

A critical review of research on the work-related attitudes of Generation Z in China

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To date, comparatively little empirical research has been done on Generation Z globally, and the studies that do exist, while informative, have arrived at different, often loosely tied, conclusions. Seeing as how Generation Z is in the process of joining the professional workforce, it is important for decision makers to understand this generation's value differences and cultural orientation in order to mitigate intergenerational conflicts and ensure a productive workforce going forward. China, meanwhile, is a rising superpower, and its Generation Z will have a significant impact globally. With the generational mix at work changing to accommodate this new generation, this paper presents a critique of current empirical research on this topic in a cross-cultural context and offers recommendations regarding future research directions as these relate to generational shift in China and other non-Western contexts. It is only by better understanding Generation Z that organizations can develop strategies and policies that will ensure a productive, profitable and collaborative environment in the future, one that better takes into account this newest generation's needs and outlook.

Keywords: *generational shift, Generation Z, cultural orientation, value differences, research methods, China, intergenerational interaction*

Introduction

Generational change at the workplace is in a steady but constant state of flux as older employees retire, only to be replaced by younger ones. The result is that lessons learnt by analyzing the workplace experiences and mentality of older gen-

erations may not necessarily accurately inform the approaches corporations need to take with newer generational cohorts. The global workplace is poised to undergo notable changes from its present generational makeup to one where older generations continue to retire *en masse*, paving the way for the participation of Generation Z,

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this century's youngest generation. It is therefore not only important to anticipate these upcoming demographic shifts, but it is also essential to understand how dynamic these changes will be, the effects they will have on workplace interactions between different generations, and how work will be organized in the future. Studies, for instance, suggest that Generation Z-ers have a different approach to their work environment in contrast to older generations and even tend to think differently due to their having interacted with technology, e.g. touchscreens, smartphones and tablets, and digital information, from a very young age [36]. Studies have also shown that Generation Z-ers differ from all other generations in how they approach corporate and personal interaction: they exhibit a strong preference for socially responsible companies, have a penchant for volunteerism, are very individualistic and adaptable, and use technology much more frequently than other generational cohorts [4; 25; 30]. These differences mean that the approaches that have been used to accommodate and harness the particular characteristics and mentality of Millennials, i.e. the generation that immediately precedes Generation Z, likely need to be updated to account for the growing influence of Generation Z-ers on labor dynamics and consumer trends. Studies on Millennials in the workplace have shown, for example, that managers from older generations often complain that they find it difficult to understand Millennials and, as a result, managing them becomes problematic [33]. This lack of understanding on the part of older generations vis-a-vis Millennials in the workforce is now on the verge of transforming into a new reality, one where an increasing number of Generation Z-ers are graduating from schools and universities and are already entering, or will soon

enter, the workforce. Generation Z, much like Millennials, requires study for practical and academic reasons, given that its arrival on the work scene may yet again alter power dynamics, the nature of workplace interactions, as well as lead to conflict, reduced loyalty to the organization and low productivity [22; 24], if their distinct characteristics are not identified and taken into account [6].

There have been a number of studies recently that have explored Generation Z, its values and orientation, its approach to the organization of work and labor, and its effect on intergenerational workplace interactions [11; 21; 23]. These studies indicate a growing interest in studying Generation Z's effects on society, although research on Generation Z in China remains somewhat in its infancy. At the same time, applying the conclusions reached in non-Chinese studies to the situation in China is problematic since the population dynamics in the country differ significantly from those found elsewhere, not only in terms of culture and traditions, but also because of history. Due to these differences, and taking into account China's rapid economic developmental and social transformations, as well as its rising global influence, the need to study China's Generation Z-ers becomes increasingly more important for a number of economic, political and socio-cultural reasons.

This study provides a critical review of recent empirical studies on China's Generation Z-er that have explored their work-related value orientations, behavior and expectations. This study also offers recommendations with respect to potential avenues for conducting further generational research in this regard. In reviewing the current state of research on Generation Z in China as this concerns the workplace, this

study provides researchers, policymakers and corporations with insights into a group that will likely have a significant impact on the economies of countless countries, as well as on the marketing and hiring strategies of global corporations that not only employ and interact with Generation Z-ers, but also provide them with services and goods.

