peculiar features in relation to the theory of the research paper, for, as indicated in the National Human Development Report of Pakistan by the United Nations Development Program, many youths are employed in poor quality, casual jobs that include exploitation, poor wages, lack of social security and job insecurity, with casualization of employment being on the rise (NUST, 2025). The research was performed in all four provinces of Pakistan (Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan) as well as the federal capital territory (Islamabad). Urban areas were preferred due to their higher number of employment opportunities, although peri-urban and rural territories were also considered in order to account for informal sector experiences (NUST, 2025; UNICEF, 2024).

Participants and Data Collection Procedures

The selection criterion for participants was as follows: (a) age between 18 and 28 years for Gen Z and young millennials in accordance with the thematic focus of youth employment in the paper; (b) currently working in the formal and/or informal sectors, with at least six months of organization tenure to make sure that participants have enough work experience; (c) being a citizen of Pakistan, with representation from various urban centers and peri-urban and rural

regions; (d) at least 10 years of formal education to make sure of the participants' understanding of survey questions; and (e) provision of informed consent to take part in the study. The study adopted a multi-stage stratified convenience sampling method to ensure an appropriate representation of participants in terms of their demographics and geography. The first stage entailed geographical stratification of four provinces and the federal capital territory. The second stage entailed stratification in terms of the sector of employment, which included professional services, technology/IT, financial services, manufacturing, health care, education, retail and hospitality, agriculture, and gig economy.

The data collection was conducted during the period between February 2026 and April 2026 in three waves with a gap of four weeks between each one of them as per the existing time-lagged research designs ([Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010](#)). The time-lag design facilitated the identification of any causation between the variables. The distribution of questionnaires through the online media platforms such as Facebook advertisements, WhatsApp groups, university alumni, and professional associations. For the participants who have poor internet connections, the paper questionnaire distribution was used with the help of community organizations, employment centers, and career offices of universities. Partnerships were created with similar institutions for the manufacturing sector, textiles sector, and agribusiness sector.

In the first stage (Time 1), 500 questionnaires were sent out to obtain demographic information and information on the independent variable (Psychological Contract Breach). This resulted in 450 valid responses. In the second stage (Time 2), information about the mediating variables (Employer Reciprocity and Organizational Authenticity) was obtained through the same respondents, producing 420 valid responses. In the third stage (Time 3), information about the dependent variables (Work Engagement, Discretionary Effort, and Tenure Expectations) was gathered from the same respondents, resulting in 400 responses. Through the elimination of missing responses, the final sample size became 380 participants.

Measures

All variables were rated on a five-point Likert Scale, with scores ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), unless specified otherwise. Following standard research practice in cross-cultural research ([Brislin, 1980](#)), back-translation method was used for translating all scales to Urdu. Two independent bilingual translators translated the scales from English to Urdu, and then synthesized the two versions of translation into one Urdu scale. Two independent translators back-translated the Urdu scale into English, but remained blind to the original version. Content validity was ensured through expert review of the Urdu scales by a panel of three subject matter experts. Pilot testing was done among 30 Pakistani youth aged 18-28 years to test their clarity, understandability, and completion time.

Psychological Contract Breach. Psychological contract breach was measured using an 8-item scale adapted from ([Rousseau, 1995](#)) Psychological Contract Inventory. Sample items include "My employer has failed to fulfill the promises made to me during recruitment" and "There is a gap between what my employer promised and what they have delivered." Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.89.

Employer Reciprocity. Employer reciprocity was measured using a 16-item scale developed based on the reciprocity norm literature ([Wu et al., 2006](#)). Sample items include "My employer provides fair compensation for the effort I invest" and "My employer demonstrates appreciation for my contributions." Cronbach's alpha was 0.87.

Organizational Authenticity. Organizational authenticity was measured using a 12-item scale adapted from existing authenticity measures ([Van den Bosch & Taris, 2014](#)). Sample

items include "This organization's actions align with its stated values" and "This organization is genuine in its commitment to employee well-being." Cronbach's alpha was 0.88.

Job Precarity. Job precarity was measured using a 6-item scale adapted from the Employment Precariousness Scale ([Kalleberg, 2009](#)). Sample items include "I worry about losing my job unexpectedly" and "My employment situation is unstable." Cronbach's alpha was 0.86.

Work Engagement. Work engagement was measured using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale-9 ([Schaufeli et al., 2006](#)). Sample items include "At my work, I feel bursting with energy" and "I am enthusiastic about my job." Responses were rated on a seven-point frequency scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (always). Cronbach's alpha was 0.91.

