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Negotiating the 'Weak' Label: How Indonesian Generation Z Responds to Workplace Stereotypes

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ABSTRACT

Generation Z (Gen Z) is frequently portrayed in organizational discourse as "weak," overly sensitive, or lacking resilience. While prior research has largely focused on how Gen Z is perceived, limited attention has been given to how Gen Z itself interprets and responds to such stereotypes. Addressing this gap, this study explores how Indonesian Gen Z individuals negotiate the "weakness" narrative in early work contexts. Using a qualitative exploratory approach, data were collected from 35 Gen Z respondents with internship or part-time work experience. Thematic analysis reveals that responses to the stereotype are neither uniform nor binary, but instead cluster into seven subthemes: (a) rejecting generalization, (b) negotiating ambivalence, (c) countering through proof, (d) reframing weakness as difference, (e) contextualizing through social change, (f) positive reinterpretation, and (g) disengagement. These subthemes are further organized into three broader meta-mechanisms: resistance (a–c), reinterpretation (d–f), and disengagement (g). The findings demonstrate that Gen Z actively negotiates generational labels rather than passively internalizing them. Through resistance, individuals challenge the validity of the stereotype; through reinterpretation, they reconstruct its meaning; and through disengagement, they minimize its relevance. Collectively, these strategies position the "weakness" narrative as a site of identity work, where young professionals actively construct and defend their emerging professional identities.
This study contributes to generational stereotype literature by shifting the focus from external perception to internal sensemaking, and by conceptualizing stereotype response as a spectrum of negotiation strategies. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of moving beyond generalized generational assumptions and recognizing the diversity and agency of Gen Z in contemporary workplaces.

Keywords: Generation Z; Generational stereotypes; Identity construction; Early career professionals

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Generation Z (Gen Z) has become one of the most intensely scrutinized cohorts in organizational discourse (Becker, 2021; Hidayat & Linando, 2024). Among the many labels attached to this generation, one narrative appears repeatedly: Gen Z is "weak" (Sari et al., 2023), "overly sensitive" (Bareng et al., 2025), or "not resilient enough" (Nu'ma & Mangunsong, 2024) for workplace pressures. Such

portrayals circulate widely across social media, managerial commentaries, and intergenerational conversations in organizations. Yet, while this narrative is frequently discussed, a critical question remains underexplored: How does Gen Z itself interpret and respond to being labeled as weak?

Existing research on Gen Z predominantly focuses on workplace preferences; salary, work-life balance, purpose-driven careers, flexibility, and mental well-being (Ie et al., 2026; Linando, 2025; Nugrohojati & Linando, 2025). At the same time, generational stereotype literature tends to examines how other generations perceive Gen Z (e.g., Flores et al., 2022; Szabó & Maczó, 2021), rather than how Gen Z negotiates those perceptions. In other words, the academic conversation has paid more attention to external judgments than to the internal sensemaking processes of those being judged. The subjective experience of stereotype negotiation among Gen Z remains insufficiently understood.

Importantly, labeling a generation as "weak" is not a neutral act. Such a label carries moral undertones and professional implications. In organizational settings, stereotypes can shape expectations of competence, allocation of responsibilities, leadership trust, and developmental opportunities (Kriegel, 2016). Theories of stereotype threat suggest that awareness of negative stereotypes can influence performance and self-concept (Roberson & Kulik, 2007). Meanwhile, social identity and identity work perspectives highlight that individuals actively construct and reconstruct their identities when confronted with externally imposed labels (Tajfel, 1974). Understanding Gen Z's response to the "weakness" narrative is therefore not merely descriptive, it is theoretically consequential.

Indonesia provides a particularly relevant context for examining this issue. As a country with a large youth population and rapidly evolving labor dynamics (Allen, 2016), Indonesia is witnessing intense intergenerational interaction within workplaces. At the same time, cultural norms emphasizing seniority and respect (Mangundjaya, 2013) may amplify generational hierarchies in organizational life. Within such a context, the label of "weak" may carry unique cultural weight, making the negotiation process especially meaningful.

This study departs from the assumption that responses to stereotypes are not homogeneous. Gen Z does not simply accept or reject the label of weakness in a binary manner. Rather, individuals may rationalize and contextualize it within broader social changes. The potential diversity of responses represent forms of identity negotiation during the early stages of professional development.

Specifically, this study aims to identify patterned negotiation strategies through which Indonesian Gen Z individuals respond to generational labeling as Gen Z being weak in the workplace. Using a qualitative exploratory approach, this research uncovers a spectrum of responses that reveal how young professionals actively make sense of generational narratives.

This study offers two primary contributions. First, it shifts the analytical focus from "how Gen Z is perceived" to "how Gen Z negotiates perception", thereby extending generational stereotype literature beyond external observation. Second, it provides organizational insight into how stereotype narratives intersect with early professional identity formation. Rather than portraying Gen Z as passive recipients of stigma, this study positions them as active agents engaged in identity construction within a contested generational discourse.

Ultimately, the label of "weakness" emerges not simply as a stigma but as a site of negotiation. Within this contested space, Gen Z is not merely evaluated, instead, it actively evaluates, reframes, and reconstructs what it means to be a young professional in contemporary workplaces.