Generations: Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

Before one can discuss the unique characteristics of Generation Z, it is important to seek more clarity regarding the concept of generations and what it means. According to [20], the term ‘generation’ refers to an aggregate of people differentiated from others by their age. Different generations, as a result, can have different values due to different life courses and historical settings [29]. According to [39], a ‘generation’ represents a group of people that have certain shared traits due to a shared historical background. They feel that age is not a standard that divides generations; instead, it serves as an indicator that makes it possible to judge members of a specific generational cohort. The concept of generations is also very closely tied to the idea of value differences, which can be studied using a life-course approach or a generation approach. The life-course approach interprets attitudes and values based on the human life cycle, with its physiological and cognitive changes, whereas the generation approach sees common historical periods as conferring unique values [3; 2]. Both these approaches, when taken together, are useful when trying to study changes in generational values, as well as when assessing the influence of both biological and social factors. Another theo-

retical framework through which one can approach the concept of generations is the individualism-collectivism distinction as it concerns cultural differences [34]. These two cultural orientations, i.e. individualism and collectivism, can be further divided into either vertical or horizontal orientations. Horizontal collectivism signifies belonging to a collective where everyone is considered equal, while vertical collectivism, which also signifies belonging to a collective, assumes that individuals in the collective may recognize differences in status, i.e. hierarchy, and consider these as being acceptable. Vertical individualism signifies not only accepting one’s individuality, but also the fact that inequality exists, whereas horizontal individualism stresses individuality and equality [34]. In the Chinese context, for example, vertical collectivism is shown to be the preferred cultural orientation among older generations, with younger generations gravitating more towards vertical individualism [19].

Generational Cohorts and the State of Current Research

The conceptualization of generations as representing different historical periods and life courses has led to the formation of culture-specific age and generational cohorts and the use of different analytical methods to study generational differences (for an insightful review of methods, see [8]). It is also worth noting while not everyone is convinced that generational differences are an actual phenomenon, notably at the workplace [9], some studies do support the existence of generational differences [5]. A meta-analysis of research on generational differences in work-related attitudes focusing on organizational commitment, job sat-

isfaction and intent to turnover by [7], for instance, found that older generations were more satisfied with their jobs and less likely to leave, although they noted that these differences were small to moderate.

Authors that focus on generational differences in the United States, for example, have used socio-historical criteria for delineating generational cohorts. In the American context, there is the Silent Generation (born between 1928 and 1945), which is known for their focus on the community and family, as well as its stoicism and loyalty to the organization. Members of this group have largely left the workforce, although small numbers might still remain for reasons of finances or simply because retirement might not suit them [4]. Baby Boomers (born between 1944 and 1964), meanwhile, are both a Western and Chinese phenomenon, with very slight variations in terms of age. In [10], the Chinese Baby Boomer generation is referred to as the Consolidation generation, a reference to the socio-economic and political developments of the period in which they grew up. In terms of differences, Baby Boomers in the US are described as having a strong work ethic, being socially liberal and competitive, and exhibiting vertical individualistic, whereas their counterparts in China have been shown to be horizontal collectivists, idealistic and conservative, although they do appear to be similarly open to change [10]. Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), the American context, has experienced both periods of instability and prosperity; one consequence of this experience is that they tend to be self-reliant, entrepreneurial and individualistic, with less loyalty to the workplace than older generations due to the volatility of the times in which they grew up [16]. In the Chinese context, Genera-

tion X (sometimes referred to as the Social Reform generation) has been found to be less conservative and more open to change than previous generations [10]. Generation Y (born between 1980 and 1995), often referred to as Millennials, are digital natives, in that they grew up in an age of fast-evolving technology and instantly accessible information [28]. Research in the Russian context has shown them to be more competitive and assertive in comparison with Generation Y [24]. In the Chinese context, where several studies have been done on them [17; 41; 40], Millennials are perceived as being highly technologically literate, educated, individualistic, open-minded, and often difficult to manage, much like their counterparts in other countries. They are also more focused on their personal careers than on loyalty to their workplace, which might lead to retention and recruitment-related issues for the companies that hire them [40].

