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The Mediating Role Of Employee Engagement In The Relationship Between Work-Life Balance And Turnover Intention Among Generation Z Employees: A Systematic Literature Review And Future Research Agenda

Lailafitri[1], Cecep Hermana[2]

Bachelor of Management Study Program, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang

Email: 2410631020226@student.unsika.ac.id, chermana911@staff.unsika.ac.id

Abstract

The high rate of turnover among Generation Z employees has become a critical challenge for modern organizations; however, the mechanism linking work-life balance to that tendency has not been fully understood, particularly the mediating role of employee engagement. This study aims to examine the mediating role of employee engagement in the relationship between work-life balance and turnover intention among Generation Z employees and to develop a future research agenda. The method used is Systematic Literature Review (SLR) with the PRISMA 2020 protocol, covering systematic searches across five indexed databases, namely Scopus, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar. Of the 847 articles identified, 32 met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed using a thematic synthesis. The synthesis results indicate that work-life balance has a significant positive effect on employee engagement, employee engagement has a significant negative effect on turnover intention, and employee engagement is proven to partially mediate the relationship between the two. The synthesis also identifies the phenomenon of ambivalent engagement that is characteristic of Generation Z, as well as three main gaps, namely theoretical, methodological, and contextual gaps. This study provides practical implications for HR managers in designing value-based retention policies and opens longitudinal and mixed methods research agendas in the Southeast Asian context.

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Keywords: Work-Life Balance; Employee Engagement; Turnover Intention; Generation Z; Systematic Literature Review

INTRODUCTION

Generation Z, those born between 1997 and 2012, has become the dominant group in the global workforce. U.S. Department of Labor (2024:1) reported that as of the second quarter of 2024, Gen Z accounted for 18% of the total U.S. workforce, surpassing Baby Boomers for the first time. McKinsey in Apollo Technical (2024:1) projected that Gen Z will constitute 40% of the global workforce by 2030. However, this large representation is accompanied by a serious problem: Apollo Technical (2024:1) reported that the average tenure of Gen Z workers is only 2 years and 3 months, and they change jobs 134% more frequently than Millennials at the same age.

The root of this retention crisis is directly linked to work-life balance. Deloitte (2024:3) affirmed that work-life balance is the primary consideration for Gen Z when choosing an employer, surpassing even financial factors. Approximately 34% of Gen Z respondents stated that work-life imbalance greatly contributes to their stress, and 40% admitted to feeling stressed almost constantly (Deloitte, 2024:5). Praveena, Sathyapriya, and Kamalakannan (2024:3) added that Gen Z is vulnerable to psychological pressure in the workplace, making work-life balance the primary strategy for maintaining well-being. In Indonesia, LPEM FEB UI (2024:1) recorded an open unemployment rate of 9.37% for Gen Z in 2023, far above the national unemployment rate of 5%, reflecting a mismatch between Gen Z expectations and available labor market conditions.

Turnover intention among Gen Z can no longer be explained solely by conventional cognitive models. Pózner and Kozák (2025:5) affirmed that the decision-making process for leaving among Gen Z employees is influenced by far more complex factors, including personal value alignment, quality of the work environment, and availability of meaningful growth. Zulkifli et al. (2024:228) proved that stress and burnout are significant predictors of turnover intention among Gen Z, and work-life balance has been proven to mitigate that risk. Deloitte (2024:2) reinforced this with the finding that 50% of Gen Z are willing to reject employers who do not support their mental well-being.

It is at this point that employee engagement plays a strategic role as a linking mechanism. Schaufeli and Bakker (2003:4) defined employee engagement as a positive, work-related condition characterized by three dimensions: vigor (energy and enthusiasm), dedication (full involvement and a sense of meaning), and absorption (deep immersion in one's work). This definition remains the dominant reference to this day;

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Bakker and Demerouti (2023:3) and Wibaselppa (2025:3) explicitly use it in contemporary studies on young workforce retention. Otoo (2024:130) proved that employee engagement mediates the relationship between job resources and turnover intention significantly. Without understanding this mediation mechanism, any retention strategy risks failing to address the root of the problem.

Several previous studies leave significant gaps. Mandagi (2022:3) combined Millennials and Gen Z without clear separation of the unit of analysis. Gašić and Berber (2023:131) tested the mediation of employee engagement but on a general sample in Serbia, not specifically Gen Z. Lestari and Margaretha (2021:5) showed that work-life balance plays a crucial role in improving retention, but the study context was Generation Y. Zulkifli et al. (2024:228) themselves acknowledged that no study has simultaneously examined all three variables exclusively for Gen Z as a single unit of analysis.