LİTERATURE REVIEW

Generational Stereotypes in Organizational Contexts

Generational stereotypes have long been embedded in organizational discourse (Green et al., 2012). Each cohort is often associated with distinctive traits, i.e., Baby Boomers as loyal, Generation X as independent (Kowske et al., 2010), Millennials as collaborative, and Gen Z as digitally native and purpose-driven (Wandhe, 2024). While such classifications offer convenient heuristics, scholars have increasingly questioned their empirical robustness and warned against overgeneralization (e.g., Lyons et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, these generational labels continue to influence managerial expectations and workplace interactions.

Stereotypes function not only as cognitive shortcuts but also as social positioning mechanisms. In organizational settings, stereotypes may shape perceptions of competence, leadership potential, commitment, and resilience (Casad & Bryant, 2016). When a generation is collectively framed as "weak" or "overly sensitive," such framing may influence how supervisors allocate responsibilities or interpret performance behaviors. Thus, generational stereotypes have material consequences beyond rhetorical discourse.

Stereotype Threat and Psychological Implications

The concept of stereotype threat suggests that individuals who are aware of negative stereotypes about their social group may experience anxiety or pressure that influences behavior and performance (Roberson & Kulik, 2007). Although much of the literature focuses on performance impairment, more recent scholarship acknowledges that stereotype and negative treatment can also trigger positive emotional implications (Linando, 2024). Individuals may intensify self-development, resilience, or strengthen their sense of agency.

Importantly, stereotype threat does not operate uniformly. The impact of stereotypes depends on many factors like context and individual coping strategies (Gil, 2024). In early career stages, when professional identities are still forming, exposure to generational stereotypes may carry particular significance. The way Gen Z responds to the "weakness" narrative may therefore illuminate broader processes of identity negotiation.

Identity Work and Generational Positioning

Identity work theory conceptualizes individuals as active agents who continuously construct, maintain, and revise their self-concepts within social environments (Brown, 2019). When individuals encounter labels that conflict with their desired professional identity, they may engage in identity work to negotiate, rethink, or reflect those labels. This process is particularly salient during transitional career phases, such as internships (Bennett & Robertson, 2015).

From this perspective, being labeled as "weak" may trigger identity defense, reframing, or reflective adaptation. Rather than accepting the label passively, Gen Z individuals may assert competence, contextualize generational differences, reinterpret sensitivity as emotional intelligence, or distance themselves from stereotypical portrayals. These responses reflect identity work in action.

The "Weakness" Narrative and Gen Z

Public discourse often associates Gen Z with heightened mental health awareness, preference for work-life balance, and sensitivity to organizational climate (Hidayat & Linando, 2024; Pauli & Dudek, 2025). While such characteristics may reflect evolving workplace values, they are frequently reframed in popular narratives as fragility or lack of resilience. This interpretive tension reveals a gap between value shifts and traditional definitions of toughness in professional settings.

Academic research suggests that prioritizing well-being does not necessarily equate to lower work quality or reduced competence (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). In fact, Gen Z is often described as technologically adept, adaptive, and innovation-oriented (Nebgen & Kurz, 2025). The contradiction between public stereotype and empirical description creates a meaningful space for exploring how Gen Z interprets accusations of weakness.

Research Gap and Theoretical Framing

Despite extensive discussions on Gen Z workplace characteristics, limited research has examined how Gen Z actively negotiates generational stereotypes from their own standpoint. Prior research on

generational differences largely relies on static categorizations and cross-sectional comparisons, treating generational membership as given rather than examined (Ravid et al., 2025). Consequently, less attention has been paid to how individuals within Generation Z interpret and negotiate these labels in their work experiences. This leaves a conceptual gap concerning the micro-level mechanisms of stereotype interpretation and identity construction.

Positioning itself at the intersection of generational stereotype theory, stereotype threat, and identity work, the present study proposes that responses to the "weakness" narrative can be understood along a spectrum of negotiation strategies. Such responses may be understood not merely as opinions, but as active strategies through which individuals negotiate externally imposed generational identities. By centering the voices of Gen Z individuals with early work exposure, this research moves beyond descriptive labeling and instead examines stereotype negotiation as an active, dynamic process. In doing so, it advances the understanding of how generational discourse interacts with emerging professional identity in contemporary organizational life.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative exploratory approach to examine how Indonesian Generation Z individuals perceive stereotypes directed toward their generation. The focus is on individuals who have not yet entered permanent employment but have completed internships or engaged in part-time work. This design is particularly appropriate for investigating emerging generational workforce dynamics, as participants already possess a preliminary understanding of workplace realities while still being in the early stages of professional identity formation. At this transitional phase, processes of stereotype negotiation and identity construction tend to be more visible, fluid, and reflexive. Such an approach aligns with the principles of exploratory research, which emphasize flexibility, inductive reasoning, and responsiveness to emerging themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The respondents were drawn from diverse educational backgrounds, allowing the study to capture a broad range of perspectives shaped by different academic disciplines and industry exposures. This variation was intended to enrich the analysis and enhance the depth and nuance of the findings. Table 1 presents the complete profile of the 35 respondents who participated in this study. To protect their confidentiality, all names were replaced with initials.