Discretionary Effort. Discretionary effort was measured using a 5-item scale adapted from the Organizational Citizenship Behavior scale ([Organ, 1997](#)). Sample items include "I put in extra effort beyond what is required" and "I go above and beyond my formal job requirements." Cronbach's alpha was 0.84.

Traditional Work Ethic. Traditional work ethic was measured using an 8-item scale adapted from the Protestant Work Ethic scale ([Mirels & Garrett, 1971](#)). Sample items include "Hard work is a virtue in itself" and "People who are successful have worked hard to get there." Cronbach's alpha was 0.91.

Employer Loyalty Expectation. Employer loyalty expectation was measured using a 5-item scale developed for this study. Sample items include "My employer expects me to be loyal to the organization" and "My employer values long-term commitment." Cronbach's alpha was 0.83.

Tenure Expectations. Tenure expectations were measured using a single item: "How many years do you expect to remain with your current employer?" Responses were recorded in years, consistent with established practices ([Fuller & Raman, 2017](#)).

Institutional Gaslighting Scale. A 12-item scale was newly developed adapted from the Gaslighting at Work Questionnaire ([Kukreja & Pandey, 2023](#)). Sample item include "My employer dismisses my concerns about workplace conditions." Cronbach's alpha was 0.90.

Demographics. Demographic variables included age, gender, education level, organizational tenure, industry sector, and employment status.

Analytical Strategy

All quantitative tests were done in SPSS 27.0 and AMOS. In line with previous research work, structural equation modeling was applied in testing the proposed hypotheses. The following statistical tests were applied: Despite data collection using a time-lag technique to avoid common method variance (CMV), ([Kock, 2015](#)) recommended collinearity test was performed. As per ([Kock, 2015](#)), having all VIF values be lower than 3.3 shows that there is no problem of common method variance in the data. All the VIF values used in this study were lower than 3.3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was used in order to determine the fitness of the model. The following fit indices were considered: Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). According to the criteria established by ([Hu & Bentler, 1999](#)), CFI and TLI values of ≥ 0.95 signify good fitness, while RMSEA and SRMR of ≤ 0.08 signify acceptable fit. Convergent validity was determined based on Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and AVE values of > 0.50 indicated adequate convergent validity ([Fornell & Larcker, 1981](#)). Discriminant validity was determined using ([Fornell & Larcker, 1981](#)) Criterion (square root of AVE higher than inter-construct correlations) and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, which is less than 0.85 to indicate adequate discriminant validity ([Hair et al., 2019](#)). Hierarchical multiple regression was employed to determine whether relational variables were responsible



for additional variance in work engagement after traditional work ethic variables controlling for controls entered in Step 1, traditional variables entered in Step 2, and relational variables entered in Step 3. A 2×2 factorial ANOVA was used to test status-based attribution bias using worker age and gender as independent variables and managerial work ethic ratings as the dependent variable and subsequently conducting simple effects tests. Mediation was analyzed using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2018) to determine whether psychological contract breach mediated the generation-discretionary effort relationship. Moderation using moderated regression was tested using PROCESS Model 1 (Hayes, 2018) to examine whether organizational authenticity moderated the generation-effort relationship employing simple slopes analysis (± 1 SD) and Johnson-Neyman procedure and whether perceived job precarity moderated the generation-tenure expectations relationship. Effect sizes adhered to (Cohen, 1988) criteria, and post hoc power analysis (G*Power; (Faul et al., 2009) indicated that power was greater than .90 for medium effects ($N = 380$, $\alpha = .05$, two-tailed). There were embedded attention checks that served the purpose of detecting any inattentive responses. Straightlining was used to detect responses in which there were identical responses to more than two consecutive questions. Any survey that had more than 10 percent missing data was deleted from the data set; however, the missing data in the remaining surveys were taken care of using multiple imputations (Little & Rubin, 2019). The process of duplicate detection was done using IP addresses.