This study rests on three theoretical frameworks that are integrated explicitly. First, Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989:516) explains that individuals strive to protect their resources of energy, time, and emotional well-being; work-life imbalance threatens these resources and triggers turnover intention. Hobfoll in Bakker and Demerouti (2023:2) clarified that adequate work resources positively influence motivation and engagement while also serving as a buffer against the negative impact of job demands. Second, Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2023:3) affirmed that adequate work resources promote engagement and serve as a buffer against the negative impact of excessive job demands. Third, Social Exchange Theory (SET) systematized by Ahmad et al. (2023:3) explains that when organizations provide adequate work-life balance , employees respond with increased emotional and cognitive engagement as a form of reciprocity. The integration of all three theories simultaneously in the Gen Z context represents a theoretical novelty not yet achieved by any prior SLR.

Based on the above, this study aims to: (1) identify and synthesize the latest literature on the relationship between work-life balance, employee engagement, and turnover intention among Gen Z employees; (2) systematically analyze the mediating role of employee engagement ; and (3) develop a future research agenda relevant to academics and HR practitioners.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) with the PRISMA 2020 protocol. Snyder (2019:334) affirmed that SLR differs from narrative review because it

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employs explicit search protocols, measurable selection criteria, and auditable synthesis procedures, thereby producing more reliable conclusions. Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart (2003:208) affirmed that SLR in management is highly relevant for generating evidence-based knowledge, especially when existing literature is scattered and has not been comprehensively synthesized. Paradigmatically, this study is situated within the interpretive qualitative domain, where analysis is conducted on texts and findings from published primary studies.

DatabaseThe databases used include Scopus, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Emerald Insight, Google Scholar, and local sources SINTA and Garuda to ensure representation of Indonesian-language literature. Page et al. (2021:3) recommended the use of more than one database simultaneously to minimize the risk of publication bias and ensure comprehensive literature coverage. The search strategy used a Boolean keyword combination: ("work-life balance" OR "work life balance") AND ("employee engagement" OR "work engagement") AND ("turnover intention" OR "intention to quit") AND ("Generation Z" OR "Gen Z"). The search covered the period 2015 to 2025, with priority given to 2021 to 2025. Publication language was restricted to English and Indonesian. The applied inclusion and exclusion criteria are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Article Selection

Aspect	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Publication Year	2015–2025 (priority 2021–2025)	Before 2015
Document Type	Peer-reviewed journal peer-reviewed	Textbooks, theses, dissertations, reports, proceedings without review
Language	English and Indonesian	Other than English and Indonesian

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Main Topic	At least two of the three main variables: work-life balance, employee engagement, turnover intention	Not relevant to the main research variables
Study Subject	Generation Z employees or young workforce	Non-employee populations (students, elderly, etc.)
Indexing	Scopus, Web of Science, or SINTA 1–4	Not indexed or grey literature
Accessibility	Full-text tersedia	Only abstract available

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of Reviewed Studies

The systematic selection process based on the PRISMA 2020 protocol yielded 32 final articles that met all inclusion criteria. Of the 847 articles identified across five databases, 312 were excluded due to duplication, 389 were excluded at the title and abstract screening stage, and 114 were excluded after full-text reading for failing to meet the predefined relevance or quality criteria. The selection process is presented in Figure 1.