Table 1. Respondent Data

#	Initial	Gender	Study Field	Past Internship/Part-time Industry Sectors
1	MP	Male	Operations Management	Agriculture
2	CL	Female	Marketing Management	Water Supply
3	WS	Female	Psychology	Healthcare
4	RD	Male	Marketing Management	Consulting
5	DW	Female	Marketing Management	Beauty
6	AB	Male	Information System	IT
7	AP	Male	Marketing Management	Services
8	IF	Male	Marketing Management	Telecommunications
9	FD	Male	Management	Graphic Design
10	HS	Male	Marketing Management	Telecommunications
11	MS	Male	Mechanical Engineering	Machinery
12	MA	Male	Financial Management	Hospitality
13	AN	Male	Civil Engineering	Construction
14	AJ	Male	Human Resources Management	Oil Mining
15	RR	Male	Management	Telecommunications

16	GB	Male	Management	Education
17	AG	Female	Sociology	Government Services
18	LW	Female	Chemistry	Oil Mining
19	ZN	Female	Medical Laboratory Technology	Healthcare
20	AS	Female	Human Resources Management	Outsourcing
21	SF	Female	Communication Science	Pawnshop
22	WY	Male	Marketing Management	Textile
23	MF	Male	Islamic Religious Studies	Trading
24	YR	Female	Environmental History	Services
25	RK	Female	Marketing Management	Food and Beverage (F&B)
26	AU	Female	Human Resources Management	Textile
27	GI	Male	Information Technology	Mining
28	FL	Male	Operations Management	Construction
29	AK	Female	Business Sociology	Banking
30	LB	Male	Petroleum Engineering	Petroleum
31	RP	Male	Marketing Management	Banking
32	LR	Female	Marketing Management	Adhesive
33	HK	Male	Economics	Food and Beverage (F&B)
34	NI	Female	Pharmacy	Pharmaceutical
35	KP	Male	Marketing Management	Government Services

Data Collection Procedure

This study was conducted within the context of a graded undergraduate course supervised by the author, a lecturer in Human Resource Management and Organizational Behaviour. The course structure provided a formal and systematic framework for data collection, ensuring procedural consistency across interviewers and maintaining ethical oversight throughout the research process. Clear guidelines were established regarding interview conduct, documentation, and confidentiality, thereby supporting methodological rigor.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were carried out by undergraduate students belonging to Generation Z who were specializing in Human Resource Management. Each interviewer engaged a respondent with whom they were personally acquainted. This peer-based design was deliberately adopted to reduce hierarchical distance and foster a more egalitarian and psychologically safe interview environment. By situating both interviewer and participant within the same generational cohort, the study sought to facilitate openness and honest reflection, particularly when discussing generational stereotypes. Such relational proximity is considered advantageous in qualitative inquiry when exploring identity-related perceptions and socially sensitive topics (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

To preserve depth and attentiveness, each interviewer was assigned only one respondent. This design choice enabled sustained engagement with participants' narratives and minimized the risk of interviewer fatigue or superficial data collection. Prioritizing depth over breadth reflects established qualitative interviewing principles that emphasize careful listening, immersion, and interpretive sensitivity (Seidman, 2006). Although the interviews covered a broader range of topics, this study focuses on three primary open-ended questions that guided the analysis:

- "Have you ever heard that Generation Z is considered weak in the workplace? How do you feel about it, and do you agree or disagree with this perception?"
- "In your opinion, why does this stereotype about Generation Z emerge?"

- "What impacts might arise from this stereotype, and how should Generation Z respond to it in professional settings?"

These questions served as a general interview guideline. Interviewers were allowed to adapt the wording, sequence, and probing questions according to the flow of conversation, while maintaining the core thematic focus of the study. The questions were deliberately kept broad to encourage rich, detailed responses and to allow participants to share their perspectives freely without being constrained by rigid questionnaire formats. In line with Patton's (2002) recommendation, open-ended questioning applied in the present study aligns with the principles of exploratory qualitative inquiry, promoting authentic narratives and minimizing researcher bias.

Given that both interviewers and participants belonged to the same generational cohort, the study acknowledges the possibility of shared assumptions influencing conversational dynamics. However, the open-ended format allowed participants to express agreement, partial agreement, or critique toward the stereotype, resulting in varied and sometimes self-critical reflections rather than uniform generational defensiveness.

Data Analysis

All interviews were conducted with informed consent and audio-recorded to ensure data accuracy and procedural transparency. Rather than generating full verbatim transcripts, the recordings were transformed into structured analytic summaries that captured participants' central arguments, key reflections, and salient emphases. This approach was adopted to preserve interpretive depth while maintaining analytical focus, consistent with qualitative exploratory traditions that prioritize meaning condensation over exhaustive textual reproduction (Sandelowski, 1995). Although full verbatim transcription was not conducted, analytic summaries included direct illustrative quotations that were preserved for thematic validation. To maintain thoroughness, summaries were systematically cross-checked against the original recording to ensure that essential nuances and contextual subtleties were retained.

