Learning to Stay or Choosing to Leave: Workplace Environment and Retention of Gen Z Employees in Indian Five-Star Hotels

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the workplace environment and retention challenges faced by Gen Z employees in India's hospitality sector. It is based on pilot purposive interviews with early-career professionals working in select five-star hotels. The pilot exploratory study examines factors like satisfaction, dissatisfaction, motivation, leadership, work-life balance and career development within hotel settings. The findings show some clear contrasts. Employees appreciate opportunities for passion-driven learning, skill development and recognition. However, they also face structural barriers such as long working hours, low salaries, limited flexibility and inconsistent managerial support. The stories from participants illustrate the conflict between their career aspirations and the demanding, sometimes exploitative, realities of the industry, with existing cultural connotations also playing a part. Gen Z employees demonstrate resilience, creativity and optimism about their career growth. Still, they report high physical and mental pressure, weak feedback systems and gender bias. These factors all contribute to a decreased long-term commitment to the sector. The pilot also highlights generational differences: unlike older staff who accept long hours as normalized routines in the Indian mid and high sector market, younger-employees(age-defined), value well-being, fairness and personal growth, making them more likely to leave if their expectations are not met. Methodologically, this study uses a qualitative, exploratory design through semi-structured interviews framed by variables related to the workplace environment. Acknowledging the limitations of the sample size, the pilot reveals key themes for an extensive extended project. These include the need for supportive leadership, clear reward systems, stronger diversity practices and policies that match Gen Z's expectations of purpose and work-life balance in particular cultural and geographic settings. The study provides research that improving employee retention requires rethinking management practices to fit generational values while maintaining service excellence in India's hospitality sector.

Keywords: Gen Z employees; Hospitality sector India; Workplace environment; Employee retention; Work-life balance; Leadership and management style; Career growth and skill development; Pilot study; Five-star hotels

. Introduction

The Indian hospitality industry has become one of the fastest-growing parts of the economy, playing a significant role in job creation and foreign earnings (Chand & Katou, 2007; Bagri, Babu, & Kukreti, 2010). Five-star hotels represent established high-standards of service and global competitiveness (Köseoglu et al., 2021). However, behind their polished image, there is a complicated labor structure full of opportunities and stress. The sector has traditionally relied on young workers, often in their early twenties, who serve on the front lines of service delivery (Baum, 2015; Deery & Jago, 2015). With many members of Generation Z (herein, taken as 21–28-year-old working population, not the usual 13-28 categorization of Gen Z), joining the workforce, the mix of hotel employees is evolving. This new group is digitally savvy, upwardly ambitious and focused on personal values

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(Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2018; Strauss & Howe, 1991). They have specific expectations for their jobs, including recognition, work-life balance, purpose and chances for career growth (Deery & Jago, 2015; Ghani et al., 2022). This creates a fundamental clash between the routines of hospitality management and the hopes of this new workforce. Similar mismatches between institutional expectations and employee aspirations have been observed in hospitality training and early career stages, where expectation–reality gaps significantly influence long-term sectoral commitment (Lingadkar & Sankaranarayanan, 2023; Ngoepe & Wakelin-Theron, 2023).

The rapid growth of branded hotels in both major and smaller cities in India has increased the demand for dependable, skilled staff (Prasad & Srivastava, 2024; Gupta & Bhatia, 2023). At the same time, the industry is facing troubling turnover rates. Reports from industry groups have repeatedly pointed out that retaining workers poses a serious risk to service quality and brand reputation. Generation Z employees are more likely than older groups (30 plus), to leave when their workplace practices clash with their expectations, especially regarding work-life balance, fair pay and opportunities for development. Recent hospitality-focused studies further reinforce that retention challenges are closely tied to organisational practices, including fairness, autonomy and HR responsiveness, particularly in emerging economies (Abou-Shouk et al., 2023; Adeyefa et al., 2023).While turnover has long been seen as a challenge in hospitality management, looking at it through a generational lens adds new urgency (Basnyat & Lao, 2020; Santhanam et al., 2017).