Finally, there is Generation Z. This generation consists of those individuals who were born after 1995. They are considered even more technologically proficient than Generation Y-ers [27; 42]. Research on Generation Z-ers, sometimes labelled Centennials and iGen, in Western contexts has increased significantly, given their future impact on local and global labor dynamics, with several recent studies exploring this generation's socio-psychological makeup [30; 36]. Research suggests Generation Z-ers are more technologically proficient than Millennials [30], and prefer texting to verbal communication [1]. Generation Z may also not be as tolerant of rigid hierarchic structures when seeking out senior executives [35], appear to prefer teamwork if it is virtual in format [1], and are strongly individualistic, which means that it is more appropriate to use individu-

al assessments when evaluating their work [35]. Moreover, for most Generation Z-ers, having been raised by Generation X and Y parents, diversity at the workplace is not only expected, but its absence would likely attract concern or confusion. Nevertheless, while they might expect diversity, they have difficulties forming genuine relationships with their colleagues at work, instead preferring superficial interactions that might inhibit productive intergenerational collaboration [1]. They are more fiscally conservative than previous generations, as well as more socially liberal, which likely influences their work ethic, leading to an expectation of a multicultural work environment where creative and open-minded approaches are encouraged. Their fiscally conservative nature suggests, however, that they might be more risk-averse and less entrepreneurial, as alluded to by [15]. At the same time, constant advancements in communication technology have led to technology becoming fully integrated into the lives of Generation Z-ers; their approach to communication, consequently, differs significantly from previous generations: they are more technologically literate, yet less articulate and have difficulty thinking on their feet [1; 4; 15]. The literature appears to advocate that companies may have to expand their communication efforts beyond traditional meetings and e-mail formats to more technologically integrated forms of training, reporting, and creative production. With Generation Z poised to enter (or already entering) the workforce, it is vital for companies to find ways to efficiently take into account the differences that exist between Generation Z-ers and older generations, and use their understanding of these differences to accommodate the shifts in outlook and expectations that have occurred [19].

Objectives of the Study

The literature review turned up a handful of studies on generational differences in work-related contexts as these concern Generation Z in China (these studies are discussed in detail below). As such, the objective of the study is to analyze this recent research to see if there is an emergent understanding of Generation Z's work-related attitudes in the Chinese context, what analytical methods the studies' authors use in this respect, and what conclusions they draw in terms of Generation Z's impact on intergenerational dynamics at work.

Generation Z in China: A Look at Current Research

Current studies on China generally tend to define Generation Z as having been shaped by the forces of rapid technological innovation and globalization, which has resulted in significant changes to the cultural orientation of Generation Z-ers in comparison to older generations [18; 19; 26; 31; 38]. Chinese Generation Z-ers have been shown to be more confident, more secularly oriented, self-promoting and professionally individualistic than any other generation that preceded them [19; 32; 38], which indicates that they have much in common with their counterparts from the United States and Russia. However, as pointed out by [14], Chinese Generation Z-ers significantly differ from Generation Z-ers in other countries in terms of their materialistic values (see also [13]), which are comparatively higher.

At the same time, there are some notable issues with the current crop of studies on Generation Z in China as this concerns work-related themes. To begin with, all the studies found during the literature review [12; 19; 32;

37; 43] have solely relied on the use of questionnaires to the exclusion of other data collection methods, for example, interviews. The result is that studies have mostly focused on participants' self-reported attitudes regarding job satisfaction and commitment, the latter being a recurring focus of several studies. This narrow research focus is likely a result of the quantitative instruments employed since there is an almost complete lack of qualitative data available on Chinese Generation Z-ers. A related issue is that many of these questionnaires have a small number of items; these items were actually developed for employees from Western contexts, which means that they might not be able to capture the generational traits possessed by generational cohorts in the Chinese context [12]. Another issue is that generations are not often clearly defined in the studies. [19] and [12], for example, conceptualize generation cohorts based on decades, e.g. post/pre-1990s and post/pre-1980s, while [37] proceed based on historical periods. The result is that, oftentimes, several generations are lumped together, with this lack of a standard approach lying in sharp contrast to Western approaches, where a unified understanding aids in comparing and contrasting different studies and serves as a stable point of reference.

There are also study-specific issues. [32], for example, indicate that Generation Z (referred to as the Societal Transition generation in their study) in China exhibits what could be described as vertical individualism, similar to what has been found in non-Chinese studies on Generation Z [1]. They attribute these generational changes to China's shift to a post-socialist society, which they claim has weakened communism ideals in the country; their reasoning for this, however, is not entirely convincing. For instance, their study specifically targeted Shanghai, which likely does not accurately

reflect generational attitudes found in other regions of China. Secondly, their methodology does not account for several factors, e.g. exposure to foreign cultures, level of acculturation, profession of respondents, all of which might have had a direct bearing on the results of the study. Several survey items are also quite ambiguously worded, leaving them open to a variety of interpretations.