Data analysis was guided by thematic analysis as outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The author began with an immersion phase, carefully reviewing interview summaries to develop a comprehensive understanding of the dataset. Open coding was subsequently undertaken to identify recurring patterns and meaningful segments of text, particularly those related to Gen Z's responses towards generational stereotypes. These initial codes were iteratively examined, refined, and clustered into higher-order categories representing distinct negotiation strategies enacted by participants.

A constant comparative strategy was employed throughout the analytic process, enabling emerging insights to be continuously integrated into the evolving thematic structure. In line with the exploratory orientation of the study, themes were generated inductively from the data rather than constrained by predefined conceptual categories. To enhance analytical credibility and reduce potential interpretive bias, peer debriefing sessions were conducted between the student interviewers and the supervising author. These reflective exchanges provided opportunities to critically interrogate interpretations and strengthen the robustness and trustworthiness of the final thematic framework.

RESULTS

The analysis reveals that Generation Z respondents do not respond to the "weak" stereotype in a uniform or binary manner. Instead, their responses cluster into a set of patterned strategies that reflect how they make sense of, engage with, and position themselves in relation to the label. These responses are best understood as forms of stereotype negotiation, where individuals actively interpret and respond to external categorizations rather than passively internalizing them.

Across the dataset, seven recurring subthemes emerge: a) rejecting generalization, b) negotiating ambivalence, c) countering through proof, d) reframing weakness as difference, e) contextualizing through social change, f) positive reinterpretation, and g) disengagement. While analytically distinct, these subthemes are not mutually exclusive; instead, they represent different orientations that individuals may adopt depending on context and personal perspective. These seven subthemes can be further organized into three broader meta-mechanisms: 1) Resistance (consisting subthemes a, b and c), 2) Reinterpretation (consisting subthemes d, e and f), and 3) Disengagement (consisting subtheme g). The detailed respondents' responds are available in Table 2.

Table 2. Thematic coding scheme

#	Initial	Quotes (translated into English)	Theme
1	MP	"...I don't feel like that... there are also older generations who are even weaker than Gen Z..."	
2	RR	"...not all Gen Z are weak at work... it depends on each person... I do not fully agree..."	
3	GB	"...not all Gen Z are weak at work... it should not be generalized... many Gen Z are serious about working... I have never encountered Gen Z who are weak at work..."	
4	AS	"...this view tends to generalize without considering variation and individual potential within Gen Z..."	
5	MF	"Actually, in my opinion not all are like that... it depends on the individuals themselves... not all Gen Z are lazy and weak... so Gen Z cannot be generalized like that."	(a) Rejecting generalization
6	LR	"...I don't really agree because not all Gen Z can be treated the same... some have stronger mentality due to environment or upbringing... some are more adaptable and mentally stronger than others..."	
7	NI	"...it is not fair... every generation has its own strengths and weaknesses... judging an entire generation based on stereotypes is not fair and not productive..."	
8	KP	"...this stereotype does not take into account many Gen Z individuals who are highly competent and dedicated... this view is too generalizing... Gen Z have different strengths and weaknesses..."	
9	CL	"...I honestly feel neutral... because many Gen Z are like that at work... I agree, many are lazy... should observe, imitate, modify... not be spoon-fed..."	
10	WS	"I agree and disagree... there may be Gen Z like that... but it all depends on each individual."	
11	IF	"...not entirely wrong... from my internship experience, Gen Z works very differently... more attached to their phones... I agree because in reality it is like that..."	(b) Negotiating ambivalence
12	AN	"...maybe 50:50... I have a friend whose mental readiness for work was still lacking, so after 3 days of working they already resigned..."	
13	AK	"...I somewhat agree because I saw during my internship that some Gen Z still lack understanding of tasks... but I also don't agree because not all Gen Z are weak... some really want to learn and have high curiosity... so for me it's still 50:50..."	
14	RP	"...I agree because some Gen Z grew up in comfortable conditions so they are not used to pressure... but I also don't agree because not all	

