

Generation Z Employees' Experiences of Reward and Punishment Systems: A Phenomenological Study at Ninetynine Indo

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of Generation Z employees regarding the implementation of reward and punishment systems in the retail sector, focusing on their implications for motivation, job satisfaction, and loyalty. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and internal documentation involving eight employees at Ninetynine Indo, Serang, Banten. The findings indicate that non-financial rewards, such as public recognition, training certificates, and personal appreciation, have a more significant positive impact than purely financial incentives, as they strengthen intrinsic motivation and emotional connections with the organization. Collective rewards were found to enhance solidarity and teamwork, although their effectiveness is influenced by the transparency and clarity of assessment criteria. Punishments accompanied by constructive guidance serve as learning tools, whereas authoritarian punishments without explanation tend to lower self-confidence and trigger stress. These findings emphasize that Generation Z demands a fair, communicative, and educational management system, where rewards and punishments function not only as control mechanisms but also as means for competency development and psychological well-being.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The demographic transformation of Indonesia's workforce is currently marked by the growing contribution of Generation Z to the labor market. According to the Central Statistics Agency, by 2025 approximately 27.94% of Indonesia's total population will consist of Generation Z, equal to 74.9 million people (BPS, 2025). They are in their productive years, with many entering the workforce, both in the formal and informal sectors. However, significant challenges remain, as around 45.1% of workers aged 15–24 are still in the informal sector, and 22.3% are categorized as NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training), meaning that nearly 9.9 million young people are neither working, studying, nor receiving training.

Recent studies have identified several structural factors underlying this phenomenon, including a persistent qualification mismatch between young graduates' competencies and industry requirements (Hasibuan & Handayan, 2021), the distinctive employment preferences and work values of Generation Z such as the demand for flexibility, job security, and transparent compensation (Setiawan et al., 2025; Fikri et al., 2024) and continued barriers to accessing formal training and

professional networks. Collectively, these conditions contribute to the high proportion of youth entering or remaining in the informal labor market. This indicates that although Gen Z has great potential as human capital, their integration into the formal labor market still faces structural and cultural barriers (Lusiana, 2024).

Within organizational contexts, these barriers are further compounded by the distinct characteristics of Generation Z compared to previous cohorts. As digital natives, they grew up in a fast-paced, transparent, and flexible environment. Consequently, they tend to demand work–life balance, personalized recognition, development opportunities, and acknowledgment of their contributions. Empirical evidence supports this tendency: Desideria (2024) and Syal et al. (2024) demonstrate that rewards aligned with work–life balance significantly influence job satisfaction, thereby improving retention among Gen Z employees. Similar findings were reported in Jakarta's creative industry, where job recognition and opportunities for self-development were critical for loyalty (Sono et al., 2024). Even at the global level, Mabaso (2025) shows that while competitive salaries and performance bonuses remain relevant, Generation Z also places high value on leave entitlements and workplace flexibility.

This emerging pattern raises important questions for labor-intensive industries such as retail, where the prevailing human resource management (HRM) approach still emphasizes discipline, target achievement, and efficiency. To maintain productivity, many retail companies rely on conventional reward and punishment systems, in which incentives or bonuses are provided for target attainment, and sanctions are imposed for violations. Theoretically, this practice aligns with Skinner's reinforcement theory, which posits that behavior can be shaped through positive and negative consequences. However, when applied to Generation Z employees, evidence suggests that financial rewards alone are insufficient to sustain loyalty, while authoritarian or non-transparent punishment often generates resistance, stress, and turnover (Krishna & Agrawal, 2025). Given the high mobility of labor in the retail sector, these dynamics reveal a widening gap between traditional HRM practices and the more complex needs of the new workforce.