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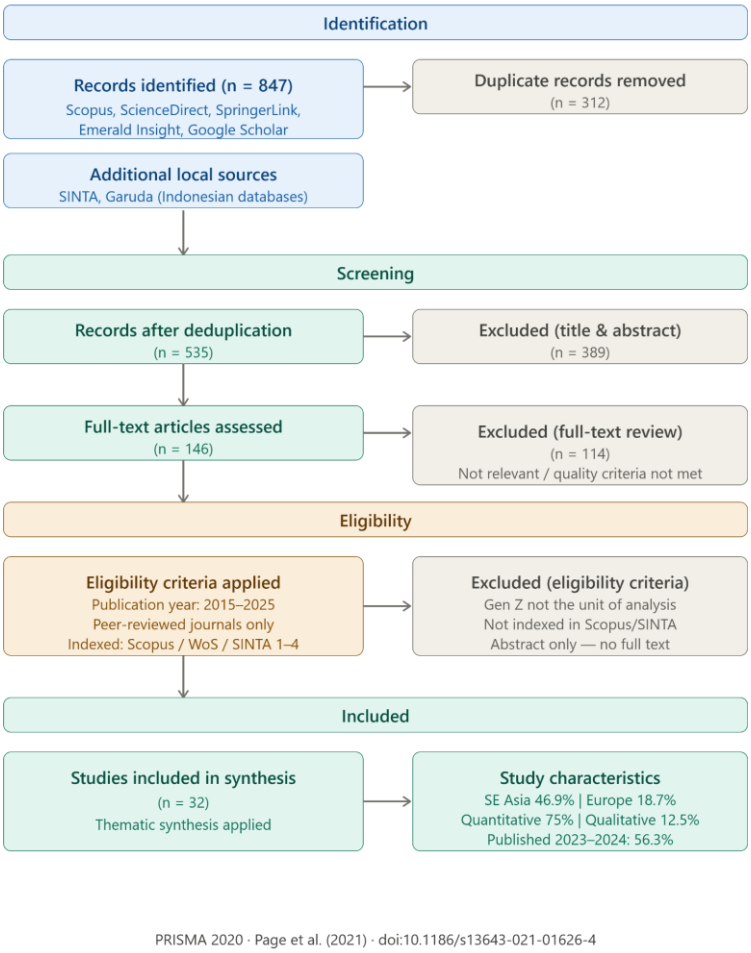


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram Article Selection Process

The geographical distribution shows a dominance of studies from Southeast Asia at 46.9%, particularly Indonesia, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka, followed by South Asia at 21.9% and Europe at 18.7%. Pózner and Kozák (2025:7) noted that the surge in publications on Gen Z in HRM has been highly significant since 2022, reflecting academic urgency regarding the workforce dynamics of this generation in the post-pandemic era. In terms of methodology, 75% of studies used a quantitative approach with SEM or PLS-SEM as the dominant technique, while qualitative and mixed methods studies each accounted for only 12.5%. Mandagi (2022:390) acknowledged that the dominance of quantitative approaches creates a gap in understanding employees' subjective

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experiences not captured by path coefficient figures alone. The complete characteristics of reviewed articles are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Characteristics of Reviewed Articlew

Characteristic	Category	Count	%
Methodology	Quantitative (SEM/PLS)	24	75,0
	Qualitative	4	12,5
	Mixed Methods	4	12,5
Sector	Manufacturing/Retail	10	31,3
	Teknologi/Startup	8	25,0
	Banking/Finance	7	21,9
	Healthcare/Others	7	21,8
Region	Southeast Asia	15	46,9
	South Asia	7	21,9
	Europe	6	18,7
	Others	4	12,5
	2021–2022	9	28,1

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Publication Year	2023–2024	18	56,3
	2025	5	15,6

Work-Life Balance and Employee Engagement

The synthesis of 32 articles shows a positive relationship between work-life balance and employee engagement, however, the strength of this relationship is conditional and not universal. Triningsih and Darma (2024:15) proved that improvements in work-life balance directly contributes to employee engagement among Indonesian manufacturing employees with a statistically significant path coefficient. Nasution et al. (2025:6) found that 77% of Gen Z employees in Indonesian private companies cited work flexibility as the primary factor enhancing their engagement. Conversely, Syuzairi et al. in Siburian et al. (2025:4) found that work-life balance does not always guarantee engagement when job satisfaction is absent as an additional mediator.

The three foundational theories offer complementary explanations for this conditionality. Through COR Theory, Hobfoll in Bakker and Demerouti (2023:2) explains that work-life balance functions as a personal resource that protects employees from depletion energy and time. Through JD-R Theory, Bakker and Demerouti (2023:3) affirmed that work resources are only effective in increasing engagement when job demands do not simultaneously increase at the same intensity. Through SET, Ahmad et al. (2023:3) explained that the norm of reciprocity is only activated when employees perceive organizational conditions as a fair and valuable exchange, not merely formal administrative policy. The synthesis of this relationship is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Synthesis of the Relationship between Work-Life Balance and Employee Engagement

Study	Context	Method	Direction	Critical Note
Triningsih & Darma (2024)	Manufacturing, Bali	PLS-SEM	(+) Significant	Limited sample (n=116)

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Gašić & Berber (2023)	Serbia, highly educated	Multiple regression	(+) Significant	Not specific to Gen Z
Nasution et al. (2025)	Gen Z, Indonesian private sector	Quantitative	(+) Significant	Local cultural context relevant
Lestari & Margaretha (2021)	Generation Y, manufacturing	SEM	(+) Significant	Different generation from Gen Z
Syuzairi et al. (2023)	Educators	Quantitative	Inconsistent	WLB insufficient without job satisfaction