#	Initial	Quotes (translated into English)	Theme
		Gen Z are like that... many, especially from lower-middle backgrounds, have strong work ethic and motivation..."	
15	HS	"...many Gen Z are actually enthusiastic about their work... only a few are weak... stereotypes come from those exposed on social media... Gen Z must prove they are not weak by being more enthusiastic at work..."	
16	MS	"...Gen Z tends to want instant things... to respond to this stereotype, they need to show their performance..."	(c) Countering through proof
17	RK	"...the word 'weak' to describe a generation is not appropriate... a generation consists of many people with different characters... so saying Gen Z is weak is not accurate... just prove it through contributing at work... Gen Z is more creative and important for future competition..."	
18	RD	"...not weak, but looking for an easier way... thinking how to finish tasks faster... using tools like ChatGPT makes it easier... why choose the slower way..."	
19	AP	"...not fully agree because different generations have different perspectives... Gen Z prefers flexibility and convenience... we are a generation that developed with technological changes... Gen Z tends to see things through social media..."	(d) Reframing weakness as difference
20	ZN	"...it is an oversimplification and unfair to consider all Gen Z as weak... people are different... Gen Z has strengths in technology compared to previous generations..."	
21	DW	"...every generation has its own challenges... Gen Z is raised with different technology... so it's natural that they bring new skills and perspectives... not weak, just having a different approach..."	
22	AG	"...I can agree and disagree... every generation has its own challenges... those who say Gen Z is weak do not experience Gen Z's challenges like the coronavirus... previous generations also have their own weaknesses..."	
23	LW	"...not weak, just a period of adjustment or training... the word 'weak' becomes a mental judgment that can bring people down..."	(e) Contextualizing through social change
24	WY	"...I agree and disagree... because technological development makes things easier... maybe this makes Gen Z less driven... but Gen Z is considered more skilled in using technology compared to previous generations..."	
25	YR	"...I'm neutral... challenges today are not just one or two... technology keeps developing... because of technology, people tend to take things more easily and rely on others to fix problems..."	
26	GI	"...I can understand why this stereotype appears... due to differences in values and lack of experience... there are differences between Gen Z and previous generations that lead to misunderstandings and challenges..."	
27	AB	"...Gen Z has many potentials and unique abilities... creative, innovative, and skilled in technology... the view is too generalizing to label Gen Z as 'weak' while ignoring those strengths..."	(f) Positive reinterpretation
28	FD	"...based on data from job platforms, many Gen Z actually show their abilities... Gen Z tends to work according to their passion or field..."	

#	Initial	Quotes (translated into English)	Theme
29	AJ	"…many Gen Z may not yet be ready for big responsibilities… but Gen Z wants to develop their skills and knowledge… they value opportunities, professional development, training, and guidance…"	
30	AU	"…not fair… every generation has its own challenges and strengths… many of my peers are adaptive, creative, and able to use technology to increase productivity…"	
31	FL	"…every generation has its own uniqueness and challenges… many Gen Z are successful at a young age… Gen Z can bring new perspectives through technology and innovate in valuable ways at work…"	
32	LB	"…not a weak generation… just treated differently from previous generations… Gen Z is more creative… we can compete in the workplace in terms of thinking patterns…"	
33	MA	"…Gen Z is still in their early 20s… it's normal to still be in the process and experiencing culture shock… those who are new to work tend to struggle more… "	
34	SF	"…if we don't feel like that, it doesn't need to be thought about… what matters is we stay professional… when given tasks, we do them and learn because it is our responsibility…"	(g): Disengagement
35	HK	"…it's a funny phenomenon… there is no scientific basis that a person's character is determined by birth year… this stereotype comes from self-claims of previous generations…"	

Meta-Mechanism 1: Resistance

(a) Rejecting Generalization

A dominant response across participants is a clear rejection of the idea that Generation Z can be uniformly characterized as weak. Rather than engaging with the stereotype at face value, respondents repeatedly question its validity by highlighting the diversity within the generation. The label is seen as overly simplistic, failing to capture the variation in capability, experience, and attitude that exists among individuals.

This rejection often takes the form of directly challenging the generalizing nature of the claim. Several participants explicitly point out that the stereotype applies a blanket judgment to a highly heterogeneous group. For instance, MF emphasizes that *"not all Gen Z are lazy and weak… so Gen Z cannot be generalized like that,"* reinforcing the idea that such claims overlook individual differences. Similarly, GB asserts that *"it should not be generalized… many Gen Z are serious about working… I have never encountered Gen Z who are weak at work,"* using personal experience to counter the stereotype.

Other participants extend this critique by focusing on fairness and accuracy. NI describes the stereotype as *"not fair"* and argues that *"judging an entire generation based on stereotypes is not fair and not productive,"* highlighting the broader implications of such labeling. In a similar vein, KP notes that the stereotype *"does not take into account many Gen Z individuals who are highly competent and dedicated,"* pointing out that it erases evidence of capability and contribution.

A related line of argument involves emphasizing variation within the generation itself. LR, for example, explains that *"not all Gen Z can be treated the same… some have stronger mentality due to environment or upbringing,"* suggesting that differences in background and experience shape individual outcomes. This shifts the focus from generational identity to contextual and personal factors, weakening the explanatory power of the stereotype.

In some cases, participants go further by comparing across generations to undermine the claim. MP challenges the exclusivity of the stereotype by noting that *"there are also older generations who are even weaker than Gen Z,"* thereby demonstrating that weakness is not unique to a particular cohort. This comparison destabilizes the generational framing altogether, suggesting that such traits are not confined to Gen Z.

Even when respondents express partial hesitation, the dominant logic remains centered on rejecting broad generalizations. RR, for instance, notes that *"not all Gen Z are weak at work… I do not fully agree,"* indicating that while some variation may exist, it cannot justify a sweeping claim about the entire generation. Across these responses, the stereotype is consistently reframed as an overgeneralization rather than an accurate reflection of reality.

Taken together, rejecting generalization emerges as a foundational strategy of resistance. Participants do not necessarily deny that certain behaviors may be observed, but they strongly oppose the extension of those observations into a generalized identity. By emphasizing individual variation, contextual factors, and counterexamples, they effectively limit the scope and credibility of the "weak" label.