Unlike previous generations, who often accepted long hours(upwards of 8 hour shifts) and strict supervision for job security, Generation Z shows less tolerance for such restrictive and sometimes objectively-grey area conditions(non-defined working conditions in terms of hours, expectations, work fulfilment quotas), and is more sensitive to corporate culture(Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Deloitte, 2020) This tension frames the main issue explored in this study. Even with a strong demand for workers, Generation Z employees have a weak connection to hotel organizations. Workplaces with long hours, few days off, low starting-salaries and poor feedback-systems, lead to ongoing dissatisfaction, expressed in terms of attrition. This problem can be worsened by management styles that range from overly controlling to disconnected, leaving employees unsure of how to grow within the company i.e. paths to advancement in areas of interest (Jaffrelot & Kalyankar, 2019; Jain & Kumar, 2025; UNFPA, 2018). Consequently, hotels face the contradiction of many aspiring students entering hospitality programs while struggling to find dedicated staff willing to build careers in the industry. Solving this issue requires a better understanding of the work environment factors that influence any employees, and within this research, specifically Generation Z's decision to stay (Herzberg, 1966; Russell Hochschild, 2012).

This paper uses a doctoral pilot study to examine these dynamics within the Indian Hotel industry. It features semi-structured interviews with select Generation Z employees from five-star hotels spread pan-India, focusing on how their work environments affect their satisfaction, dissatisfaction and motivations to stay or leave. The study utilizes works from Kvale, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006 for this. The interviews uncover the real experiences of hotel employment: the excitement of reaching professional milestones and the pride in creative tasks, along with the frustration of unequal workloads, low pay and a lack of employee input. These stories, contextualized with works such as Ghani et al., (2022) and Deery & Jago (2015), provides essential insights on how to rethink retention strategies that balance company needs with the values of this new generation. The main research questions of this paper are simple but underexplored in Indian hospitality studies: (a) How do Generation Z employees feel about their work environment in five-star hotels? and (b) What factors influence their decision to stay or leave?

This pilot aims to offer exploratory insights that can guide further academic research and management practices, using qualitative methods that prioritize personal experiences over numerical data. By highlighting employee perspectives, the paper enhances our understanding of workforce management in a sector often driven by standardized service and strict controls.

Three objectives guide the enquiry: to identify satisfaction and dissatisfaction factors including career growth, leadership, recognition and diversity; to surface emerging themes around retention and turnover with preliminary HR recommendations; and to connect findings to wider generational shifts in workplace values (Herzberg, 1966; Rousseau, 1995; Seemiller & Grace, 2018). By foregrounding Gen Z employee narratives, the paper addresses a notable gap in Indian hospitality research, where labour studies rarely account for generational differences (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Basnyat & Lao, 2020; Singh, 2024; Kareem, Hussain, & Sujood, 2025).

As a pilot, it also methodologically contributes by testing interview questions, refining coding categories and bringing forth themes for broader research efforts Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002; Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2014). From a management perspective, the findings are very relevant. Retaining employees cannot rely solely on traditional methods like salary increases, promotions, or strict rules. Generation Z employees expect more inclusive management styles, open communication and recognition beyond superficial gestures. They appreciate wellness initiatives, sustainable practices and chances to be creative. Emerging research on green HRM and sustainability-oriented leadership further indicates that environmentally aligned organisational practices can enhance employee commitment and retention in hospitality settings (Adeyefa

et al., 2023; Ayad et al., 2023). This shift requires a move from compliance-focused HR systems to engagement-driven strategies for hotel managers. The findings relate to wider discussions in organizational behaviour and strategic HRM, where employee experiences are increasingly seen as key to a company's competitiveness.

In framing the paper, it is also necessary to acknowledge the methodological modesty of a pilot. With only ten participants, the analysis is not statistically representative. Yet, its value lies in capturing authentic voices and revealing patterns that can be evaluated in subsequent stages of research. In qualitative management studies, pilots are crucial for sharpening conceptual tools, building rapport with respondents and uncovering blind spots in research design (Patton, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001). This paper, therefore, positions itself not as an endpoint but as a launching pad for a more comprehensive doctoral project.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews literature and presents the conceptual framework; Section 3 outlines methodology; Section 4 presents thematic findings; and Section 5 synthesises implications and future directions.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The hospitality industry has long been recognised as one of the most labour-intensive service sectors, marked by a dependence on young, mobile and flexible workers who constitute the frontline of guest interaction (Baum, 2015; Deery & Jago, 2015). With the entry of Generation Z into this labour market, new dynamics are emerging that call for renewed theoretical and empirical scrutiny (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2018).