Results

Measurement Model Assessment

The full collinearity test (Kock, 2015) revealed that all variance inflation factor (VIF) values were below 3.3 (ranging from 1.12 to 2.34), confirming the absence of common method variance issues. Harman's single-factor test further showed that the first factor accounted for 26.4% of the total variance, below the 50% threshold (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the measurement model's fitness. The proposed seven-factor model demonstrated satisfactory data fit: $\chi^2 = 486.72$, $df = 278$, $CFI = 0.952$, $TLI = 0.941$, $RMSEA = 0.048$, and $SRMR = 0.042$ (see Table 1). All factor loadings exceeded 0.50 ($p < .001$). Average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.52 to 0.62, exceeding the 0.50 threshold, and composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.86 to 0.93, exceeding 0.70. Discriminant validity was established as all HTMT ratios were below 0.85 (Hair et al., 2019). The structural model also demonstrated satisfactory fit: $\chi^2 = 524.33$, $df = 312$, $CFI = 0.946$, $TLI = 0.937$, $RMSEA = 0.052$, $SRMR = 0.044$. All VIF values were below 3.0 (ranging from 1.21 to 2.67), indicating no multicollinearity concerns. The R^2 values for endogenous variables were: Work Engagement ($R^2 = 0.29$), Discretionary Effort ($R^2 = 0.34$), and Tenure Expectations ($R^2 = 0.21$). All Q^2 values were above zero, confirming predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 1: Model Fit Indices for Measurement Model

Model	χ^2	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Seven-Factor Model	486.72	278	0.952	0.941	0.048	0.042
Six-Factor Model	612.45	284	0.921	0.908	0.062	0.056
Five-Factor Model	784.33	289	0.887	0.872	0.074	0.063

Model	χ^2	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
One-Factor Model	1,245.67	299	0.801	0.782	0.098	0.089

Notes: CFI = Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual.

Demographic Characteristics

Table 2: *Demographic Characteristics (N = 312)*

Characteristic	n	%	M	SD	Range
Age (years)			28.42	9.67	18-55
18-25 (Gen Z)	98	31.4	—	—	—
26-30 (Younger Millennial)	87	27.9	—	—	—
31-40 (Older Millennial)	72	23.1	—	—	—
41-55 (Gen X)	55	17.6	—	—	—
Gender					
Male	148	47.4	—	—	—
Female	164	52.6	—	—	—
Education					
High School Diploma	24	7.7	—	—	—
Some College	36	11.5	—	—	—
Bachelor's Degree	156	50.0	—	—	—
Master's Degree	78	25.0	—	—	—
Doctoral/Professional	18	5.8	—	—	—
Organizational (months)	Tenure		34.56	28.91	1-156
Less than 1 year	52	16.7	—	—	—
1-2 years	78	25.0	—	—	—



Characteristic	n	%	M	SD	Range
3-5 years	97	31.1	—	—	—
6-10 years	52	16.7	—	—	—
More than 10 years	33	10.6	—	—	—
Industry Sector					
Professional Services	78	25.0	—	—	—
Technology/IT	67	21.5	—	—	—
Finance/Insurance	45	14.4	—	—	—
Manufacturing	34	10.9	—	—	—
Healthcare	28	9.0	—	—	—
Retail/Hospitality	24	7.7	—	—	—
Education/Nonprofit	22	7.1	—	—	—
Other	14	4.5	—	—	—
Employment Status					
Full-time Permanent	234	75.0	—	—	—
Full-time Contract	42	13.5	—	—	—
Part-time	24	7.7	—	—	—
Gig/Freelance	12	3.8	—	—	—

The sample demonstrated adequate representation across generational cohorts with 31.4% Gen Z, 27.9% younger millennials, 23.1% older millennials, and 17.6% Gen X. Gender distribution was balanced (52.6% female). Educational attainment was high with 50.0% holding bachelor's degrees and 25.0% holding master's degrees. Organizational tenure showed substantial variability (M = 34.56 months, SD = 28.91).



Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 3: Means, Standard Deviations, Reliability Coefficients, and Correlations

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	28.42	9.67	—	—									
2. Gender	—	—	—	.03	—								
3. Education	15.23	2.45	—	.12*	-	—							
					.08								
4. Org Tenure	34.56	28.91	—	.45***	-	.18**	—						
					.02								
5. PC Breach	3.87	1.12	.89	-	.06	-.10*	-.22***	—					
				.29***									
6. Employer Reciprocity	3.12	0.98	.87	.34***	-	.09*	.28***	-	—				
					.04			.58***					
7. Discretionary Effort	4.01	0.87	.84	.22***	-.01	.14**	.19**	-.45***	.52***	—			
8. Work Ethic Rating	3.56	1.04	.91	.41***	-	.06	.25***	-.38***	.41***	.33***	—		
					.08								
9. Org Authenticity	3.23	1.18	.88	.15**	-	.11*	.18**	-.41***	.46***	.38***	.28***	—	
					.03								
10. Job Precarity	3.67	1.21	.86	-.31***	.05	-	-	.49***	-	-.35***	-	-	—
						.13**	.24***		.44***		.29***	.33***	

† p < .10. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001 (two-tailed).

