Ground Floor, Mirror, and Puzzle Piece: Salary Sensemaking Among Indonesian Gen Z

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Indonesian Generation Z (Gen Z) perceives salary as they prepare to enter the workforce. While prior research has often treated salary as either a priority or secondary factor in job selection, this study focuses on how salary is conceptually constructed by young individuals with limited but formative work experience. Using a qualitative exploratory approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 32 Gen Z respondents who had completed internships or part-time jobs but had not entered full-time employment. Thematic analysis revealed three overarching perceptions: (1) salary as the ground floor—a basic threshold to meet living needs; (2) salary as a mirror—reflecting job demands, one's skills and contributions; and (3) salary as one piece—part of a larger set of factors including work-life balance, career development, and organizational culture. These findings offer a more nuanced, context-sensitive view of salary as both a material necessity and symbolic construct.

Keywords: Generation Z; Salary; Indonesian Workforce; Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the discourse around compensation and workplace preferences has shifted dramatically, particularly in light of Generation Z (Gen Z), the latest generation to enter the workforce (Aggarwal et al., 2022). Numerous studies and industry reports suggest that Gen Z do not view salary as the sole or primary determinant of their happiness and satisfaction at work (e.g., Deloitte, 2025; Mercer, 2025; Nichols & Smith, 2024; Schroth, 2019). Unlike previous generations, Gen Z appears to prioritize values such as work-life balance (Hidayat & Linando, 2024), purpose-driven work (Khosla, 2025), mental well-being (Nichols & Smith, 2024), and opportunities for growth (Celestin, 2020). In this context, salary is often framed as a "hygiene factor" rather than a "motivator" in the classic two-factor lens (Herzberg et al., 1959), meaning it must be fair and adequate, but it alone cannot drive job satisfaction or commitment.

While the shift of discourse is well-documented, much of the existing literature tends to focus on what Gen Z wants, rather than how they make sense of salary in relation to their evolving career, expectations, and life stage (e.g., Nichols & Smith, 2024; Schroth, 2019). Most findings rely on survey data (e.g., Barhate & Dirani, 2021), employer branding insights (e.g., Pandita, 2021), or Western-centric studies (Tang, 2019), leaving important questions unanswered; particularly in non-Western contexts. In an effort to fill in the gap, the present study places Indonesian Gen Z as object of interest.

Indonesia offers a relevant and timely context for investigating how salary is perceived by Gen Z individuals at the onset of their careers. As a country with a large youth population (Ridho et al., 2019) and increasing participation in unconventional working arrangements like freelancing (e.g., Delavani & Linando, 2025), internships (Pertiwi & Linando, 2024), and part-time work (Robinson, 2015), young Indonesians are increasingly exposed to real-world employment structures before securing their first full-time job. These early experiences potentially shape not only their expectations about compensation but also their emerging understanding of what salary means in relation to their professional identity, life goals, and perceived value. At this stage, salary may not yet be negotiated or experienced in its full form, but it is anticipated, imagined, and interpreted in ways that influence future career choices.

While this is not the first study to establish the way Gen Z perceive salary (some studies already addressing the issue previously, see, for example, Baša et al., 2023; Brading, 2020; Silva & Carvalho, 2021), the present study arguably complementing the conceptual in-depth portrayal on how salary is framed by Gen Z entering the workforce. This study draws on data from Indonesian Gen Z participants who had never been employed full-time at the time of data collection but had completed at least one internship or part-time job. Rather than focusing solely on preferences or priorities, the study examines how salary is meaningfully constructed in the minds of Gen Z as they prepare to enter the world of work. It offers a nuanced typology of salary perceptions and connects these typologies to broader expectations about meaning, identity, and organizational culture in a transitional life phase.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the existing research on Gen Z's workplace expectations identifies salary as an important feature for them (Hampton & Welsh, 2019; Puiu, 2017). Studies also recorded that for Gen Z, while the financial aspect matters, they also prioritize other factors like mental health (Reddy, 2024), work flexibility (Osorio & Madero, 2025), and attractive organizational culture (Arar & Öneren, 2018). Further, Rahman et al. (2025) found that a significant segment of Generation Z deliberately avoids employment in sectors perceived to offer inadequate salaries. This avoidance behavior highlights Generation Z's acute sensitivity to salary, which they consider an important factor in choosing a job. Dash & Islam (2024) provide qualitative evidence suggesting that financial incentives, when coupled with strong assurances of employment stability, significantly enhance the mental health and organizational attachment of Generation Z employees. Taken together, these findings suggest a pragmatic orientation toward income, in which salary is part of a larger bundle of expectations.