(b) Negotiating Ambivalence

Not all participants respond to the "weak" stereotype by rejecting it outright. A significant portion instead adopts an ambivalent stance, where agreement and disagreement coexist. This pattern reflects a more nuanced engagement with the stereotype, as respondents acknowledge that certain observations may hold some validity while resisting their generalization to the entire generation.

This ambivalence is often expressed explicitly through balanced statements. WS, for example, directly states *"I agree and disagree… there may be Gen Z like that… but it all depends on each individual,"* indicating a simultaneous recognition and limitation of the stereotype. Similarly, AK frames their position as *"50:50,"* explaining that while *"some Gen Z still lack understanding of tasks,"* others *"really want to learn and have high curiosity."* These responses suggest that participants are not dismissing the stereotype entirely, but are actively negotiating its scope.

Personal experience plays a key role in shaping this ambivalence. IF, drawing from internship exposure, notes that *"Gen Z works very differently… more attached to their phones… I agree because in reality it is like that,"* pointing to observable behavioral patterns. However, this agreement is not presented as a definitive conclusion, but rather as a contextual observation, leaving room for variation. Likewise, AN supports the stereotype through anecdotal evidence, describing a peer who *"after 3 days of working… already resigned,"* yet frames this as a partial rather than universal condition.

Other participants balance agreement with structural or contextual explanations. RP, for instance, attributes some perceived weaknesses to upbringing, stating that *"some Gen Z grew up in comfortable conditions so they are not used to pressure,"* while simultaneously emphasizing that *"not all Gen Z are like that… many… have strong work ethic and motivation."* This dual positioning reflects an effort to explain rather than fully endorse the stereotype.

In some cases, ambivalence is accompanied by normative expectations. CL acknowledges that *"many are lazy"* but immediately follows with a prescriptive stance, arguing that individuals *"should observe, imitate, modify… not be spoon-fed."* Here, agreement with the stereotype is intertwined with an implicit call for behavioral adjustment, suggesting that the label functions as both description and critique.

What is notable across these responses is that ambivalence is not a sign of indecision, but of critical engagement. Participants are not passively accepting external judgments; rather, they are weighing evidence, drawing from experience, and distinguishing between partial truths and overgeneralization. This creates a layered response where recognition and resistance operate simultaneously.

Taken together, negotiating ambivalence represents a middle-ground strategy in stereotype negotiation. It allows individuals to acknowledge observable patterns without being fully defined by them. By holding both agreement and disagreement in tension, participants maintain flexibility in how they interpret and position themselves in relation to the "weak" label.

(c) Countering Through Proof

A smaller but distinct group of participants responds to the "weak" stereotype by emphasizing action over argument. Rather than focusing on whether the label is accurate, they highlight the need to demonstrate capability through actual work performance. In this approach, identity is negotiated not through explanation, but through visible contribution.

This perspective is evident in how respondents frame the appropriate response to the stereotype. MS, for instance, notes that *"Gen Z tends to want instant things… to respond to this stereotype, they need to show their performance,"* suggesting that any negative perception should be addressed through demonstrated results. Similarly, HS emphasizes that *"Gen Z must prove they are not weak by being more enthusiastic at work,"* linking effort and engagement directly to how the generation is evaluated.

In some cases, this action-oriented stance is combined with broader rejection of the label. RK argues that *"saying Gen Z is weak is not accurate,"* yet still concludes that the most effective response is to *"just prove it through contributing at work."* This indicates that even when participants disagree with the stereotype, they see performance as the most practical way to counter it.

Overall, countering through proof reflects a pragmatic strategy. Participants recognize that perceptions in the workplace are often shaped by observable behavior, and therefore position performance, responsibility, and contribution as key mechanisms for challenging and reshaping the stereotype.

Meta-Mechanism 2: Reinterpretation

(d) Reframing Weakness as Difference

Some participants respond to the "weak" stereotype by reframing it as a difference in approach rather than a deficiency. Instead of rejecting the label outright, they shift its meaning by suggesting that behaviors interpreted as weakness are actually alternative ways of working shaped by preferences and changing expectations. This is most clearly expressed by RD, who explains that Gen Z is *"not weak, but looking for an easier way… thinking how to finish tasks faster… using tools like ChatGPT makes it easier… why choose the slower way."* Here, what might be perceived as lack of effort is reinterpreted as efficiency and problem-solving. The emphasis is not on avoiding work, but on optimizing it.

A similar logic appears in AP's response, where Gen Z is described as preferring *"flexibility and convenience"* and approaching work through a different perspective shaped by their environment. While partially contextual, the key point remains that these behaviors reflect a distinct working style rather than an inherent weakness.

In some cases, this reframing is reinforced by pointing to strengths that accompany these differences. ZN, for instance, notes that Gen Z *"has strengths in technology compared to previous generations,"* suggesting that what is labeled as weakness may coexist with, or even stem from, competencies that are undervalued in traditional frameworks.

Overall, this subtheme highlights a shift from deficit to difference. By redefining how behaviors are interpreted, participants transform the stereotype into a misreading of alternative approaches, positioning Gen Z not as weak, but as operating under a different logic of work.