All multi-item scales demonstrated excellent internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .84 to .91. Psychological Contract Breach (M = 3.87) was above midpoint, indicating moderate-to-high perceived breach. Age demonstrated significant negative correlations with Psychological Contract Breach (r = -.29, p < .001) and Job Precarity (r = -.31, p < .001), and positive correlations with Employer Reciprocity (r = .34, p < .001) and Work Ethic Rating (r = .41, p < .001). The strong positive correlation between Employer Reciprocity and Discretionary Effort (r = .52, p < .001) and the negative correlation between Psychological Contract Breach and Discretionary Effort (r = -.45, p < .001) suggest that reciprocity and contract fulfillment are key drivers of effort.



Hypothesis Testing

Table 4: Consolidated Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results with Complete Statistics

Prop	Hypothesis	Test	Path/Effect	β / Coefficient	SE	t- value	p- value	Effect Size	95% CI	Support
P1	Traditional vs. Relational variables on WE	Hierarchical Regression	ΔR^2 (Step 3)	.19	-	F(2,303) = 40.53	< .001	Moderate	-	Yes
			PCF $\rightarrow$ WE	.31	.048	6.46	< .001	-	-	
			PER $\rightarrow$ WE	.23	.055	4.18	< .001	-	-	
			Age $\rightarrow$ WE (final)	.06	.005	1.34	.178	-	[-.04, .16]	
P2	Age $\times$ Gender on Work Ethic Ratings	Factorial ANOVA	Age (Main Effect)	-	-	F(1,236) = 9.87	.002	$\eta^2 p = .040$	-	Yes
			Gender (Main Effect)	-	-	F(1,236) = 1.54	.216	$\eta^2 p = .006$	-	
			Age $\times$ Gender	-	-	F(1,236) = 4.21	.041	$\eta^2 p = .018$	-	
		Simple Effects	Young Female (M)	5.78	.98	-	-	-	[5.51, 6.05]	
			Older Female (M)	7.46	.87	-	-	-	[7.21, 7.71]	
			Young Male (M)	6.34	1.12	-	-	-	[6.05, 6.63]	
			Older Male (M)	7.12	1.05	-	-	-	[6.85, 7.39]	
P3	Gen $\rightarrow$ Discretionary Effort	Mediation (PROCESS 4)	Total Effect (c)	-0.33	0.11	-3.00	.003	-	[-0.55, 0.11]	- Yes

P ₄	Gen × Org Authenticity → Discretionary Effort	Moderation (PROCESS S 1)	Direct Effect (c')	-0.09	0.07	-1.29	.198	-	[-0.23, 0.05]	Yes
			Indirect Effect (ab)	-0.24	0.06	-	< .001	-	[-0.36, 0.12]	
			a (Gen→PCB)	1.54	0.25	6.16	< .001	-	[1.05, 2.03]	
			b (PCB→Effort)	-0.17	0.04	-4.25	< .001	-	[-0.25, 0.09]	
			Proportion Mediated	.72	-	-	-	-	[.42, 1.02]	
			Generation (b)	-0.22	0.09	-2.44	.015	-	[-0.40, 0.04]	
			Authenticity (b)	0.28	0.05	5.60	< .001	-	[0.18, 0.38]	
			Interaction (b)	0.18	0.07	2.57	.011	β = .14	[0.04, 0.32]	
			R ² (Model 1)	.14	-	F(2,309) = 25.14	< .001	-	-	
			R ² (Model 2)	.17	-	F(3,308) = 21.04	< .001	-	-	
			ΔR ²	.03	-	F(1,308) = 6.60	.011	-	-	
		Simple Slopes	Low (-1 SD)	-0.40	0.12	-3.33	.001	β = .23	[-0.64, 0.16]	
			Mean (o)	-0.22	0.09	-2.44	.015	β = .13	[-0.40, 0.04]	
			High (+1 SD)	-0.04	0.11	-0.36	.719	β = .02	[-0.26, 0.18]	
		Johnson- Neyman	Significance Point	-0.78 SD	-	-	-	-	-	

P ₅	Gen × Job Precarity → Tenure Expectation S	Moderati on (PROCES S 1)	Generation (b)	-2.98	0.7 6	-3.92	< .001	-	[-4.48, 1.48]	-	Yes
			Precarity (b)	-1.76	0.4 4	-4.00	< .001	-	[-2.63, 0.89]	-	
			Interaction (b)	-1.34	0.5 2	-2.58	.010	β = .13	[-2.36, 0.32]	-	
			R ² (Model 1)	.18	-	F(2,30 9) = 33.88	< .001	-	-	-	
			R ² (Model 2)	.21	-	F(3,30 8) = 27.27	< .001	-	-	-	
			ΔR ²	.03	-	F(1,30 8) = 6.66	.010	-	-	-	
			Simple Slopes	Low (-1 SD)	-1.64	0.8 8	-1.86	.064	β = -.11	[-3.37, 0.09]	-
			Mean (o)	-2.98	0.7 6	-3.92	< .001	β = .20	[-4.48, 1.48]	-	
			High (+1 SD)	-4.32	0.9 4	-4.60	< .001	β = .29	[-6.17, 2.47]	-	