Employee Engagement and Turnover Intention

The negative relationship between employee engagement and turnover intention is the most consistent relationship across the entire synthesized literature. Otoo (2024:145) proved in a study of 934 pharmaceutical employees that employee engagement directly suppresses turnover intention with a strong negative path coefficient (-0.41). Zhu et al. (2023:4) in a meta-analysis of 28 primary studies confirmed the consistency of this relationship across sectors, further reinforced by employees' perceived organizational support. Karyati and Suwandi (2025:89) reinforced these findings in the Indonesian context by proving that engagement mediates the relationship between generational diversity and turnover intention in manufacturing companies.

However, in the Gen Z context, Siburian et al. (2025:3) identified the phenomenon of ambivalent engagement: employees feel fully engaged professionally yet remain willing to leave when better opportunities arise. Ahmad et al. (2023:6) explained through SET that the norm of reciprocity among Gen Z is more dynamic and is continuously re-evaluated in real-time, while COR Theory adds that employees who feel their resources are depleted will seek replacement resources elsewhere, even if their engagement level is momentarily high. The synthesis of this relationship is presented in Table 4.

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Table 4. Synthesis of the Relationship between Employee Engagement and Turnover Intention

Study	Context	Direction	Effect Size	Critical Note
Otoo (2024)	Pharmaceutical, Ghana	(-) Significant	Strong (β=-0.41)	Not specific to Gen Z
Zhu et al. (2023)	Meta-analysis, 28 studies	(-) Consistent	Moderate-strong	Multi-sectoral, cross-generational
Karyati & Suwandi (2025)	Manufacturing, Indonesia	(-) Significant	Moderate	Relevant to local context
Gašić & Berber (2023)	Serbia, Europe	(-) Significant	Moderate (β=-0,33)	Different cultural context
Siburian et al. (2025)	Startup, Indonesia Gen Z	Inconsistent	Weak	Phenomenon of ambivalent engagement

Triningsih and Darma (2024:18) explicitly proved that employee engagement partially mediates the relationship between work-life balance toward turnover intention partially: the effect of work-life balance toward penurunan turnover intention operates partly through an increase in employee engagement prior increase in *employee engagement*, while the direct path remains present and significant. Gašić and Berber (2023:135) confirmed a similar partial mediation pattern in the European context. Arief et al. (2025:3) found that the mediating strength of employee engagement is greater for Gen Z employees in sectors providing high autonomy and continuous feedback compared to hierarchical sectors.

These findings align with the integration of the three theories: COR Theory explains that organizations providing work-life balance help employees maintain their

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resources; JD-R Theory explains that these resources subsequently promote engagement, and SET explains that engagement that emerges from a perceived fair exchange is what suppresses turnover intention. Ahmad et al. (2023:7) affirmed that the perception of fairness in the exchange is the key factor, not merely the material availability of work-life balance. The conceptual model resulting from the synthesis is presented in Figure 2.

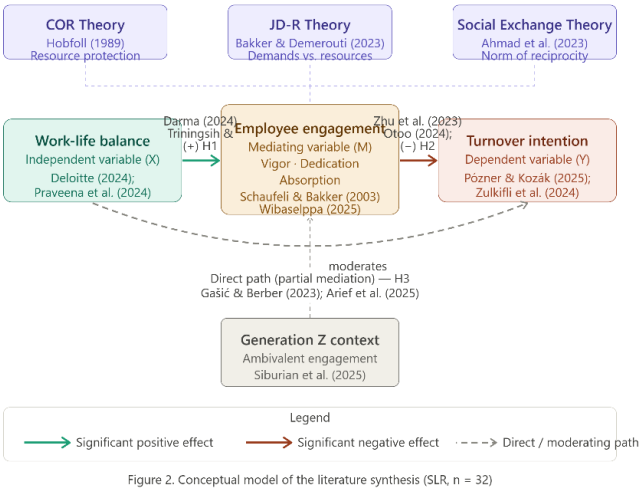


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of the Literature Synthesis

Research Gaps

A critical analysis of 32 articles identifies five interconnected layers of gaps. Theoretically, almost no study has integrated COR Theory, JD-R Theory, and SET explicitly within a single mediation model specific to Gen Z; Ahmad et al. (2023:9) affirmed that SET is still rarely combined with resource-based theories in the context of young workforce HRM, and Mandagi (2022:392) acknowledged that research on WLB and engagement among young generations is still dominated by single theoretical approaches. Methodologically, the dominance of cross-sectional studies at 75% fails to capture dynamic changes in engagement throughout the career cycle; Pózner and Kozák (2025:11) affirmed that longitudinal research is the most urgent need. Contextually, studies exclusively on Gen Z in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, remain very limited (Zulkifli et al., 2024:233). In terms of variables, leadership and organizational culture moderators have not been extensively tested (Karyati & Suwandi, 2025). Sectorally, gig economy and startup digital remain minimally studied, while Lestari and Margaretha