(e) Contextualizing Through Social Change

Another prominent response involves explaining the "weak" stereotype through broader contextual factors rather than individual shortcomings. Participants in this group situate Gen Z behavior within

changing social, technological, and developmental conditions, suggesting that what is perceived as weakness is better understood as a product of circumstance.

A common explanation relates to generational environment. DW notes that *"every generation has its own challenges… Gen Z is raised with different technology… so it's natural that they bring new skills and perspectives,"* framing behavior as an outcome of exposure to different conditions. Similarly, AG highlights how Gen Z has faced distinct experiences, such as the coronavirus, arguing that those who label them as weak *"do not experience Gen Z's challenges,"* thereby emphasizing the importance of situational context.

Other participants focus on life stage and adjustment. LW, for example, explains that Gen Z is *"not weak, just a period of adjustment or training,"* suggesting that early career challenges should not be mistaken for inherent limitations. GI extends this by pointing to *"differences in values and lack of experience"* as sources of misunderstanding between generations.

Technological change also emerges as a key factor. WY observes that *"technological development makes things easier… maybe this makes Gen Z less driven,"* yet also acknowledges that Gen Z is *"more skilled in using technology."* In a similar vein, YR describes how rapid technological advancement shapes behavior, noting that *"technology keeps developing… people tend to take things more easily,"* linking perceived traits to environmental conditions rather than personal weakness.

Overall, this subtheme shifts the focus from individual deficiency to contextual explanation. By emphasizing differences in technology, life stage, and social experience, participants reinterpret the stereotype as a mismatch between changing conditions and static expectations, rather than as an inherent flaw of Generation Z.

(f) Positive Reinterpretation

Beyond resisting or explaining the stereotype, some participants actively replace it with a more positive narrative. Rather than engaging with the "weak" label on its own terms, they redirect attention to the strengths, capabilities, and potential of Generation Z, effectively reframing the discussion altogether.

This shift is evident in how respondents highlight competencies that contradict the stereotype. AB, for instance, emphasizes that Gen Z possesses *"many potentials and unique abilities… creative, innovative, and skilled in technology,"* arguing that the stereotype overlooks these strengths. Similarly, AU notes that many Gen Z individuals are *"adaptive, creative, and able to use technology to increase productivity,"* presenting a counter-image of capability rather than limitation.

Other participants reinforce this positive framing through evidence of performance and outcomes. FD points out that *"many Gen Z actually show their abilities… [and] work according to their passion or field,"* suggesting alignment between interest and capability. FL adds that *"many Gen Z are successful at a young age"* and are able to *"bring new perspectives… and innovate in valuable ways at work,"* highlighting tangible contributions.

In some cases, this reinterpretation is combined with a developmental perspective. AJ acknowledges that some individuals *"may not yet be ready for big responsibilities,"* but emphasizes that Gen Z *"wants to develop their skills and knowledge"* and values learning opportunities. This frames potential gaps not as weakness, but as part of a growth trajectory.

Finally, LB summarizes this perspective by asserting that Gen Z is *"not a weak generation… [but] more creative… [and] able to compete in the workplace,"* reinforcing the idea that the stereotype fails to capture the generation's actual strengths. Overall, positive reinterpretation transforms the narrative from deficit to capability. By foregrounding creativity, adaptability, innovation, and growth orientation, participants construct an alternative understanding of Gen Z that directly challenges and replaces the "weak" label.

Meta-Mechanism 3: Disengagement

(g) Disengagement

Evidence for disengagement appears in a smaller set of responses where participants downplay the importance of the stereotype or refuse to engage with it directly. Rather than debating or reframing the label, these respondents minimize its relevance or shift attention to more practical concerns. This is most clearly seen in SF's response, where the stereotype is treated as something that *"doesn't need to be thought about,"* with the focus redirected toward maintaining professionalism and fulfilling responsibilities at work. Here, disengagement is not passive indifference, but a deliberate choice to prioritize action over reaction.

In contrast, HK approaches the stereotype by questioning its seriousness, describing it as *"a funny phenomenon"* and emphasizing that there is *"no scientific basis"* for linking character to birth year. While this introduces an element of critique, the dismissive tone suggests that the stereotype is not considered worth serious engagement.

MA's response, although more contextual, also contributes to this pattern by normalizing the situation. By framing Gen Z as *"still in their early 20s"* and naturally *"in the process and experiencing culture shock,"* the stereotype is implicitly deprioritized, treated as a temporary and expected phase rather than a defining issue.

Overall, distancing and disengagement represent a less confrontational form of response. Participants neither fully resist nor reinterpret the stereotype, but instead reduce its importance, either by ignoring it, dismissing it, or shifting focus to more immediate and controllable aspects of work.

Discussion

The findings show that many participants reject the generalization that Gen Z is weak, emphasizing individual differences and variation within the generation. Others adopt a more ambivalent stance, acknowledging that some behaviors may exist while resisting their generalization. In addition, several participants highlight the need to demonstrate competence through work performance as a response to the stereotype.