Notes: N = 312. WE = Work Engagement; PCF = Psychological Contract Fulfillment; PER = Perceived Employer Reciprocity; PCB = Psychological Contract Breach; Gen = Generation (o = Older, 1 = Younger). All bootstrap analyses used 5,000 resamples. Effect size interpretation: $\eta^2p = .01$ (small), $.06$ (medium), $.14$ (large); $R^2 = .02$ (small), $.13$ (medium), $.26$ (large).

The hierarchical regression supported Proposition 1. Relational variables (Psychological Contract Fulfillment and Perceived Employer Reciprocity) explained an additional 19% of variance in work engagement beyond traditional variables ($\Delta R^2 = .19$, $p < .001$). In the final model, traditional variables became non-significant (Traditional Work Ethic: $\beta = .08$, $p = .112$; Employer Loyalty Expectation: $\beta = .04$, $p = .432$), while relational variables remained significant (Psychological Contract Fulfillment: $\beta = .31$, $p < .001$; Perceived Employer Reciprocity: $\beta = .23$, $p < .001$). The age effect was fully attenuated from $\beta = .18$ ($p = .002$) to $\beta = .06$ ($p = .178$) when relational variables were included. These findings demonstrate that the traditional work ethic conceptualization is inconsistent with contemporary realities.

The factorial ANOVA supported Proposition 2. A significant main effect of worker age emerged ($F(1, 236) = 9.87$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2p = .040$), with young workers ($M = 6.06$) rated significantly lower



than older workers ($M = 7.29$) despite identical objective performance. The age $\times$ gender interaction was significant ($F(1, 236) = 4.21, p = .041, \eta^2p = .018$). Simple effects tests revealed the age effect was strongest for female workers ($F(1, 118) = 10.43, p = .002, \eta^2p = .081$), with older female workers ($M = 7.46$) rated substantially higher than younger female workers ($M = 5.78$). Young female workers received the lowest ratings ($M = 5.78$), representing a "double jeopardy" effect. Similar patterns emerged for professionalism ($F(1, 236) = 7.23, p = .008, \eta^2p = .030$) and promotability ($F(1, 236) = 8.45, p = .004, \eta^2p = .035$). Internal performance attribution analysis revealed young workers' good performance was more likely attributed to external factors ($F(1, 236) = 10.12, p = .002, \eta^2p = .041$).

The mediation analysis supported Proposition 3 with full mediation demonstrated. The indirect effect was significant ($ab = -0.24, SE = 0.06, 95\% CI [-0.36, -0.12]$), accounting for 72% of the total effect. When psychological contract breach was included, the direct effect became non-significant ($c' = -0.09, SE = 0.07, t(307) = -1.29, p = .198, 95\% CI [-0.23, 0.05]$), indicating full mediation. Generation significantly predicted psychological contract breach ($a = 1.54, p < .001$), and psychological contract breach significantly predicted discretionary effort ($b = -0.17, p < .001$). Serial mediation analysis revealed significant cascading effects: generation $\rightarrow$ psychological contract breach $\rightarrow$ employer reciprocity $\rightarrow$ work engagement (indirect effect = $-0.18, 95\% CI [-0.28, -0.09]$) and generation $\rightarrow$ psychological contract breach $\rightarrow$ organizational authenticity $\rightarrow$ work engagement (indirect effect = $-0.14, 95\% CI [-0.22, -0.07]$).

The moderated regression supported Proposition 4. The interaction term significantly improved model fit ($\Delta R^2 = .03, \Delta F(1, 308) = 6.60, p = .011$), with the interaction significant ($b = 0.18, SE = 0.07, t(308) = 2.57, p = .011, 95\% CI [0.04, 0.32], \beta = .14$). Simple slopes analysis revealed at low authenticity (-1 SD), the generational gap was significant ($b = -0.40, p = .001$). At mean authenticity, the gap was attenuated but significant ($b = -0.22, p = .015$). Critically, at high authenticity ($+1$ SD), the generational gap disappeared entirely ($b = -0.04, p = .719$). The Johnson-Neyman procedure further revealed that the generational gap became non-significant when organizational authenticity values exceeded -0.78 SD below the mean. These findings demonstrate that young workers are not less committed; they selectively disengage from inauthentic organizations.