Barhate & Dirani (2021) suggest that Gen Z's career aspirations are shaped by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, with salary being a nuanced component within a broader set of priorities as discussed above. Salary, therefore, is positioned as part of a holistic value proposition rather than a stand-alone motivator. Schroth (2019) emphasizes that Gen Z is not primarily driven by money but seeks environments that align with personal values. Similarly, Seemiller & Grace (2017) found that Gen Z is drawn to careers that offer personal fulfillment, often at the expense of high income.

Some studies had addressed the multidimensional benefits of understanding Gen Z employees within non-Western context. For instance, Tarigan et al., (2022) provide evidence that a total rewards system, which incorporates both monetary and non-monetary rewards, directly contributes to enhanced job satisfaction and could improve overall organizational financial performance in the context of Indonesian Generation Z workers. Similarly, research conducted by Hendratmoko & Mutiarawati (2023) highlights that a favorable workplace environment is critically important in driving Gen Z performance, suggesting that environmental enhancements, when coupled with financial incentives, can yield desirable outcomes.

Nevertheless, what unites the literature is a tendency to describe Gen Z's salary attitudes in terms of preference rather than interpretive meaning. While informative, the existing studies focus on what Gen Z wants from work, treating salary as a static tradeable variable, rather than a dynamic part

of identity or life stage interpretation. This illustrates an open arena for further exploration on the currently lacking in-depth qualitative insight into how Gen Z constructs the meaning of salary within specific cultural and socio-economic environments. Additionally, when it comes to meaning-making processes of salary from Gen Z viewpoint, voices from non-Western contexts remain underrepresented, leaving open questions about how local values and circumstances shape salary perceptions among Gen Z. Addressing these gaps is essential to gaining a more holistic understanding of the way this generation constructs the meaning of salary.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory design to capture Indonesian Generation Z's perceptions regarding salary. Recognizing the limited full-time work experience among this generation, the present study targeted individuals who had not yet entered the full-time workforce but had completed internships or part-time engagements. The design employed in the present study, particularly to studying emerging generational workforce dynamics, aligns best with the nature of exploratory research that inherently flexible, emergent, and inductive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Participant Selection

A total of 32 respondents' data were used in the study. All respondents belonged to Generation Z (individuals born between 1997 and 2013) and had never been employed full-time prior to the study. Nevertheless, by design, all participants were required to had completed at least one internship or part-time job, ensuring they possessed preliminary work-related experiences. Such a purposeful sampling strategy (as advocated by scholars, e.g., Palinkas et al., 2015) was used to ensure that participants could meaningfully reflect on workplace outlooks based on real, albeit limited, professional exposure. Respondents were drawn from diverse educational fields to enrich the nuance within the present study by incorporating a wide range of perspectives shaped by different academic disciplines and industry exposures. Table 1 summarizes the complete information of all respondents. The names were replaced with initials to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1. Respondent Data

#	Initial	Gender	Educational Field	Internship/Part-time Industry Sectors
1	DW	Female	Marketing Management	Beauty
2	AB	Male	Information System	IT (Consultant/Auditor)
3	CL	Female	Marketing Management	Water Supply
4	WS	Female	Psychology	Healthcare
5	RD	Male	Marketing Management	Consulting
6	AP	Male	Marketing Management	Services
7	IF	Male	Marketing Management	Telecommunications
8	MP	Male	Operations Management	Agriculture
9	LB	Male	Petroleum Engineering	Petroleum
10	MA	Male	Financial Management	Hospitality
11	AN	Male	Civil Engineering	Construction
12	AJ	Male	Human Resources Management	Oil Mining
13	LW	Female	Chemistry	Oil Mining
14	AS	Female	Human Resources Management	Outsourcing
15	SF	Female	Communication Science	Pawnshop
16	WY	Male	Marketing Management	Textile

