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Beyond generational decay: a psychosocial account of Generation Z's changing relationship with achievement, education and work

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Abstract. *Generation Z is often defined in public and organisational discourse as less resilient, less willing to work, more psychologically vulnerable and more inclined towards immediate rather than progressive achievement than previous generations. Such interpretations tend to locate the presumed problem within the generation itself, treating behavioural differences as evidence of declining work ethic, motivation or tolerance for adversity. This paper challenges the explanatory value of this "generational decay" perspective and suggests an alternative psychosocial account. It proposes that characteristics attributed to Generation Z should be examined in relation to the developmental environment in which its members established expectations regarding success, effort, reward and wellbeing. Basing its arguments on social learning theory, social comparison theory, expectancy-value approaches to motivation and contemporary evidence concerning social-media use, materialism, academic procrastination and occupational values, the paper proposes that digitally mediated socialisation may systematically alter perceptions of normative achievement.*
Social media disproportionately increases the visibility of exceptional outcomes while providing significantly less information about unsuccessful attempts, ordinary trajectories and the temporal costs underlying achievement. Therefore, exceptional success may become perceptually more available without becoming objectively more probable. The paper proposes that this asymmetry can contribute to a recalibration of expectations regarding the magnitude, probability and speed of reward, potentially reducing the subjective attractiveness of gradual educational and occupational pathways and increasing vulnerability to discouragement and disengagement when expected outcomes fail to be achieved. However, Generation Z's changing relationship with work should not be interpreted exclusively as negative. A higher priority on respectful treatment, psychological safety, adequate pay, flexibility and personal development may constitute an adaptive renegotiation of the psychological contract between workers and organisations. The paper therefore differentiates reduced tolerance for productive discomfort from reduced tolerance for unnecessary psychosocial harm. It concludes that apparent generational decline may be more usefully conceptualised as a complex pattern of adaptation to altered technological, social and economic conditions, resulting in both vulnerabilities and potentially progressive changes in attitudes towards education, work and interpersonal life.

Keywords: Generation Z, social media, social comparison, work values, social learning, academic procrastination.

JEL Classification: I21, J24, J28, J81, Z13.

1. Introduction

Popular explanations of generational differences have a recurring tendency to transform historical change into character judgement. Younger generations have repeatedly been characterized as insufficiently disciplined, excessively demanding or inadequately prepared for the responsibilities of adulthood. In modern societal discussion, these concerns have become particularly visible in descriptions of Generation Z, generally referring to individuals born from the mid-to-late 1990s onwards. Individuals who are part of this group are often portrayed as psychologically fragile, hesitant to work, excessively concerned with work-life balance, dependent on immediate gratification and unwilling to tolerate the demands traditionally associated with educational and occupational achievement.

The empirical foundation for interpreting such characteristics as stable generational traits is considerably weaker than their cultural popularity might suggest. Research analyzing generational differences in work values has long identified substantial methodological difficulties in separating cohort effects from age, life-stage and historical-period effects (Parry and Urwin, 2011). More recent meta-analytic evidence similarly indicates a few systematic and practically meaningful differences between conventionally defined generations across many workplace outcomes (Ravid, 2025). Analyses capable of distinguishing age, period and cohort influences have additionally demonstrated that historical-period effects may explain changes in work values more consistently than generational membership itself (Kalleberg and Marsden, 2019). Therefore, the behavior patterns observed among young adults at a particular historical moment should not automatically be interpreted as intrinsic properties of the generation to which those adults have been assigned.

This distinction is fundamental to the present paper. Rather than asking whether Generation Z displays less motivation, resilience or willingness to work than previous generations, the more theoretically productive question is how the environment in which its members developed may have shaped their expectations regarding effort, achievement and reward. A psychosocial approach redirects the explanatory focus from presumed deterioration in individual character towards the interaction between individuals and their social, technological and economic environments.

Such an approach aligns with longstanding psychological accounts of socialisation. Social learning theory suggests that behavioural patterns, expectations and standards can develop partly through observation of models and the consequences associated with their behaviour (Bandura, 1977). Social comparison theory likewise establishes that individuals evaluate themselves partly through comparison with others, particularly when objective standards are uncertain or unavailable (Festinger, 1954). Modern digital environments dramatically expand both processes. The reference groups available to an adolescent or young adult are no longer mainly composed of family members, classmates, colleagues, neighbours and locally visible professionals. Social-media platforms offer continuous access to selectively

presented lives belonging to potentially millions of individuals, including celebrities, entrepreneurs, influencers and apparent peers.