Against this backdrop, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how Generation Z employees actually experience organizational reward and punishment systems. A phenomenological approach is particularly relevant, as it allows researchers to capture the subjective meanings and lived experiences of employees, rather than relying solely on quantitative indicators such as job satisfaction or turnover rates. Beyond contributing practical insights for the retail industry, this study also offers a broader theoretical contribution by enriching intergenerational HRM discourse. Specifically, it seeks to conceptualize how generational characteristics intersect with reinforcement mechanisms, thereby laying the groundwork for a more adaptive, human-centered model of motivation that can be applied not only in retail but across diverse organizational settings.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study examines the experiences of Generation Z employees regarding the implementation of reward and punishment systems in retail companies. The research was conducted at Ninetynine Indo, a fashion store located at Jalan NN No.52, Cimuncang, Serang City, Banten, where the majority of employees belong to Generation Z. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: aged 20–27, employed for at least six months, and having experienced either rewards or punishments. Based on these criteria, eight employees were selected. While the sample size of eight may appear small, it is considered adequate for this qualitative study as it allows for in-depth exploration of individual experiences and provides sufficient data saturation. This ensures that no new significant themes emerge from further interviews, which is a key indicator that data collection is sufficient (Creswell, 2013).

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, passive participatory observation, and company internal documentation. The researcher served as the primary instrument, responsible for designing interview guidelines, exploring participants' experiences, and interpreting the findings. The role of the researcher is emphasized through reflexivity, where an ongoing reflection on the researcher's potential biases and involvement in the research process was maintained throughout data collection and analysis. This self-awareness helped ensure the reliability and transparency of the research.

Data analysis followed Creswell's phenomenological model. The process began with epoche to suspend researcher bias, followed by horizontalization to identify significant statements. These statements were then clustered to form themes. Both textual and structural descriptions were written to narrate and explain participants' lived experiences, and a final synthesis was made to formulate the essence of the experiences of Generation Z employees.

Additionally, source triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail were utilized to ensure the validity and credibility of the data. Internal documentation and passive participatory observation were integrated into the analysis to support the findings from the interviews. Observational data were cross-referenced with interview results to validate the consistency of employee experiences and to provide deeper insight into the organizational context and implementation of the reward and punishment systems.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study reveals that Generation Z employees at Ninety-nine Indo have diverse experiences with the implementation of reward and punishment systems. These systems significantly impact their motivation, job satisfaction, and team dynamics. The following sections present the findings under clearly defined sub-themes: Personal Rewards, Collective Rewards, Constructive Punishment, and Negative Effects of Authoritarian Punishment.

Personal Rewards

The study revealed that personal recognition plays a significantly stronger role in motivating employees compared to purely financial rewards. This finding highlights the importance of psychological and emotional factors in employee motivation. Rather than focusing solely on material compensation, employees at Ninety-nine Indo expressed a preference for being recognized for their individual contributions. Such recognition not only increased their morale but also ignited a sense of pride and ownership in their work. For instance, Cashier A shared that being publicly acknowledged for meeting sales targets during team meetings made her feel appreciated and motivated her to perform better. For example, Cashier A remarked:

"When my name was mentioned in the meeting for achieving the sales target, I felt appreciated and became more enthusiastic about working."

Field observations confirmed that recognition made Cashier A more proactive in customer service, frequently assisting colleagues and maintaining a high level of initiative. Similarly, SPG B stated:

"Recognition from my supervisor makes me feel that my contribution is acknowledged, so I try to give my best."

This sentiment was echoed by several employees, highlighting that recognition whether verbal or public fulfills a deeper emotional need for validation and a sense of belonging. These findings challenge the conventional emphasis on financial incentives, suggesting that intrinsic rewards, such as recognition, may play a more significant role in fostering long-term motivation and job satisfaction, particularly among Generation Z employees. Specifically, the study reveals that recognition not only enhanced intrinsic motivation but also led to tangible improvements in store performance, such as better product displays and enhanced customer service. This supports the argument that intrinsic rewards, especially recognition and praise, are more effective in sustaining motivation compared to extrinsic rewards like monetary incentives (Krishna & Agrawal, 2025).