#	Initial	Gender	Educational Field	Internship/Part-time Industry Sectors
17	RR	Male	Management	Telecommunications
18	GB	Male	Management	Education
19	AG	Female	Sociology	Government Services
20	AU	Female	Human Resources Management	Textile
21	NI	Female	Pharmacy	Pharmaceutical
22	KP	Male	Marketing Management	Government Services
23	FL	Male	Operations Management	Construction
24	AK	Female	Business Sociology	Banking
25	FD	Male	Management	Graphic Design
26	HS	Male	Marketing Management	Telecommunications
27	RP	Male	Marketing Management	Banking
28	LR	Female	Marketing Management	Healthcare
29	ZN	Female	Medical Laboratory Technology	Food and Beverage (F&B)
30	MF	Male	Islamic Religious Studies	Services
31	YR	Female	Environmental History	Food and Beverage (F&B)
32	RK	Female	Marketing Management	Beauty

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews. A distinguishing feature of this study is that the interviews were conducted by Generation Z individuals who were concurrently pursuing a concentration in Human Resource Management (HRM) as part of their undergraduate studies. Each interviewer was personally acquainted with the respondent they interviewed. This peer-to-peer approach was intentionally designed to minimize hierarchical distance and foster a greater sense of trust and openness during the interview process, as recommended in relational qualitative research methods (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

To maintain a manageable interviewer-to-respondent dynamic and preserve interview depth, each interviewer conducted only one interview. By restricting each interviewer to a single respondent, the study sought to enhance rapport quality and to allow interviewers to focus deeply on understanding and recording the respondent's viewpoints without distraction or procedural fatigue, aligns with the approach recommended by Seidman (2006). It is important to note that this research was conducted as part of a graded course project, supervised by the author, a university lecturer specializing in Human Resource Management and Organizational Behaviour. The structure of this program, serving as the framework for data collection, provided systematic oversight to ensure methodological consistency across interviews and to uphold ethical standards throughout the research process.

Each interview was guided by several questions, yet the data used in the present study is sourced only from this open-ended exploratory question: "Is a high salary a decisive factor for you when choosing a workplace? In other words, if the salary offered is not high, would you resign?". This question is well-aligned with the study's core aim: to uncover how Generation Z conceptualizes salary. Rather than simply asking respondents to comment on salary importance, the question prompts reflection on salary from their elaborated personal meaning. It is open-ended and exploratory, allowing respondents to not only express whether salary matters but why and how it matters in their judgment. This gives space for diverse responses and supports the emergence of nuanced typologies.

Furthermore, by including a follow-up clause (...if the salary offered is not high, would you resign?), the question invites the respondent to consider hypothetical trade-offs. This probes deeper into their sensemaking process on how they weigh salary against other factors. Given that the respondents are Gen Z individuals with previous immersion into work experience (internship or part-time), such a

framing encourages reflection involving both their prior experience and future expectations. It aligns well with Patton's (2002) guidance on using open-ended, context-bounded questions in qualitative inquiry to produce authentic and meaningful narratives.

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded with the respondents' consent to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the data. Instead of full verbatim transcription, the recordings were summarized based on the main points of respondents' answers. This summarization approach prioritized capturing the essential meanings and key arguments without transcribing every utterance word-for-word. Such a method is consistent with practices in exploratory qualitative research that seek to balance data richness with analytical focus (Sandelowski, 1995). Summaries were cross-checked against the original recordings to ensure that critical ideas and nuances were preserved.

Thematic analysis was then employed to systematically analyse the transcribed interviews (Braun & and Clarke, 2006). The author first familiarized himself with the data by reading all transcripts thoroughly. Coding was then conducted to identify the category of theme from each respondent's answer on the way they perceive salary. Although this study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach, the thematic analysis involved organizing the emergent codes into predefined analytical categories to facilitate clarity and coherence in interpreting the findings.

While the initial coding was inductively derived from participants' narratives, the subsequent phase of analysis grouped these themes under broader conceptual frames informed by the research aim. This combined inductive–deductive strategy allowed the study to remain open to participants' unique expressions while ensuring the findings addressed the core analytical focus. To enhance credibility, rounds of peer debriefing were conducted among the students collecting the data and the author as the course instructor. This process helped to minimize potential interpretive biases and ensured the robustness of the data.

FINDINGS

Three overarching themes emerged from the data: 1) salary as the ground floor, reflecting a baseline for meeting basic needs; 2) salary as a mirror, seen as a reflection of one's skills, contributions, or job scope; and 3) salary as one piece of a larger puzzle, where compensation is considered alongside non-monetary factors such as work-life balance, growth opportunities, and organizational culture. Each theme illustrates how Gen Z constructs meaning around salary in relation to their emerging professional identities and expectations. A table summarizing each respondent's stance on salary is presented below. The quotes from respondents are also included to help readers understand the overarching findings synthesized by the author.