Gen Z employees, usually defined as those born between 1995 and 2010, are the first group fully raised in a digital world. They bring expectations of purpose, balance and recognition to workplaces that have often focused on hierarchy, discipline and long hours (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Deloitte, 2020). The literature review below outlines three areas of theory and research: generational characteristics, organizational behavior models and insights specific to hospitality. It then ties these strands together in a framework that matches the goals of this study. Generational theory is often used to explain differences in workplace behavior, motivation and career goals. Strauss and Howe's (1991) generational cohort theory states that historical and social contexts shape shared values and attitudes. For Gen Z, these contexts involve digital connectivity, economic uncertainty and increased awareness of mental health and sustainability issues.

Research consistently shows Gen Z values flexibility, inclusivity and culture-fit over hierarchy, with psychosocial work environments directly shaping satisfaction and performance - dynamics significant in India where over 65 per cent of the population is under 35 (Seemiller & Grace, 2018; Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Korir, 2023; Jaffrelot & Kalyankar, 2019; UNFPA, 2018; Jain & Kumar, 2025). Herzberg's (1966) two-factor theory remains a key anchor, distinguishing hygiene factors, salary, hours, job security, from motivators like recognition and growth; while both remain weak in Indian hospitality (Chand & Katou, 2007; Bagri et al., 2010; Prasad & Srivastava, 2024), Gen Z's heightened sensitivity to motivators and implicit expectations of fairness further complicate retention (Rousseau, 1995; Conway & Briner, 2009).

Breaches of this contract, such as when promised opportunities do not materialise or when excessive hours disrupt work-life balance, have been linked to turnover intentions across service industries (Santhanam et al., 2017; Basnyat & Lao, 2020; Conway & Briner, 2009). Recent hospitality studies similarly highlight that organisational justice, autonomy and HR practices play a mediating role in retention, particularly through their impact on perceived fairness and employee engagement (Abou-Shouk et al., 2023). For Gen Z, whose career paths are generally shorter and whose switching costs are seen as lower, breaches in the psychological contract may lead to quicker exits. Research specific to hospitality offers a clearer view of these issues. Many studies have looked at work intensification, where operational demands exceed staffing levels. This situation results in excessive workloads and burnout (Deery & Jago, 2015; Baum, 2015). Work–life imbalance has also been shown to significantly affect psychological health among hotel employees, reinforcing the role of workload and scheduling structures in shaping retention outcomes (Dayour & Adongo, 2023). Emotional labour, a term made popular by Hochschild (2012) Karatepe & Aleshinloye, 2009; Karatepe, 2010, is especially relevant in hospitality. Employees must manage their emotions to meet service standards, often at a personal cost. Research shows that younger employees may face emotional exhaustion more intensely because they have fewer coping strategies and weaker ties to their organizations (Karatepe & Aleshinloye, 2009).

The gap between high guest expectations and limited managerial support increases stress and makes it harder to keep employees. In India, studies point to ongoing issues like long working hours, low pay and poor HR systems as major concerns affecting workforce stability (Chand & Katou, 2007; Bagri et al., 2010; Gupta & Bhatia, 2023). Despite these challenges, hotels depend on young workers to provide the high-qualified service that boosts their competitiveness. Globally, Gen Z is more likely to seek purpose-driven employment and less willing to remain with organisations that deprioritise diversity or sustainability (Deloitte, 2020; Francis & Hoefel, 2018), though the flexible scheduling, recognition programmes and digital HR platforms that have emerged in response in US and European hospitality remain largely absent in India (Prasad & Srivastava, 2024; Singh, 2024).

structures and face resource shortages (Prasad & Srivastava, 2024; Gupta & Bhatia, 2023; Singh, 2024). This leads to a mismatch between global trends in employee expectations and the realities in Indian workplaces.