These results challenge the classical reinforcement theory, which traditionally asserts that external rewards, particularly financial ones, are the most effective tools for reinforcing desired behaviors. However, Generation Z employees seem to derive greater value from non-financial rewards, reflecting a stronger preference for personal development and career growth opportunities over material compensation. Moreover, the act of recognition appears to foster a stronger emotional attachment to the organization, which in turn enhances long-term commitment (Surugiu et al., 2025; Asria et al., 2025). Comparable patterns have been observed in international studies, such as research in South Africa (Mabaso, 2025) and Malaysia (Salem, 2025) which similarly report that while competitive pay and bonuses remain relevant, Generation Z consistently emphasizes growth

opportunities, recognition, autonomy, and meaningful work as central determinants of retention and organizational loyalty.

The findings of this study suggest several key managerial implications for enhancing employee motivation and improving organizational performance. First, managers should consider shifting the focus from purely financial rewards to a more balanced approach that includes personal recognition. Recognizing employees for their individual achievements whether through public acknowledgment or verbal praise can have a significant impact on morale and motivation. Moreover, managers should ensure that recognition is timely, specific, and sincere to maximize its effectiveness. Recognizing employees during team meetings or through personal commendations can increase their sense of value within the organization and boost their motivation to contribute meaningfully to team goals. This aligns with Generation Z's preference for work environments that prioritize personal growth and meaningful feedback, rather than simply material rewards.

Furthermore, managers should integrate recognition within a broader framework of professional development, offering opportunities for career advancement and skill-building alongside acknowledgment of individual and team achievements. This approach will not only motivate employees but also strengthen their commitment to the organization, reducing turnover and fostering a more engaged workforce. In practice, this could mean implementing more formal systems of recognition, such as employee of the month programs, team-based performance bonuses, or even regular feedback loops where employees can share their successes and receive praise. By doing so, managers will create an environment where intrinsic rewards, like recognition, contribute to a positive organizational culture, long-term employee satisfaction, and enhanced overall performance.

Collective Rewards

The study found that collective rewards, such as team-based incentives, played a crucial role in fostering team solidarity and enhancing collaboration among employees. Unlike individual rewards, which focus on personal achievement, collective rewards emphasize shared success, encouraging employees to work together toward common goals. This approach helps create a sense of community and mutual responsibility within the workplace. Merchandiser F shared:

"We feel appreciated as a team, so we help each other when arranging products or dealing with customers."

This statement underscores the importance of recognizing collective efforts, highlighting that such recognition not only boosts individual motivation but also strengthens team cohesion and collective identity. By celebrating group achievements, employees are reminded that their contributions are integral to the success of the team, reinforcing the notion that success is a shared endeavor.

Team-based incentives align with existing research, which suggests that collective rewards are particularly effective in environments where tasks are interdependent, and collaboration is crucial for achieving optimal outcomes (Alkandi et al., 2023). This finding challenges the traditional emphasis on individual performance and underscores the increasing value of teamwork and shared goals in modern organizational settings. When properly designed, collective rewards not only enhance productivity but also foster a positive work culture, in which employees feel supported and motivated to contribute to both individual and team success. "Team-based incentives align with existing research, which suggests that collective rewards are particularly effective in environments where tasks are interdependent, and collaboration is crucial for achieving optimal outcomes. For example, Goette & Senn (2024) report that team-based incentives yield higher productivity than individual incentives in cognitively complex, interdependent tasks. Similarly, a 2025 scoping review in primary care demonstrates that team-based compensation and intrinsic motivators (e.g., autonomy, mastery) substantially improve collaboration and satisfaction among interprofessional teams (Aggarwal et al., 2025). These findings challenge the traditional emphasis on individual performance and underscore the increasing value of shared goals and teamwork in modern organizational settings. When properly designed, collective rewards not only enhance productivity but also foster a positive work culture in which employees feel supported and motivated to contribute to both individual and team success.