Table 2. Respondent Quotes

#	Initial	Quotes (translated into English)	Theme
1	DW	A high salary is good, but it's not the main factor. What matters most is work that brings satisfaction, feels meaningful and challenging, and maintains good work-life balance. Even if the salary isn't high, that's not a problem for me.	One piece
2	AB	For some people, including myself, salary is the biggest factor but not the only one to consider. I value the balance between salary, benefits, and other perks offered by the company, as well as the suitability of the job and responsibilities I carry out.	One piece, Mirror

#	Initial	Quotes (translated into English)	Theme
3	CL	At first, yes (salary is really important), but after hearing stories from friends, it changed my perspective. Having healthy coworkers affects work comfort.	One piece
4	WS	If my needs are met with the salary I receive, I will stay at the company. If my needs increase and the salary feel insufficient, I will try to request a raise.	Ground floor
5	RD	A high salary is important, but we also need to understand our own capabilities. So, it should be adjusted to match our abilities. If the salary isn't quite as expected, it can be balanced with a good work environment and other benefits.	One piece, Mirror
6	AP	I tend to focus on the work environment and opportunities for career development. If the salary isn't high but the environment is good, I will stay.	One piece
7	IF	A high salary without being able to deliver maximum performance doesn't make sense. So, even if the salary isn't high, as long as it matches my abilities, I will still accept it.	Mirror
8	MP	Salary amount is an important factor. In addition, company culture and career advancement opportunities matter too. If the salary isn't high, I look at whether there are chances for promotion and how the work environment is in that company.	One piece
9	LB	For me personally, what I prioritize is the facilities, because during my internship I was constantly under pressure, needing to be ready in any situation, weather, or call. Good facilities help me relax.	One piece
10	MA	In my opinion, a high salary can influence performance. However, a low salary doesn't necessarily make employees uneasy as long as the work environment is comfortable, because salary often starts small in the beginning. Over time and with experience, salary will increase. But if the salary is low and the environment is uncomfortable, I would choose to resign.	Ground floor, One piece, Mirror
11	AN	For now, it seems not, because as a fresh graduate, immediately demanding a high salary is somewhat inappropriate unless you're working in your own family's company. The point is to gain experience first, and if later there's no improvement in salary or position, then you can look for work elsewhere.	Mirror
12	AJ	In my opinion, we all need a high salary. I look at the company first—if it offers good career advancement and big bonuses, maybe I would stay.	One piece
13	LW	A high salary isn't an absolute factor, because sometimes a small base salary can be supplemented with incentives or bonuses when we work well and perform to the best of our abilities. If I don't get the salary I expect, I'll focus on maximizing my performance according to my capabilities. If there's no progress, I'll look for another job. Even a small salary isn't a problem if I enjoy the work.	One piece, Mirror
14	AS	Salary isn't an absolute factor, but it is a consideration. Other added values, such as career development and work environment, are also important.	One piece
15	SF	A high salary isn't an absolute factor, but it is an important consideration. If the salary doesn't match my expectations, I wouldn't	Ground floor, One piece