This change is significant for reasons other than just the rise in media consumption. Digital platforms alter the informational environment from which individuals can deduce what constitutes a normal life. Success is highly visible; unsuccessful attempts are substantially less so. Exceptional income, rapid entrepreneurship, luxury consumption, physical attractiveness, occupational autonomy and highly designed lifestyles can consequently become repeatedly observable without becoming statistically comparable. In other words, online environments may increase the psychological availability of exceptional outcomes without increasing their objective base rates.

2. Generation Z's passing through social and societal evolution

Recent research provides support for important components of this argument. Social-media use is associated with social comparison, although effects can vary substantially according to individual and contextual factors (Meier and Johnson, 2022). Recent meta-analytic evidence points to an association between problematic social-media use and social-comparison processes (Demir et al., 2026), while online higher comparison has also been associated with poorer psychological adjustment. Importantly, these effects shouldn't be interpreted as uniform or inevitable: social comparison may generate inspiration as well as dissatisfaction, and digital-media effects depend on what individuals interact with, how they use platforms and their pre-existing characteristics.

Nevertheless, evidence related to materialistic modelling is especially relevant to expectations of socioeconomic achievement. Dávila and Casabayó (2025), studying university students aged 17–26, found that intensity of Instagram use anticipated materialism through social comparison and identification with influencers. A subsequent systematic review and three-level meta-analysis incorporating 55 studies, 90 effect sizes and 28,531 participants reported a significant high association between social-media use and materialism (Liu, Ding and Chao, 2026). Exposure to social-media influencers has also been associated with social comparison, materialistic tendencies, fear of missing out and noticeable consumption (Liu and Zhang, 2024). Together, this literature indicates that digitally mediated models can contribute to the construction of aspirations and standards against which individuals evaluate their own conditions and reality.

The current paper theoretically extends this literature by asking what happens when selective exposure affects not only what individuals want and desire, but also their implicit estimates of how they achieve success.

Individuals who are constantly around successful entrepreneurs, creators who make a lot of income, individuals who move up quickly in their careers, or young adults who are unusually opulent rarely see a sample of everyone who attempted to follow similar paths.

Failed businesses disappear. Content creators who never build a loyal following are essentially invisible. Investments generating average or unfavourable returns create less inspirational content compared to extraordinary profits. Prolonged periods of unnoticeable skill development can be condensed into summaries of success stories. The visible outcome is consequently separated from much of the invisible denominator that gives the outcome its statistical meaning.

This asymmetry creates the possibility of what the present paper terms success calibration distortion: a systematic discrepancy between the perceived and actual distribution of socioeconomic outcomes resulting from repeated exposure to selectively visible success. This concept does not imply that members of Generation Z believe success should simply be given to them, nor does it require the assumption that they are unwilling to make the necessary effort. Instead, it focuses on expectations regarding which forms of effort should produce reward, how quickly reward should develop, how large that reward should be, and how much unsuccessful effort constitutes a normal part of achievement.

This distinction is significant. Wanting an easy pathway to an exceptional life is psychologically different from believing oneself entitled to an exceptional life without contribution. The former may result from inaccurate beliefs about the pathways through which success normally occurs. If an informational environment repeatedly displays exceptional rewards associated with apparently short, autonomous or uncommon pathways, standard trajectories involving prolonged education, junior employment, repetitive skill development, and gradual advancement may become comparatively unattractive. Their rewards have not objectively decreased simply because more spectacular alternatives are visible; their subjective value, however, may change.

Expectancy-value theories of achievement offer a useful framework for understanding this possibility. Behaviour is influenced partly by expectations related to the probability of success and by the subjective value assigned to available outcomes and activities (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002). Decisions about whether to stay invested in education, employment or skill development therefore depend not only on objective opportunity but on how individuals perceive expected benefits, costs and alternative options. A digitally transformed comparison environment can theoretically affect each of these evaluations.

This has significant implications for interpretations of procrastination and educational disengagement. Academic procrastination should not be reduced to social-media exposure, and its causes are varied. However, recent evidence has repeatedly identified associations between problematic social-media use and academic procrastination, while a 2026 meta-analysis of 44 studies involving 18,330 participants found a moderate negative association between academic self-efficacy and academic procrastination (Aslan and Terzi, 2026). Systematic evidence regarding excessive social-network use also links problematic patterns of use with academic stress, procrastination and poorer academic outcomes, although causal link remains difficult to establish.