Observations revealed that teams worked cohesively, effectively dividing tasks and supporting each other without the need for direct supervision. Group recognition, such as collective

incentives for achieving team targets, reinforced a shared sense of responsibility and cooperation. This highlights the crucial role of group-based incentives in promoting collaboration, particularly in settings where tasks are interdependent (Alkandi et al., 2023). Unlike previous generations, Generation Z employees evaluate rewards not solely based on material value but also on how they contribute to personal development and team cohesion. Therefore, collective rewards are most effective when they are linked to transparent and fair performance evaluation systems.

This suggests that organizations should design reward structures that integrate both individual recognition and collective achievement, ensuring that competition remains healthy and free-riding behaviors are minimized. Additionally, clear performance indicators tied to collective rewards can help prevent perceptions of unfairness and enhance group cohesion (Figueiredo, 2025). These findings are consistent with Mabaso's (2025) research, which emphasizes that Generation Z values transparency, learning opportunities, and collective accomplishments.

Constructive Punishment

When it comes to punishment, Generation Z employees demonstrated a more favorable response to constructive feedback compared to authoritarian reprimands. This preference for constructive criticism highlights the growing importance of a more developmental and supportive approach to managing employee behavior, particularly among younger generations who value growth opportunities and learning from their mistakes. Cashier D shared an insightful perspective:

"I once had my bonus cut because of a wrong transaction input, but after being shown how to correct it, I became more careful."

This statement highlights the effectiveness of framing punishment as a learning opportunity rather than a mere penalty. By providing clear guidance and constructive feedback on how to improve, employees are empowered to take corrective actions and enhance their performance, without feeling demoralized or disengaged.

Such an approach is consistent with contemporary management practices, which prioritize employee development, continuous feedback, and emotional well-being. Research indicates that punitive measures lacking constructive feedback often lead to negative outcomes, including diminished self-esteem, heightened anxiety, and defensive behavior (Gligor et al., 2024). Generation Z employees, in particular, tend to respond more positively to feedback that is specific, actionable, and presented as an opportunity for improvement, as it reinforces their sense of capability and control over their work. This preference for constructive punishment further supports the idea that clear communication and feedback can significantly enhance employee motivation, job satisfaction, and performance, fostering a more supportive and productive work environment.

Field observations revealed that teams at Ninety-nine Indo exhibited strong cohesion, effectively dividing tasks and supporting one another without the need for direct supervision. Group recognition, such as collective incentives for achieving team targets, reinforced a shared sense of responsibility and cooperation. This finding underscores the importance of group-based incentives in promoting collaboration, particularly in work environments where tasks are interdependent (Alkandi et al., 2023). Unlike previous generations, Generation Z employees evaluate rewards not only in terms of material value but also in terms of their contribution to personal development and team cohesion.

Therefore, collective rewards are most effective when linked to transparent and equitable performance evaluation systems. This suggests that organizations should design reward structures that integrate both individual recognition and collective achievement, thus mitigating the risks of unhealthy competition or free-riding behaviors. Furthermore, clear performance indicators associated with collective rewards help prevent perceptions of unfairness, thereby strengthening group cohesion (Figueiredo, 2025). These findings align with Mabaso's (2025) research, which highlights that Generation Z places high value on transparency, learning opportunities, and recognition of collective success.

This finding suggests that organizations should shift towards constructive punishment, framing mistakes as learning opportunities rather than mere penalties. Providing clear guidance on how to improve can help employees take corrective actions without feeling demoralized, thereby

enhancing performance and job satisfaction. Managers should prioritize specific, actionable feedback that reinforces employees' sense of capability and control.

Additionally, collective rewards should be integrated into reward systems to promote team cohesion and shared responsibility. Generation Z employees value not only material rewards but also personal development and team unity. Therefore, reward structures should be linked to transparent and fair performance evaluation systems to prevent unhealthy competition and free-riding behaviors. Clear performance indicators tied to collective rewards will strengthen group cohesion and foster a collaborative work environment, aligning with Generation Z's preference for learning, transparency, and collective success.