#	Initial	Quotes (translated into English)	Theme
16	WY	work there, because I also work to cover my living expenses. If it meets my cost-of-living needs, I would take it, as long as the environment isn't toxic—because if we're not comfortable with the environment, the work won't be done properly. I think it's reasonable for new employees to have a salary below the minimum wage at first. If I'm just starting at a company, I'll observe for a few months. If my salary doesn't increase or isn't in line with the job description, I might consider resigning.	Mirror
17	RR	If the salary can support my living needs, I will stay. If I get a better offer with a higher salary, I will resign.	Ground floor
18	GB	As long as the salary is enough and appropriate for the work, that's fine for me. Expecting an easy job with a high salary is unrealistic. If I get a high salary, I'm grateful.	Ground floor, Mirror
19	AG	Even if the salary is high, if the environment is unhealthy, I would rather choose a job with a healthy environment even if the salary is standard.	One piece
20	AU	A high salary is also important, but it's not the main factor for me. I prefer a work environment that supports career development opportunities and well-being. If the salary isn't high but the work environment is good and offers growth opportunities, I won't resign.	One piece
21	NI	A high salary is important, but it's not the main factor I look for in a workplace. If the salary isn't high, I won't immediately resign as long as it still supports my well-being and career development—such as a positive work environment, opportunities to learn and grow, and good work-life balance.	One piece
22	KP	A high salary is important, but it's not the main factor. I look at career development opportunities, work-life balance, and a positive work environment. If the salary isn't high but still meets my expectations, I'll look for solutions to find a way forward.	Ground floor, One piece
23	FL	A high salary is indeed important because it provides financial security and allows me to meet my needs while planning for the future. However, it's not the sole factor in choosing a workplace. Other important aspects I consider are work-life balance.. I also value opportunities for professional growth, including access to training, skill development, and challenging projects. A supportive work environment and workplace culture are also crucial.	Ground floor, One piece
24	AK	Salary can be a determining factor, but it's not the only one. Before looking for a job, we should research salary ranges appropriate for the role. If the initial salary isn't high, resigning isn't always the solution because I personally believe in the process. If the salary remains low for a while, it might eventually increase in line with our own quality, good performance, positive experience, and high curiosity.	Ground floor, Mirror
25	FD	It's important to remember that a high salary definitely aligns with an individual's quality. If our work quality isn't good, we shouldn't expect a large salary.	Mirror
26	HS	If the salary isn't high, I won't immediately resign, I'll try to enjoy the job first since finding work is quite difficult these days. The most important thing is that the salary and the job align. If the work is	Ground floor, Mirror

#	Initial	Quotes (translated into English)	Theme
		demanding and the pay isn't proportionate, then I'll have no choice but to find a more suitable job.	
27	RP	Salary isn't an absolute factor for me. Wherever I apply for a job, I don't aim for a large salary. Instead, I want to gain the knowledge. I'll learn from the experiences of long-term employees there and acquire knowledge from them. Once I feel I've gained enough knowledge, I'll resign. My reason for resigning won't be about salary, but rather my desire to seek new knowledge. I'll continue this approach until I'm capable of handling significant responsibilities.	Ground floor, Mirror
28	LR	In the long term, yes, regarding salary, if I don't experience development in the future, I might resign. If a company offers a small salary and no development, I might resign quickly.	One piece
29	ZN	A high salary is certainly important, especially for Gen Z right now. However, for me, salary isn't the absolute determining factor when looking for a job. Other factors I seek include a supportive work environment, work-life balance, career development opportunities, and a positive company culture. If the salary isn't very high but the factors I mentioned are met, I would reconsider resigning.	One piece
30	MF	In my opinion, the salary amount is very important for employees. For example, many people nowadays, when looking to work at a company or in an industry, will first look at the salary. This is because if we've done good work but the compensation doesn't match, we'll become unmotivated. Therefore, the salary factor is paramount.	Mirror
31	YR	To be realistic, jobs with high salaries are definitely highly sought after. As long as there isn't a better offer with a higher salary, I won't resign, even if the salary is at the minimum wage. I also consider the work environment. Even if the salary is high but the work environment isn't good, I won't take the job.	Ground floor, One piece
32	RK	I evaluate my salary in relation to the job description. If the job responsibilities are heavy and the salary is insufficient, it will be a consideration for me to choose another company.	Mirror

1. Salary as the ground floor

One of the themes that emerged from the data is that Gen Z perceives salary as the ground floor, meaning that salary fulfils the fundamental baseline that must be met. Rather than viewing salary as a marker of ambition or success, many respondents framed it as the way to bring about sustained living costs and justifying one's continued presence in a job. For instance, RR stated, *"If the salary can support my living needs, I will stay. If I get a better offer with a higher salary, I will resign"*, reflecting a practical view of salary from its rudimentary nature. Similarly, WS shared, *"If my needs are met with the salary I receive, I will stay at the company. If my needs increase and the salary feels insufficient, I will try to request a raise"*.

This orientation does not downplay the importance of financial compensation but places it in a framework of sufficiency rather than abundance. Respondents such as GB and YR expressed gratitude or acceptance of appropriate compensation: *"As long as the salary is enough and appropriate for the work, that's fine for me... If I get a high salary, I'm grateful"* (GB). *"If there's not a better offer with a higher salary, I won't resign, even if the salary is at the minimum wage"* (YR). KP took a more nuanced position, stating, *"If the salary isn't high but still meets my expectations, I'll look for solutions to find a way forward"* These quotes summed up in SF's quote, that Gen Z works with an expected amount of salary to cover their basic needs:

"If the salary doesn't match my expectations, I wouldn't work there, because I also work to cover my living expenses".