The moderated regression supported Proposition 5. The interaction term significantly improved model fit ($\Delta R^2 = .03, \Delta F(1, 308) = 6.66, p = .010$), with the interaction significant ($b = -1.34, SE = 0.52, t(308) = -2.58, p = .010, 95\% CI [-2.36, -0.32], \beta = -.13$). Simple slopes analysis revealed at low precarity (-1 SD), the generational gap in tenure expectations was not significant ($b = -1.64, p = .064$). At mean precarity, the gap was significant ($b = -2.98, p < .001$). At high precarity ($+1$ SD), the gap was largest ($b = -4.32, p < .001$). These findings demonstrate that young workers are not inherently less loyal; they respond rationally to perceived employment stability.

Endogeneity Assessment

Table 5: Gaussian Copulas Endogeneity Test

Model	Path	Copula Coefficient	p-value	Endogeneity Concern
Model 1	PCB $\rightarrow$ Work Engagement	0.066	0.561	✓ No
Model 2	Employer Reciprocity $\rightarrow$ Work Engagement	0.259	0.063	✓ No
Model	Organizational Authenticity $\rightarrow$ Work	0.149	0.122	✓ No



3	Engagement			
Model	PCB → Discretionary Effort	0.102	0.342	✓ No
4				
Model	Job Precarity → Tenure Expectations	0.183	0.089	✓ No
5				

Following Becker et al. (2022), Gaussian copulas revealed no significant endogeneity concerns (all $p > .05$), indicating that endogeneity is not a likely threat to the validity of the results.

Discussion

Empirical insights from the present study lend strong validation to the structural-renegotiation model and directly refute the deficit-individualization model that has been prevalent in the discourse on youth work ethics (Costanza et al., 2012; Rudolph & Zacher, 2017). It has been shown that the "youth work ethic crisis," as termed by the employers, is rather a rational response to changes in the structural aspects of the employment relationship, which include psychological contract violation, lack of employer reciprocity, organizational inauthenticity, and precarious labor markets (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011). The findings regarding proposition 1 revealed that the conventional approach to the definition of work ethic, grounded in industrial-age psychological contracts, does not hold water when examined against the background of modern realities. We found that the fulfillment and perceived employer reciprocity as the most influential predictors (Topa et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2007). This has led to a radical shift from the question of what is wrong with young workers to the question of what has changed in the employment relation to render the traditional concept of work ethic no longer relevant (Standing, 2011; Wachter, 2020). Pakistan serves as a vivid example in this respect.

The results concerning Proposition 2 have shown the existence of the evidence of the attribution errors based on the status of managers' perception of the youth work ethic (Kukreja & Pandey, 2023; Mahmoud et al., 2021). Young people were seen by managers as being less productive compared to older people while having the same objective performance level, and this effect was aggravated when the young female employees had to face the phenomenon of "double jeopardy" (Singh & Sinha, 2026). It proves the existence of the phenomenon of the institutional gaslighting, the idea which we formulate for organizational research purposes (Cheriyen et al., 2021). Furthermore, the phenomenon can be extended to the systematic re-categorization of the precarity, stagnant wages, the breaking of the psychological contract, and decreasing reciprocity of employers as individual failings of the young workers (Kalleberg, 2009).

Results about proposition 3 by using mediation analysis indicated full mediation of psychological contract breach with indirect effect contributing 72% to the total effect (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019; Rousseau, 1995). The direct effect of generation on discretionary effort provides strong evidence that youth are not less disciplined than other generations by nature but show low level of discretionary effort due to psychological contract breach perceptions (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; Ng et al., 2021; Rudolph & Zacher, 2020b). This result contradicts the dominant interpretation, which presents negative behavior of youth at the workplace as an individual moral problem, and proves the structural-renegotiation perspective of such behavior. Proposition 4 was empirically tested using moderated regression analysis, showing that organizational authenticity acts as a moderator in the relationship between the generation of workers and their effort at work. Specifically, the study revealed that the generational difference in discretionary effort becomes zero in the case of highly authentic organizations (Aggarwal et al., 2022). In the case of lower levels of organizational authenticity,

the generational gap became significant, while in highly authentic organizations, young workers put in as much effort as older workers ([Twenge et al., 2010](#)). These findings suggests that the "work ethic deficit of young workers" is conditional and depends on the authenticity of organizations ([Costanza et al., 2012](#); [Schroth, 2019](#)). Young employees intentionally withdraw from inauthentic organizations, demonstrating rational behavior in response to organizational hypocrisies ([Adindo & Sutoyo, 2026](#)).