In India, attrition in hotels can reach 35–40 per cent annually, with entry-level staff most at risk, driven by long hours, minimal days off, low starting salaries and weak recognition systems (Kandasamy & Ancheri, 2009; Chand & Katou, 2007; Gupta & Bhatia, 2023).

Gendered challenges are also visible, with women employees often experiencing additional barriers related to safety, cultural norms and unequal workloads[1] (Morgan & Pritchard, 2019; Chaudhary & Gupta, 2010; Kareem et al., 2025; Pritchard, 2018). Despite widespread acknowledgement of these issues, empirical research rarely isolates the experiences of Gen Z employees (Ghani et al., 2022). Instead, most studies aggregate data across cohorts, obscuring generational differences in expectations and responses. This gap underlines the importance of exploratory studies focusing specifically on Gen Z employees in Indian five-star hotels.

Building on these insights, this paper develops a conceptual framework that links workplace environment variables to retention outcomes for Gen Z employees. The framework is derived from the literature and the unstructured interview guide used in the pilot study. At the core are variables such as satisfaction and dissatisfaction drivers, motivation, leadership and management style, career growth, recognition, feedback, flexibility, diversity and conflict management (Herzberg, 1966; Rousseau, 1995; Deery & Jago, 2015).

These factors connect with retention challenges like workload stress, low salaries, gender bias, poor work-life balance and limited support for innovation. By examining these variables through a generational lens, the framework highlights how Gen Z's views on purpose, balance and recognition shape their experience in organizations. The framework also emphasizes the differences and similarities across various types of organizations. For example, while large five-star properties may focus on hierarchy and standard service routines, boutique or eco-resorts may foster more inclusive and wellness-focused cultures (Köseoglu et al., 2021; Bagri et al., 2010). However, in both environments, Gen Z employees share a common demand for meaningful recognition, fairness and opportunities for growth (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2018). This duality shows that while workplace factors are generally relevant, their expression can differ based on the organization's size, culture and resources.

The literature review demonstrates that the intersection of generational theory, organisational behaviour and hospitality-specific scholarship provides a robust basis for analysing Gen Z workplace experiences. A clear research gap remains; little qualitative, empirical work has been conducted in the Indian hospitality sector to capture the lived realities of Gen Z employees (Basnyat & Lao, 2020; Ghani et al., 2022; Singh, 2024). The present study addresses this gap by deploying a pilot design that foregrounds employee narratives, thereby generating academically relevant and managerially actionable insights.

3. Methodology

Understanding how Generation Z employees experience the workplace environment in five-star hotels requires an approach that privileges voice, depth and reflexivity over numerical generalisation. This study was designed as an exploratory qualitative pilot, recognising that pilot inquiries are vital in refining instruments, uncovering emergent categories and grounding larger research designs (Yin, 2018; Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Patton, 2015). The methodology integrates established qualitative management research practices with context-specific adaptations to the Indian hospitality sector.

Research Design, Sampling and Participants

The study adopts an exploratory case-informed design situated within the interpretivist paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Unlike positivist approaches that assume stable variables and quantifiable relationships, interpretivism emphasises meanings constructed through interaction and discourse (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This orientation is particularly appropriate given the aim of examining how Gen Z employees make sense of their work environment, what drives their satisfaction or dissatisfaction and how these interpretations inform retention decisions. A pilot study was deliberately chosen, consistent with methodological recommendations that early qualitative inquiry enables iterative adjustment before launching large-scale data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2014 Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002).

The research questions-focused on workplace experience, motivation and retention-align with exploratory designs requiring flexibility to capture phenomena not yet systematically studied in Indian hospitality contexts. By privileging the depth of engagement with a small sample, the study generates thick description and nuanced insights (Geertz, 1973).