Another justification for tolerating just-enough salaries lies in future orientation and professional growth. Respondents like RP noted, *"Wherever I apply for a job, I don't aim for a large salary. Instead, I want to gain the knowledge ... Once I feel I've gained enough knowledge, I'll resign. My reason for resigning won't be about salary, but rather my desire to seek new knowledge"*. Similarly, MA observed, *"Over time and with experience, salary will increase"*. That shows just-enough salary position as the tolerable ground floor while the Gen Z is seeking other more important factors. These statements also reflect a developmental mindset where the early career phase is seen as an investment in skills and experience, with salary's amount as the thing Gen Z worry the least during that phase.

Taken together, the abovementioned views reinforce the idea that for Gen Z, salary serves as a necessary baseline, what must be "at least enough" to justify staying in a job. As FL put it, salary is important because it *"provides financial security and allows me to meet my needs while planning for the future"*. Even when the initial pay is not ideal, AK believes that there is a process for salary hike: *"if the initial salary isn't high, resigning isn't always the solution because I personally believe in the process. If the salary remains low for a while, it might eventually increase..."*. HS echoed this practicality, adding the current job market circumstances that makes him accept considerably low salary in the begining. In HS' words: *"If the salary isn't high, I won't immediately resign, I'll try to enjoy the job first since finding work is quite difficult these days"*. These responses show that salary is still viewed as a critical threshold. At least the salary should be sufficient to cover the basic needs, then it is enough to make Gen Z stay, grow, and eventually aim for more.

2. Salary as a mirror, reflecting one's value

Another theme that emerged is that Gen Z sees salary as something that reflects the employee's skills, responsibilities, and contributions. RD made this clear by stating, *"A high salary is important, but we also need to understand our own capabilities. So, it should be adjusted to match our abilities"*. This suggests that respondents don't simply expect high pay, in fact they expect fairness, meaning the salary they receive should be proportionate to what they can offer. IF echoed this view, saying, *"A high salary without being able to deliver maximum performance doesn't make sense. So, even if the salary isn't high, as long as it matches my abilities, I will still accept it"*. These responses highlight a strong internal calibration between self-worth and compensation.

This belief also applies to expectations in Gen Z's early career. AN acknowledged the importance of gaining experience before expecting high rewards: *"As a fresh graduate, immediately demanding a high salary is somewhat inappropriate... The point is to gain experience first, and if later there's no improvement in salary or position, then you can look for work elsewhere"*. Similarly, WY pointed out a willingness to accept lower wages initially, mirroring the 'new employee' status. WY also added that the salary should reflect the job description employee is doing. In WY's words: *"It's reasonable for new employees to have a salary below the minimum wage at first... If my salary doesn't increase or isn't in line with the job description, I might consider resigning"*. In these cases, salary is not just a number, it's an evolving reflection of one's career journey and professional value.

The alignment between salary and performance was also evident in LW's statement: *"If I don't get the salary I expect, I'll focus on maximizing my performance... If there's no progress, I'll look for another job"*. This principle is further emphasized by FD, who linked salary to perceived work quality: *"It's important to remember that a high salary definitely aligns with an individual's quality. If our work quality isn't good, we shouldn't expect a large salary"*. Such a pragmatic stance reflects a common Gen Z attitude: salary should reflect the value they bring, but they are willing to prove themselves, then they will see how the company reflects back on their contribution in form of salary raise. If the mirror (salary) shows no change despite improved contributions, they begin to question their staying in the job.

AB added that salary should reflect not just individual ability or contribution but also the workload and the broader job context: *"Salary is the biggest factor but not the only one to consider. I value the balance between salary, benefits, and other perks offered by the company, as well as the suitability of the job and responsibilities I carry out"*. RK reinforced this point, saying, *"I evaluate my salary in relation to the job description. If the job responsibilities are heavy and the salary is insufficient, it will be a consideration for me to choose another company"*. Both statements position salary as a reflection not only of personal merit but of job demands and role fit.