Negative Effects of Authoritarian Punishment

Conversely, authoritarian punishment, such as verbal reprimands given without clear explanation, was found to have a detrimental effect on employee motivation and confidence. SPG E shared her experience:

“A verbal warning without prior explanation made me anxious and afraid of making mistakes again.”

This statement illustrates how punitive measures that lack transparency and constructive feedback can induce anxiety and reduce employees' willingness to engage proactively in their work. When reprimands are issued without clear context or guidance, employees may become overly cautious, second-guessing their actions and hesitating to take initiative. Such an approach can have long-term detrimental effects, particularly for younger employees, such as those in Generation Z, who place significant value on clear communication and the opportunity to learn from their mistakes. Research indicates that authoritarian punishment, when not accompanied by educational feedback, can lead to increased stress, diminished self-confidence, and a decrease in overall job satisfaction (Krishna & Agrawal, 2025; Homburg et al., 2024). Employees subjected to this type of punishment often become focused on avoiding mistakes rather than striving for improvement or innovation. Consequently, their motivation to contribute meaningfully to the team wanes, and their overall work performance may decline.

This finding aligns with the growing body of literature on modern management practices, which emphasize the importance of providing feedback that is both constructive and empathetic. In contrast, authoritarian approaches are often shown to undermine employee morale, impede personal and professional growth, and reduce job satisfaction particularly among younger generations, who thrive on feedback and developmental support. Therefore, organizations are encouraged to adopt a more balanced approach to corrective actions, one that integrates guidance, support, and clear communication, ensuring that punitive measures contribute to employee development rather than instilling fear or uncertainty.

Field observations revealed that SPG E exhibited hesitancy in her work, frequently delaying decisions and seeking constant validation. This behavior indicated that reprimands, when unclear or lacking constructive feedback, can undermine self-confidence and prompt defensive actions rather than proactive ones. This further underscores the potential negative effects of punitive measures that lack clear communication or corrective guidance. When punishments are not framed as learning opportunities, they can result in heightened anxiety and diminished initiative, especially among younger employees who place a high value on feedback and personal growth (Gligor et al., 2024).

These findings suggest that a shift toward constructive punishment —integrating corrective guidance and feedback would not only enhance employee motivation but also align with contemporary management practices that prioritize employee well-being and continuous improvement. Authoritarian punishment, particularly when devoid of constructive support, exacerbates anxiety, erodes confidence, and negatively affects both the pace and quality of work (Krishna & Agrawal, 2025; Homburg et al., 2024). This is consistent with the observations of Gligor et al. (2024), who found that punitive measures without specific corrective feedback can reduce work quality and increase stress levels among employees.

4. CONCLUSION

This study confirms that Generation Z employees have distinct needs and expectations regarding reward and punishment systems compared to previous generations. Non-financial rewards, particularly those aligned with personal development, prove to be more effective in fostering motivation and loyalty than purely financial incentives. Collective rewards enhance team cohesion, but only when based on transparent and consistent performance criteria. In contrast, educational punishment, supported by constructive feedback, acts as a tool for learning, while authoritarian punishments tend to cause negative psychological effects and increase turnover risk. Theoretical implications include a contribution to the reinforcement theory, suggesting that intrinsic rewards and constructive feedback can more effectively reinforce desired behaviors in Generation Z employees. This challenges traditional reinforcement models that emphasize external rewards like financial incentives. Additionally, this study adds to the literature on Human Resource Management (HRM) across generations, offering insights into how reward and punishment systems should be tailored to meet the preferences of different generational cohorts. Practical implications suggest a managerial paradigm shift within the retail sector toward more humanistic and adaptive reward and punishment systems. Companies should integrate financial incentives with personal recognition and competency development, while positioning punishment as a learning tool to foster continuous improvement. This approach can help reduce turnover, improve employee engagement, and strengthen loyalty among Generation Z workers. Suggestions for future research include comparing reward and punishment systems across different sectors, such as technology or healthcare, to identify industry-specific differences. Additionally, employing a quantitative approach could help generalize the findings to a broader workforce, enabling better decision-making for HRM strategies in the context of diverse generational groups.

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