This pattern can be interpreted as a form of identity defense, where individuals resist externally imposed labels that conflict with their self-concept (Whitson et al., 2017). By shifting the focus from generational identity to individual capability, participants challenge the validity of stereotype-based categorization (Gardiner et al., 2013). This aligns with broader critiques of generational stereotyping that question the assumption of homogeneity within cohorts (Stark & Poppler, 2018).

The presence of ambivalence further suggests that resistance is not purely oppositional. Instead, participants engage selectively with the stereotype, acknowledging partial truths while limiting their scope. This reflects a more nuanced form of engagement, where individuals neither fully accept nor fully reject the label, but negotiate its meaning based on personal experience (Abbey, 2004).

Meanwhile, the emphasis on proving oneself through performance indicates that resistance is also enacted behaviorally. Rather than relying solely on argument, participants respond through visible contribution, responsibility, and effort. This can be interpreted as a compensatory response, where exposure to negative stereotypes motivates individuals to demonstrate competence (Linando, 2024).

The findings also show that participants do not always reject the stereotype, but often reinterpret it. Some describe Gen Z behaviors as differences in work approach, such as prioritizing efficiency, flexibility, or convenience. Others explain these behaviors through technological change, generational context, or early-career adjustment. In addition, many participants highlight strengths such as creativity, adaptability, and technological competence.

These responses can be understood as a process of meaning reconstruction, where individuals redefine externally imposed labels to align with their own experiences (Wehrman, 2023). Rather than accepting the negative connotation of "weakness," participants transform it into a reflection of different

working styles and priorities. Reframing weakness as difference suggests that what is perceived as a lack of effort may instead reflect alternative approaches to productivity. This points to a potential mismatch between traditional expectations of work and evolving practices shaped by digital environments (van Vugt et al., 2024). In this sense, the stereotype may arise not from actual deficiency, but from differences in how work is conceptualized.

Contextualizing behavior through social change further strengthens this interpretation. Participants attribute perceived weaknesses to technological development, shifting values, and limited work experience. This indicates that generational differences are embedded in broader socio-historical contexts rather than inherent traits, aligns with Kingstone's (2021) assertion.

Positive reinterpretation extends this process by replacing the negative label with a strengths-based narrative. By emphasizing innovation, adaptability, and growth orientation, participants construct an alternative identity that challenges deficit-based perceptions. This reflects a proactive form of identity work, where individuals do not merely respond to stereotypes but redefine them (Van Laer & Janssens, 2017).

The findings also reveal a smaller pattern of disengagement, where participants minimize the importance of the stereotype. Some describe the label as not worth thinking about, while others shift attention toward maintaining professionalism and fulfilling responsibilities rather than responding to the stereotype directly. This pattern can be interpreted as a form of strategic detachment, where individuals protect their self-concept by reducing the relevance of stigmatizing labels (Doldor & Atewologun, 2021).

Instead of confronting or redefining the stereotype, participants manage it by limiting its psychological impact. Unlike resistance and reinterpretation, which involve active engagement, disengagement operates through non-engagement. By treating the stereotype as unimportant or dismissible, participants prevent it from shaping their identity. This suggests that identity work does not always involve direct negotiation, but can also take the form of withdrawal (Galinsky et al., 2003).

At the same time, the relatively limited presence of this pattern indicates that most participants do not ignore the stereotype. Instead, they engage with it in meaningful ways, either by challenging or reinterpreting it. This suggests a level of reflexivity, where individuals actively position themselves in relation to generational discourse rather than remaining indifferent, just like the generations before Generation Z did (Risman, 2018; Williams et al., 1997).

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the "weakness" label attached to Generation Z does not function as a fixed identity, but as a dynamic construct that is actively negotiated. Rather than passively accepting the stereotype, Gen Z individuals respond through three meta-mechanisms: resistance, reinterpretation, and disengagement. These strategies demonstrate that generational labeling is not a one-way imposition, but a process of interaction between external perception and internal sensemaking. In this process, Gen Z emerges as an active agent shaping its own professional identity, with the "weakness" narrative serving as a site of contestation rather than a definitive judgment.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is situated within the Indonesian context and focuses primarily on early-career individuals, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other contexts or career stages. In addition, the analysis is based on self-reported reflections, which capture subjective interpretations but do not directly reveal behavioral outcomes in the workplace. The uneven distribution of response patterns, particularly the relatively limited presence of disengagement, also suggests that further data could deepen understanding of less prominent strategies.

Recommendations

Future research may build on these findings by examining how stereotype negotiation evolves over time as Gen Z progresses in their careers, as well as how these responses are interpreted by other generations

within organizations. Integrating qualitative insights with behavioral or performance-based data could also provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these strategies translate into workplace outcomes. Cross-cultural comparisons would further enrich the discussion by highlighting how generational narratives are shaped by different socio-cultural environments.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that organizations should move beyond generalized generational assumptions and instead recognize the diversity within Gen Z. Managers may benefit from focusing on individual capability and providing structured opportunities for development and contribution. As Gen Z demonstrates a strong awareness of how they are perceived, creating environments that allow them to meaningfully demonstrate competence may help reduce the persistence and impact of stereotype-based judgments.

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