MF added a motivational dimension, explaining, *"Many people nowadays will first look at the salary… if we've done good work but the compensation doesn't match, we'll become unmotivated"*. Therefore, salary as a mirror could also determine the motivation level of Gen Z. This view affirms that Gen Z expects recognition for effort, and material aspects (in form of good salary) is among the recognition Gen Z is seeking. In sum, these insights reveal that Gen Z does not see salary as an entitlement, nor as an isolated motivator. Instead, they view it as a mirror that reflects ability, workload, and performance. When this reflection is clear and fair, Gen Z feels validated. When the mirror is distorted, whether through undercompensation, mismatch with responsibilities, or lack of expectation alignment, they begin to question the job's worth and might look elsewhere.

3. Salary as one piece, part of the bigger picture

The idea that salary is only one component of a much more factors expected by the employees is well-established in literature. Gen Z's responses in this study echo those findings, consistently framing salary as important, but not the only thing matters, in shaping their workplace preferences. DW noted, *"A high salary is good, but it's not the main factor. What matters most is work that brings satisfaction, feels meaningful and challenging, and maintains good work-life balance"*. Similarly, AB explained that although salary is a major factor, he also values *"the balance between salary, benefits, and other perks offered by the company, as well as the suitability of the job and responsibilities I carry out"*. These remarks illustrate a broader mindset in which salary alone is not enough to sustain satisfaction, motivation or commitment.

A supportive work environment emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned elements in this "bigger picture". CL shared, *"At first, yes (salary is really important), but after hearing stories from friends, it changed my perspective. Having healthy coworkers affects work comfort"*. AG reinforced this view, stating, *"If the environment is unhealthy, I would rather choose a job with a healthy environment even if the salary is standard"*. Echoing the same theme, SF remarked, *"If we're not comfortable with the environment, the work won't be done properly"*. YR made a clear judgment: *"If the work environment isn't good, I won't take the job"*, highlighting that salary becomes irrelevant if basic comfort is absent. FL also added, *"A supportive work environment and workplace culture are also crucial"*.

Career growth and development opportunities were also cited as highly valued. AP said, *"I tend to focus on the work environment and opportunities for career development. If the salary isn't high but the environment is good, I will stay"*. AU emphasized, *"If the salary isn't high but the work environment is good and offers growth opportunities, I won't resign"*. LR echoed a future-oriented view: *"In the long term, yes, regarding salary. If I don't experience development in the future, I might resign"*. AJ shared a practical take: *"I look at the company first, if it offers good career advancement and big bonuses, maybe I would stay"*. Even AS, who considered salary important, made clear: *"Other added values, such as career development and work environment, are also important"*.

Many also cited work-life balance and mental well-being as significant pieces in evaluating a job. ZN noted, *"Other factors include a supportive work environment, work-life balance, career development opportunities, and a positive company culture"*. NI said, *"I won't immediately resign as long as it still supports my well-being and career development—such as a positive work environment, opportunities to learn and grow, and good work-life balance"*. FL similarly mentioned valuing *"work-life balance, professional growth, and challenging projects"*. KP added, *"I look at career development opportunities, work-life balance, and a positive work environment"*.

Lastly, several respondents positioned salary as a motivator that must be matched with other factors. AJ recognized the appeal of bonuses and incentives: *"If it offers good career advancement and big bonuses, maybe I would stay"*. LW stated, *"A small base salary can be supplemented with incentives or bonuses when we work well and perform to the best of our abilities"*. MF summarized the generational stance: *"If we've done good work but the compensation doesn't match, we'll become unmotivated. Therefore, the salary factor is paramount"*, but only when paired with recognition and fairness. LB provided another angle, stating, *"During my internship I was constantly under pressure... good facilities help me relax"*, pointing to how physical comfort from the facilities provided by the company contributes to workplace satisfaction. Together, these reflections portray salary not as a standalone motivator, but as one essential piece in a constellation of factors Gen Z uses to evaluate job fit and satisfaction.

Discussion

This study offers a nuanced understanding of how Indonesian Gen Z perceives salary in their early career stage. Rather than a standalone driver of workplace decisions, salary emerges in layered and contextualized ways. Salary serves as a baseline requirement, a reflective measure of value, and a contributing element within a broader work-related expectation. These findings resonate with but also deepen existing scholarship (e.g., Chawla et al., 2017) on generational work preferences, offering context-specific insights into how salary is rationalized, negotiated, and prioritized by young workers.