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(2021:5) acknowledged that digital work pressure often produces imbalances undetected by partial studies. These gaps are systematically presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Research Gap Matrix

Type Gap	Specific Description	Acknowledging Studies	Implication
Theoretical	COR, JD-R, and SET not yet integrated into a single EE mediation model for Gen Z	Ahmad et al. (2023); Mandagi (2022)	New integrated model needed
Methodological	Dominance of *cross-sectional* studies; cross-sectional; limited longitudinal and qualitative research	Gašić & Berber (2023); Pózner & Kozák (2025)	Weak causal validity
Contextual	Limited studies exclusively on Gen Z in Southeast Asia/Indonesia	Zulkifli et al. (2024); Nasution et al. (2025)	Western generalizability limited
Variable	Leadership and organizational culture moderators insufficiently tested	Karyati & Suwandi (2025)	Model does not capture complexity
Sectoral	Gig economy and startup digital sectors minimally studied	Lestari & Margaretha (2021)	Declining relevance for digital economy

Based on the identified gaps, three research priorities are formulated. First, longitudinal research specifically following Gen Z employees during the first two to three years of their employment is urgently needed; Pózner and Kozák (2025:13) identified this period as the most critical phase in the formation of engagement patterns and the decision to remain. Second, mixed methods studies combining quantitative surveys with in-depth

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interviews are needed to capture the phenomenon of ambivalent engagement that cannot be captured by path coefficients alone, as affirmed by Braun and Clarke (2022) that qualitative approaches yield a depth of understanding irreplaceable by numbers. Third, research explicitly testing the role of organizational culture moderators in the Indonesian context is urgent, as Ahmad et al. (2023:11) identified the collectivist cultural context as a critical moderator overlooked in the application of SET and COR Theory in Asian organizations. This agenda is presented in a structured form in Table 6.

Table 6. Future Research Agenda

Priority	Topic	Approach	Context	Urgency Basis
High	Longitudinal WLB-EE-TI study exclusively on Gen Z	Longitudinal quantitative	Indonesia/ASEAN	Pózner & Kozák (2025)
High	Moderation of organizational culture in EE mediation	Mixed methods	Indonesia	Ahmad et al. (2023)
Moderate	Remote/hybrid work on WLB and EE among Gen Z	Survey quantitative	Startup digital	Nasution et al. (2025)
Moderate	EE as mediator in the gig economy	Qualitative/case study	Southeast Asia	Lestari & Margaretha (2021)
Low	Comparison of Gen Z vs. Millennials in the mediation model	Comparative quantitative	Multi-sectoral	Mandagi (2022)

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CONCLUSION

This study produces three main conclusions. First, work-life balance has a significant positive effect on employee engagement among Generation Z employees, although this relationship is conditional and depends on job satisfaction and perceptions of organizational fairness. Second, employee engagement has a significant negative effect on turnover intention, but the phenomenon of ambivalent engagement phenomenon characteristic of Gen Z shows that high engagement does not always guarantee long-term loyalty if personal values are not aligned with organizational culture. Third, employee engagement is proven to partially mediate the relationship between work-life balance and turnover intention, confirming that the effect of work-life balance on employee retention operates partly through the mechanism of first increasing engagement.

Overall, the integration of COR Theory, JD-R Theory, and SET within a single analytical framework provides a more comprehensive understanding than the single theoretical approach that has dominated the literature. For HR practitioners, policies on work-life balance need to be systematically integrated with programs to enhance employee engagement through flexible work systems, adequate autonomy, and continuous recognition of Gen Z employees' contributions. For organizational policymakers, a retention approach based on value alignment and meaningful career growth should be a strategic priority, especially given the rising proportion of Gen Z workers in Indonesia. For future researchers, longitudinal and mixed methods studies exclusively focused on Gen Z in Southeast Asia represent the most urgent agenda for the academic community to address.

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