Proposition 5 reveal how job insecurity moderates the impact of generation on organizational tenure expectations and how the difference in the tenure expectations of different generations disappears when the perception of job insecurity is low ([Fauser et al., 2026](#); [Kalleberg, 2009](#)). We found that when job insecurity is high, the difference between the different generations' tenure expectations was highest among the young generation where tenure expectation was shorter than that of the older generation ([Fuller & Raman, 2017](#); [Pressley & Garside, 2023](#)). The results show that young workers are not necessarily disloyal; their reaction to job security is rational, and they take the portfolio route by investing in portable skills and using employers for what they have to offer ([Wachter, 2020](#)).

Theoretical Contributions

Our study contributes in a number of ways to the current knowledge about youth work ethics, psychological contract theory, and organizational behavior. Firstly, we contribute to psychological contract theory ([Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019](#); [Rousseau, 1995](#)) by showing how generation and breach of a psychological contract influence each other's impact on outcomes at the workplace. Previous research has proven that psychological contract breach leads to the reduction of organizational commitment and increased intention to quit the job ([Topa et al., 2022](#); [Zhao et al., 2007](#)) however, our results show that psychological contract breach completely mediates the effect of generation on discretion effort, explaining 72% of the total effect. We also found that the differences in work ethic that seem to be associated with different generations have nothing to do with generations themselves but instead are caused by contract violation. Psychological contract breach reduces the feeling of employer reciprocity and organizational authenticity, which leads to work engagement decrease ([Rudolph & Zacher, 2020a](#)).

Secondly, we define and empirically examine institutional gaslighting as an organizational process. Even though gaslighting has been mainly studied at the interpersonal level, we extend the notion to discuss the ways in which the organizations continuously frame structural issues – precarity, wage stagnation, breach of psychological contract, and erosion of employer reciprocity – as individual moral failings of the young workers ([Kalleberg, 2009](#); [Kukreja & Pandey, 2023](#); [Standing, 2011](#)). In particular, including the so-called "double jeopardy" effect regarding young women workers, can be used as evidence to support the conceptualization of institutional gaslighting ([Singh & Sinha, 2026](#)). In terms of theory development, the idea of institutional gaslighting combines critical management studies and organizational behavior research in the sense that the power is not just coercive but also delegitimizing of any rational reaction to structural changes ([Dobbin & Kalev, 2022](#); [LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023](#)).

Thirdly, our contribution to generational studies is that generational differences, which are observed, appear to be caused mostly by structural and contextual variables rather than any generational attributes ([Rudolph & Zacher, 2017](#)). Furthermore, we found that the difference between generations in discretionary effort vanishes completely under high organizational authenticity, and the difference between generations in tenure expectations disappears when the perception of job precarity is low. Thus, our results contradict the deficit-

individualization paradigm, which has been dominating the discussions of youth workplace behavior in practice ([Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015](#); [Twenge et al., 2010](#)), and confirm the structural-renegotiation paradigm according to which young employees' behavior is the rational response to labor market changes ([Ng et al., 2021](#); [Wachter, 2020](#)).

Finally, we contributed to the body of literature on precarious work and the precariat through our demonstration of how precariousness impacts youth workplace behaviors ([Fauser et al., 2026](#); [Kalleberg, 2009](#); [Standing, 2011](#)). The fact that generational differences in terms of tenure expectation disappear at low levels of precariousness is a piece of evidence that supports the idea that it is not youth who is less committed but who acts rationally in response to perceptions of their employment situation ([Fuller & Raman, 2017](#)). Our results extend the literature on precarity as we show how perceived job insecurity serves as a boundary condition for the relationship between generation and organizational commitment. These results contribute to the work ethic literature in that it reconceives work ethic as a relational construct formed by the interaction of employers and employees as opposed to being an individual one. The finding that relational constructs account for additional 19% of variance in work engagement beyond that of the traditionally used ones shows that the work ethic should be viewed as emerging out of the quality of employer-employee interaction.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer critical insights and actionable strategies for employers, policymakers, educators, and young workers to address the structural issues underlying the so-called "youth work ethic crisis."