These findings indicate that formal educational institutions receive students whose motivational structures have already been developing for many years. Explanations that link disengagement exclusively to outdated curricula therefore risk beginning the analysis too late. By the time an individual enters higher education, expectations regarding reward timing, personal success, frustration, attention, effort and failure have already been shaped through family socialisation, peers, socioeconomic circumstances, cultural narratives and increasingly digital environments. Educational mismatch may therefore constitute one component of a broader developmental problem rather than its only origin.

At the same time, interpreting all changes in Generation Z's relationship with effort as evidence of maladaptation would reproduce exactly the deficit model this paper aims to challenge. One of the most significant changes associated with younger workers involves the conditions under which employment is considered worthwhile. Recent systematic reviews of Generation Z in the workplace identify common preferences for flexibility, work-life balance, meaningful work, development opportunities, supportive leadership and positive workplace environments (Nugroho, Yanti and Haryanto, 2025; Pózner and Kozák, 2025). Evidence from healthcare contexts similarly identifies flexibility, supportive environments and psychological safety as significant concerns among Generation Z students and professionals (Chicca et al., 2025).

A narrative of diminishing resilience can easily incorporate some of these preferences: employees who leave unsatisfactory workplaces or demand psychological safety could be described as incapable of dealing with stress and adversity. Such an interpretation, however, fails to differentiate between two fundamentally different conditions: productive discomfort and unnecessary psychosocial harm.

Productive discomfort refers to the frustration, repetition, uncertainty, temporary failure and sustained effort typical in developing difficult skills and pursuing long-term goals. Eliminating such discomfort completely would make many forms of valuable and meaningful achievement impossible. Unnecessary psychosocial negative impact, by contrast, includes sense of shame, exploitation, ongoing disrespectful treatment, preventable organisational dysfunction and demands that provide minimal developmental or productive benefit. A reduced willingness to tolerate the former can prevent achievement; a reduced willingness to tolerate the latter may represent social progress.

Generation Z may display elements of both tendencies. This duality is fundamental to the psychosocial model developed in this paper. The argument is not that digital environments have produced a damaged generation, neither that all observed differences between younger and older adults can be attributed to social media, instead, Generation Z represents a particularly informative case for examining how individuals adapt to a developmental environment in which exceptional outcomes are unusually visible, social comparison is continuous, traditional routes to economic security have become less predictable, and psychological wellbeing has gained greater cultural validity.

Additionally, work values themselves are socially transmitted rather than generated independently within individuals. A meta-analysis of 30 studies across 11 countries found a strong correlation between parents' work values and those of their children, while also indicating substantial room for wider sociocultural and peer influences (Cemalcilar, Secinti and Sumer, 2018). Work values additionally demonstrate both stability and developmental change across the life course (Jin and Rounds, 2012). These findings further discredit explanations in which generational attitudes appear spontaneously now young adults enter employment.

Accordingly, the primary research question guiding this conceptual analysis is: to what extent can behavioural and attitudinal characteristics attributed to Generation Z be understood as psychosocial adaptations to altered developmental environments rather than evidence of generational decline?

The paper develops three interconnected arguments. First, it proposes that selective digital exposure may distort perceived standards surrounding socioeconomic achievement by making exceptional successes substantially more visible than the unsuccessful and ordinary routes necessary to establish their true base rates. Second, it argues that such distorted calibration may influence the subjective valuation of gradual steps to achievement and contribute, under some conditions, to procrastination, demoralisation or disengagement when actual outcomes fail to match expected ones. Third, it indicates that changing attitudes towards employment must be separated into potentially maladaptive avoidance of productive discomfort and potentially adaptive rejection of unnecessary psychosocial harm.

This framework therefore replaces the idea of generational deterioration with a model of differential psychosocial calibration. A generation developing within a different informational, economic and cultural environment should not be expected to develop with identical assumptions to those formed under previous conditions. The relevant scientific question is therefore not whether Generation Z is better or worse than its predecessors, but which adaptations its developmental environment has made more probable, which of those adaptations allow for functioning in contemporary society, and which may create novel types of vulnerability.

3. Generations as Products of Psychosocial Environments

Generational categories should be treated with caution because they do not represent identical psychological populations. Differences attributed to Generation Z may reflect age, life stage, historical period or group-specific experiences rather than stable generational traits. Research on generational differences in work values has repeatedly highlighted the difficulty of separating these effects, with evidence for significant generational differences often weaker than popular discourse suggests (Parry and Urwin, 2011; Kalleberg and Marsden, 2019; Ravid, 2025).

A psychosocial approach therefore focuses less on whether Generation Z possesses innate characteristics and more on the environments in which its attitudes developed. One important difference is the integration of social media into everyday socialisation during childhood and adolescence.