[19] similarly report a shift to individualism among Chinese Generation Z-ers from the vertical collectivism of older generations, although they express some observations. They note that although they "did find strong evidence for more prevalent vertical individualism in the younger generation (vs. older generations) of Chinese employees... the results regarding a decreased level of vertical collectivism in this age group (vs. older generations) remain inconclusive" [19, p. 537]. They, furthermore, confirm that China remains a collectivist, albeit vertically oriented, culture, although it is possible that, given the greater individualism exhibited by Generation Z-ers, its collectivist nature may soon change.

Similarly inconclusive results can be found in [10] and [37]. [37], for example, report that generational differences were not significantly predictive of workplace attitudes, although younger generations sought more control over their career paths; they write that researchers should instead focus on Chinese culture, which is a more accurate indicator in this respect, especially with respect to work culture. Their contention finds some support in [43], where the Chinese participants are seen to be influenced by Confucianism, desiring, as a result, continuous learning, while also seeking advancement in terms of work. Here, too, cultural differences appear more significant than generational characteristics, al-

though Chinese participants are described as being more self-centered, individualistic, social and career-focused than previous generations. There is also the implication that culture and traditions might actually be hindering generational differences from occurring in the Chinese context, although this is never explicitly stated.

Taken together, these studies arrive at somewhat divergent conclusions regarding Chinese Generation Z-ers. It seems that there is some movement towards greater individualism on the part of Generation Z-ers, yet cultural characteristics continue to remain entrenched in their psyche. They appear to strongly desire career advancement, sociable colleagues and job satisfaction, while also being influenced by Confucian ideals that stress learning. The move towards individualism suggests that there is likely to be some conflict between older generations and Generation Z since they appear to deviate from the traditionally collectivist orientation of China, although some studies suggest that culture has a mitigating effect on intergenerational differences [37].

Implications for Future Research

This paper reviewed existing studies on work-related attitudes and implications as these relate to China's Generation Z, and sought to gather, in one place, preliminary conclusions about the specific characteris-

tics that define this generation. With several generational cohorts now participating in the labor force, it is important that all generations remain fully engaged and understood, and while current studies do show that Generation Z is likely more individualistic than older generations, there still appear to be some issues with research design and methodology. First of all, there is a need for more qualitative research on Generation Z in the Chinese context. None of the studies to date has used interviews, corpus linguistic approaches, video materials or any other methods to gather data on what differentiates Generation Z-ers from other generational cohorts. This is a significant gap that should be addressed. Secondly, as suggested by the authors of some of the studies covered here, culture is an important variable and should be taken into account. One way to achieve this is by designing data collection instruments that incorporate (or at least account for) those aspects of Chinese culture that have influenced social and workplace interactions. Using questionnaires that were developed for Western contexts and applying them directly to the Chinese setting without any modifications will likely lead to issues with the accuracy of data that is thus gathered. Finally, there is a need to standardize how generations are categorized in the Chinese context. This is important because it allows for the cross-comparison of findings and aids in conducting additional research when researchers have a stable point of reference.

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Критический обзор исследований отношения к работе поколения Z в Китае

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В настоящее время во всем мире проведено сравнительно мало эмпирических исследований, посвященных поколению Z, а имеющиеся исследования, хотя и информативны, приводят к различным, часто противоречивым заключениям. Между тем уже сейчас поколение Z вступает в трудоспособный возраст, и важно понимать специфику его ценностей и культурную ориентацию для того, чтобы смягчить конфликты между поколениями на рабочих местах и обеспечить эффективную деятельность предприятия или организации. Китай является растущей сверхдержавой, и влияние поколения Z этой страны будет чувствоваться на глобальном уровне, что обуславливает значимость его изучения. В статье проведен критический анализ текущих эмпирических исследований поколения Z в кросс-культурном контексте и предложены новые направления исследований по проблеме смены поколений в Китае и других странах вне Запада. Только благодаря лучшему пониманию поколения Z организации смогут разрабатывать стратегию и политику с учетом потребностей и перспектив этого нового поколения, что позволит обеспечить продуктивную, прибыльную среду и межпоколенческое сотрудничество в будущем.

Ключевые слова: смена поколений, поколение Z, культурная ориентация, ценностные различия, методы исследования, Китай, взаимодействие поколений.

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