The first theme, salary as the ground floor, illustrates a pragmatic orientation. Rather than viewing salary as a marker of success, many respondents emphasized sufficiency: being able to cover living costs and justify their presence in a job. *"If the salary can support my living needs, I will stay"* said one, showing that salary functions as a gatekeeper to employment viability. This view resonates with studies that link financial adequacy, not abundance, to job acceptance and retention (Briscoe et al., 2021), especially among early-career employees. The emphasis here is not on ambition, but on financial grounding and independence.

Interestingly, several respondents accepted low starting salaries as long as they perceived learning and development opportunities ahead. *"I want to gain the knowledge... my reason for resigning won't be about salary"* one participant explained. This future-focused tolerance of modest compensation suggests that Gen Z sees early employment as an investment, not just a transaction. However, this tolerance is conditional, if growth stagnates and salary remains flat, the contract (psychological or formal) begins to break (Acheampong, 2021). Employers must recognize this conditionality and offer clear pathways for both competence-building and pay progression.

In the second theme, salary as a mirror, compensation becomes a symbol of recognition. *"It should be adjusted to match our abilities"*, said one respondent. Here, salary is not only income, it is feedback. Many expressed that when their performance improves but their pay does not, they begin to question their worth to the organization. This reflects broader concerns around organizational justice, particularly distributive justice, where fairness in outcome allocation directly affects satisfaction (Cook & Hegtvedt, 1983). This reflective view of salary also encompasses job demands and workload. *"If the job responsibilities are heavy and the salary is insufficient, it will be a consideration for me to choose another company"*, one stated. The expectation is not for luxury, but for equity, salary should mirror both input and burden. While merit-based pay systems are widely discussed in the literature (Scott et al., 2008), this finding adds a generational texture: Gen Z internalizes the logic of fairness deeply, but is also quick to detect misalignment and act on it.

As expected, salary is not the only element Gen Z weighs. Yet unlike prior research that simply concludes *"salary is not everything"* (Barhate & Dirani, 2021), this study unpacks how and when salary loses priority. In the theme salary as one piece, participants highlighted work environment, career development, and mental well-being as equal or greater determinants of job satisfaction. *"If the environment is unhealthy, I would rather choose a job with a healthy environment even if the salary is standard"*, one respondent said. Others mentioned that meaningful tasks, supportive peers, and learning

opportunities made modest salaries tolerable. This holistic frame illustrates that Gen Z calculates value in multidimensional terms, not just monetary ones.

Ultimately, salary remains important, but never in isolation. It is foundational when evaluating job entry, reflective when assessing fairness, and supplementary when balanced with other valued aspects. What makes Gen Z's view distinct is this layering: salary matters differently at different stages and in different contexts. Rather than adopting blanket compensation strategies, organizations would benefit from adaptive models, ones that recognize when salary is enough, when it needs to signal worth, and when it must be combined with a broader value proposition. Shortly put, a contingency compensation strategy (Balkin & Gomez-Mejia, 1987; Chen & Fu, 2008) may work well for Gen Z who conceptualize salary into nuanced comprehensions.

CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on how Indonesian Gen Z constructs the meaning of salary in their professional careers. Rather than viewing salary in isolation, respondents framed it in layered and context-bound ways; as a basic survival threshold (the ground floor), a reflection of things including one's merit, contributions, status and also job demands (the mirror), and a complementary element in a broader ecosystem of elements in the workplace (one piece). These findings extend beyond preference-based interpretations common in prior literature, offering deeper insight into the interpretive processes by which young people in a non-Western context make sense of compensation. By capturing how salary is imagined, negotiated, and situated relative to other factors, this study contributes a more culturally grounded understanding of what salary means to a generation increasingly filling the labor market.

The findings should be taken while considering several limitations this study bears. Its exploratory and qualitative nature, though appropriate for meaning-making inquiry, does not permit generalization across all Indonesian Gen Z individuals or industry contexts. The use of summarized, not fully transcribed, interviews may have limited the capture of subtle discursive nuances. Furthermore, the data were drawn from individuals with limited work exposure, meaning their reflections are anticipatory rather than based on long-term employment experience. Future studies should consider longitudinal designs or incorporate respondents from various industries and stages of employment to explore how salary perceptions evolve over time across industries. Despite these limitations, this study arguably offers valuable groundwork for researchers and practitioners seeking to understand how salary operates as both a material and symbolic construct for a new generation of workers, particularly in Indonesia or other countries with similar characteristics.

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