Social learning theory suggests that individuals develop expectations partly by observing others and outcomes associated with their behaviour (Bandura, 1977). Social comparison theory similarly proposes that individuals evaluate themselves using others as reference points, particularly when objective standards are uncertain (Festinger, 1954). Social media dramatically increases both the number and range of available models.

Nevertheless, these models are not randomly selected. Successful entrepreneurs, influencers, creators and individuals displaying desirable lifestyles are more visible than those whose attempts result in ordinary or unsuccessful outcomes. Digital environments can therefore expose users repeatedly to outcomes that are genuine but statistically unrepresentative.

This distinction matters because repeated exposure can influence what feels normal even when individuals consciously understand that online content is selective. Exceptional income, rapid career progression or highly autonomous lifestyles may become psychologically accessible criteria against which regular educational or professional progress is evaluated.

Parts of this mechanism are supported by evidence that links social media use with materialistic orientations and social comparison (Meier and Johnson, 2022; Dávila and Casabayó, 2025; Liu, Ding, and Chao, 2026). These results show that online comparison environments can affect standards and values related to socioeconomic achievement, but they do not prove that digital exposure leads to irrational career expectations.

The present paper thereby treats Generation Z not as a psychologically deteriorated generation, but as a group whose expectations developed within a substantially altered informational environment.

A fundamental characteristic of online success narratives is the unequal visibility of outcomes. Successful cases attract attention, audiences and algorithmic distribution, whereas unsuccessful attempts are far less visible. Users therefore come across the successful numerator much more often than the denominator of all those who attempted comparable pathways.

This leads to the possibility of success calibration distortion: a discrepancy between the perceived and actual distribution of achievement resulting from repeated exposure to exceptional outcomes.

Three dimensions are particularly relevant: perceived probability of success, expected time necessary to achieve it, and perceived correlation between effort and reward. Digital narratives may affect all three. Years of unsuccessful experiments or gradual skill

development can be compressed into short narratives of success. Resources, previous advantages and chance may remain invisible. As a result, rare outcomes can seem more attainable, faster and more directly connected to individual effort than they objectively are.

This does not mean that Generation Z expects success without effort, and a more precise hypothesis would be that some individuals may develop unrealistic expectations regarding which kinds of effort are worth making and how quickly significant rewards should follow.

Expectancy-value theory has significance here because motivation depends partly on expected success, perceived costs and the subjective value of competing alternatives (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002). When highly rewarding unconventional routes appear attainable, gradual pathways involving formal education, junior employment and gradual advancement may appear comparatively unattractive.

The psychological problem develops when perceived probabilities come into conflict with actual outcomes. Repeated failure to reproduce highly visible forms of success can generate a gap between expected and experienced progress. If individuals interpret this discrepancy primarily as personal shortcomings rather than recognising selection effects and low base rates, self-efficacy and motivation may decline.

The model therefore suggests that what is sometimes labelled laziness or lack of persistence may, in some cases, reflect miscalibrated expectations of progress. Ordinary development can feel like failure when the comparison standard has become exceptional.

4. Education, Procrastination and Delayed Reward

This structure has implications for education. Explanations of Generation Z's educational disinterest often focus on curricula, attention patterns or teaching methods. However, students enter formal education with motivational expectations already shaped through years of family, peer, cultural and digital socialisation.

Higher education depends strongly on delayed reward. Competence develops gradually, difficult material requires repetition, and economic benefits may remain distant or uncertain. These conditions may be particularly difficult when students are simultaneously being exposed to alternative narratives in which achievement appears rapid and transformative.

Problematic social-media use has been associated with academic procrastination and lower achieving educational outcomes, although causal direction remains uncertain. Academic self-efficacy is also negatively associated with procrastination, which indicates that perceptions of competence are relevant to persistence (Aslan and Terzi, 2026).

The present argument does not attribute procrastination to social-media exposure. Rather, it proposes that educational disengagement can partly reflect conflict between the reward structure students have come to expect and the much slower reward structure of formal learning.

This also marks a significant educational distinction. Frustration, repetition, and temporary failure are unavoidable aspects of developing competence. Attempts to eliminate all psychological discomfort from education may be counterproductive. In contrast, unnecessary humiliation, poor teaching, or institutional dysfunction should not be presented as necessary forms of resilience-building. The relevant goal is not increased tolerance of discomfort in general, but rather improved differentiation between productive discomfort and unnecessary harm.