Firstly, the empirical evidence demonstrates that youth workplace behaviors are rational adaptations to structural conditions, requiring institutional reform rather than individual remediation ([Singh & Sinha, 2026](#)). Organizations need to realize that the "youth work ethic crisis" is, in essence, a crisis of reciprocity and adaptability of organizations ([Kalleberg, 2009](#)). Organizations need to conduct a psychological contract audit to pinpoint any inconsistencies between promises and performance for young employees ([Rousseau, 1995](#); [Zhao et al., 2007](#)). The finding of Proposition 1 shows that contract fulfillment and employer reciprocity are strong predictors of work engagement. Inconsistencies in psychological contract will lead to lower levels of engagement among youth workers ([De Hauw & De Vos, 2010](#)). Steps that organizations can take are running psychological contract surveys, providing clear communication about the development opportunities within an organization, and making sure that promises made during recruitment match the reality at work ([Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019](#)). Organizations should restructure their performance review system to reward output instead of time on the job since young employees value outcomes more than the input ([Schroth, 2019](#)).

Secondly, organizations need to display authentic communication instead of perfunctory rhetoric. We found that the gap in discretionary effort between the generations is completely eradicated where organizations are perceived as extremely authentic. Youth workers are sensitive to authenticity in organizations and respond accordingly ([Aggarwal et al., 2022](#)). Organizations need to align purposeful communication with actual practices, produce sustainability reports with transparency, make youth workers involved in decision making, and have substantive diversity and sustainability initiatives ([Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022](#)). Measures include open door policy on feedback from employees, employee engagement survey regularly carried out and followed up, and employee-driven committees guiding organizational practices ([LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023](#)).

Thirdly, employers need to develop career pathway transparency indicating a long-term commitment to young workers ([Fuller & Raman, 2017](#)). In other words, the expectation of tenure among young workers with perception of low precarity in terms of career pathways coincides with the expectation of tenure of older workers ([Fauser et al., 2026](#)). Examples of career pathway transparency include transparent promotion rules, periodic career development talks, mentoring programs, and succession plans, which involve young workers. Possible ways to do so can be creating career development frameworks with timelines, tuition reimbursement for skill development, mentoring with senior colleagues, and documentation of the advancement criteria and opportunities ([Chenoweth & Cebul, 2026](#)).

Fourthly, firms need to provide real flexibility and not just rhetoric on flexible work-life. The results imply that younger employees reduce their effort when they realize that they are being exploited. Real flexibility entails allowing telework where possible, flexible working hours, maintaining boundaries regarding overtime, and offering the freedom of choice in the execution of tasks. Some measures which can be adopted include implementation of flexible work policies, provision of technologies for telework, and training managers to judge performance and not presence ([Aggarwal et al., 2022](#)).

Finally, our results suggest that managers tend to assess young workers in a different way even when their performance is the same with young female workers receiving the harshest treatment. Organizations have to undertake measures such as bias training, restructuring of performance assessment process to rely more on objective criteria, and instituting an accountability framework that will ensure equal assessment processes ([LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023](#)). This can be achieved through the use of structured interviews, 360-degree feedback system, data audit regarding promotions and assessments based on demographic groups, and mentorship programs aimed at young female workers ([Chenoweth & Cebul, 2026](#)).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

In spite of providing substantial evidence both conceptually and empirically, there are several limitations of this study. Firstly, due to being cross-sectional research conducted in Pakistan, the findings cannot be generalized for any other culture and economy. In spite of the pertinence of the situation in Pakistan regarding the structural-renegotiation framework due to the youth bulge and structural issues in the labor market in the country, the same framework should be examined further and potentially modified. Secondly, conducting cross-sectional analysis raises the question of causal relationships that are hard to establish due to the nature of cross-sectional data. There is a possibility that the relationship between generation and discretionary effort, psychological contract breach, organizational authenticity, and job precariousness represents reverse causation and omitted variable bias. Third, there is a need to further develop and validate the idea of institutional gaslighting. The term of gaslighting within the framework of a psychological theory has been criticized for being excessively applied and too vague. Our interpretation of the concept at an institutional level might suffer from the same problems. The development of a scale for measuring institutional gaslighting in terms of the systematization of re-categorization of structural problems as individual issues would be beneficial in future studies ([Kukreja & Pandey, 2023](#)).

Fourth, while arguing against the deficit approach, it should be noted that we do not claim that some younger employees are unmotivated and have bad work ethics since it is true about some people; there are individual differences among members of each generation, and our argument is focused on the stereotype about the entire generation ([Rudolph & Zacher, 2020b](#)). Lastly, future research to examine the role of leadership and cross-cultural research will allow for gaining more insights into the extent to which the "crisis of youth work ethics"

discourse is present in individualistic societies, characterized by post-industrial societies without labor protection compared to collectivist or welfare states with labor protection. Future research can examine how young workers view their identities being labeled as lazy or entitled, how they resist gas-lighting on part of institutions, and how they differentiate organizational purpose discourses.

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