5. Generation Z and Work: A Changing Psychological Contract

The workplace is one of the primary settings in which Generation Z is portrayed as not sufficiently resilient or loyal. However, empirical evidence for stable generational differences is inconsistent, and some apparent generational changes may reflect historical and labour-market conditions (Parry and Urwin, 2011; Kalleberg and Marsden, 2019; Ravid, 2025).

Nonetheless, research on contemporary Generation Z employees reveals recurring preferences for work-life balance, flexibility, development opportunities, supportive leadership, and respectful organizational environments (Nugroho, Yanti, and Haryanto, 2025; Pózner and Kozák, 2025).

These preferences can be understood in two different ways. One reason is that younger employees are increasingly reluctant to endure standard job expectations. The alternative hypothesis is that the psychological contract between employer and employee has shifted.

Traditional employment relationships often implicitly traded loyalty and perseverance for stability, advancement, and institutional security. Long-term employment becomes less predictable, making unconditional employee loyalty more difficult to justify. Younger employees might therefore evaluate employment based on a broader set of criteria, such as whether compensation is adequate, whether the position provides opportunities for advancement, and whether the individual is treated with respect. This could represent an adaptive development rather than a decline in work ethic.

Again, distinguishing between productive discomfort and unnecessary psychosocial harm is critical. Difficult projects, constructive criticism, repetition, and uncertainty can all help build competence. Humiliation, chronic disrespect, and exploitative conditions do not gain developmental value simply because previous generations tolerated them. A decreased willingness to tolerate the first category may limit achievement. A reduced willingness to tolerate the second could indicate social progress. Generation Z may exhibit elements of both. Greater awareness of psychological well-being may strengthen personal boundaries while, in some cases, making ordinary frustration easier to interpret as evidence of a harmful environment.

As a result, resilience should not be defined simply as the ability to persevere in difficult circumstances. The more important question is whether adversity serves a meaningful developmental or productive purpose.

6. Discussion

The concept of generational decay has limited explanatory value because it converts behavioural differences into character judgments while ignoring the conditions under which those behaviours developed.

In contrast, the current paper proposes a model of differential psychosocial calibration. Generation Z grew up in an environment marked by constant social comparison, unprecedented visibility of exceptional outcomes, shifting labour-market conditions, and increased cultural emphasis on psychological well-being.

Within this context, selective digital exposure may distort expectations about the likelihood, rapidity, and routes to socioeconomic success. Exceptional outcomes become increasingly visible, whereas failed and ordinary trajectories remain relatively hidden. Conventional progress may appear inadequate when compared to atypical reference points.

This model remains theoretical. Existing research supports the link between social media use, social comparison, materialism, academic self-efficacy, and procrastination, but it does not establish the entire causal chain proposed here. Longitudinal and experimental research would be required to determine whether prolonged exposure to exceptional-success narratives affects estimates of probability, expected timelines, and persistence after failure.

Future research could compare participants who were only exposed to successful entrepreneurial or career narratives to those who were told the same stories but also learned about unsuccessful attempts and actual outcome distributions. Differences in perceived attainability, expected time to success, and willingness to pursue progressive alternatives could all be used to directly test the proposed calibration mechanism.

The model also considers socioeconomic, cultural, and individual differences. Generation Z is not homogeneous, and digital exposure interacts with family background, education, personality, and economic opportunities. These factors limit broad generational generalizations.

Most importantly, the framework avoids categorizing all behavioural changes as either deterioration or progress. Reduced tolerance for productive discomfort may impair learning and perseverance, whereas reduced tolerance for exploitation or disrespect may improve psychological and occupational conditions. The two should not be confused simply because they both cause disengagement from an environment.

7. Conclusion

Generation Z does not need to be viewed through the lens of generational decline. Its attitudes toward achievement, education, and employment can be viewed as responses to a developmental environment that differs significantly from that of previous generations.

Continuous exposure to selectively visible success may make exceptional outcomes appear more common than they are. This can change expectations about how quickly goals should

be met, which types of effort are worthwhile, and what constitutes adequate progress. When experience does not meet expectations, certain individuals may become more prone to procrastination, disengagement, or demoralization.

At the same time, Generation Z's preference for proper compensation, development, psychological safety, and respectful treatment should not be interpreted as a lack of resilience. Refusing unnecessary workplace harm differs from refusing productive discomfort required for competence and achievement.

The most useful distinction may not be between resilient and fragile generations, but rather between adaptive and maladaptive responses to changing psychosocial environments.

Rather than asking what went wrong with Generation Z, researchers should investigate what their environment taught young people to expect from achievement, work, and adulthood, and which of those expectations modern institutions are realistically able, or ethically obliged, to meet.

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