The pilot engaged ten participants, each between the ages of 23 and 26, employed in five-star hotels within the National Capital Region of India. The selection was purposive, focusing on employees who fit the generational definition of Gen Z and had at least two years of experience in the sector for depth of involvement (Patton, 2015). Such criteria ensured that participants could speak with credibility about entry-level challenges and emerging career pathways. The cases reflected variation in roles and organisational contexts. One participant worked in a sales and marketing function in a resort-style property, another in front-office operations in a

[1] Government of India, *National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001* (New Delhi: Department of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Human Resource Development), accessed September 24, 2025,

metropolitan hotel and a third in food and beverage services. This heterogeneity allowed the study to capture diversity across departments and organisational forms, while still being manageable within the scope of a pilot (Patton, 2015; Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). Although the sample size remains limited, qualitative methodology values saturation of themes over breadth of coverage and pilots prioritise testing conceptual categories rather than establishing population-level estimates. (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2014)

Unstructured interviews of 60–75 minutes, guided by thematic prompts covering satisfaction and dissatisfaction drivers, leadership, career growth, recognition, workload, flexibility, diversity and conflict management, were conducted conversationally to allow fluid narration and capture emerging Gen Z-specific concerns - such as digital mediation and sustainability - often overlooked in traditional HR research (Kvale, 2009; Patton, 2015), with all sessions audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and conducted under informed consent with anonymity assured (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001; Miles et al., 2014).

Data Analysis

The analysis used a thematic coding approach in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. Transcripts were read several times to build familiarity, followed by initial coding of significant segments. Codes were both deductive, based on workplace environment variables identified in the literature and inductive, arising from participant accounts (Miles et al., 2014). For example, deductive codes included 'career growth,' 'feedback,' and 'work-life balance.' Inductive codes included 'eco-friendly values' and 'peer-driven motivation.'

Codes were then collated into candidate themes: satisfaction drivers, dissatisfaction drivers and leadership impacts. Cross-case comparison was undertaken to identify patterns of convergence and divergence. This involved mapping whether themes appeared across all participants, were unique to specific organisational contexts, or were articulated differently depending on departmental roles. Comparative analysis is particularly useful in small-sample qualitative studies because it highlights the robustness of themes across varied contexts (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The analytic strategy also acknowledged the pilot function of the study. By evaluating how well the interview prompts elicited relevant narratives, the analysis served not only to generate findings but also to refine the research instrument (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). For instance, participants' emphasis on organisational sustainability practices suggested more explicit probing on environmental values in subsequent data collection. Similarly, the frequency with which participants linked work stress to commuting distances indicated an overlooked variable that future instruments should incorporate.

Credibility was ensured through verbatim transcription and iterative coding; transferability through thick description of participant contexts; dependability through systematic coding procedures; and confirmability through reflexive memos recording researcher assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Orb et al., 2001). As a pilot, the study prioritises thematic feasibility and conceptual refinement over population-level claims (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was maintained throughout the study. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured confidentiality and granted the right to withdraw at any stage. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts to protect identities and audio files were stored securely with restricted access. Given the hierarchical structures in hotels, care was taken to ensure that participation did not affect respondents' employment status or relationships with supervisors. Ethical reflexivity was particularly important given the sensitivity of discussing dissatisfaction, turnover and managerial shortcomings in a tightly controlled service environment (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002).

Limitations

The methodological choices necessarily entailed limitations. First, the small sample means that findings cannot be generalised to all Gen Z employees in Indian hospitality (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Miles et al., 2014). Second, reliance on self-reported narratives introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, especially given cultural norms of respect toward authority (Patton, 2015). Third, as a pilot, the study emphasises breadth of themes rather than depth of any single construct (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). These limitations are acknowledged, yet they do not diminish the study's contribution as a preliminary exploration. On the contrary, they underline the importance of subsequent larger-scale studies that can triangulate qualitative insights with survey-based or longitudinal data.

Pilot Function and Future Directions

As a pilot, the study performed several critical functions. It demonstrated that Gen Z employees are willing to articulate nuanced perspectives on satisfaction, dissatisfaction and retention when given a supportive conversational space. It highlighted the salience of variables such as eco-friendly organisational practices and commuting-related stress, which are not commonly addressed in hospitality retention literature. It confirmed the relevance of generational theory and organisational behaviour models in framing experiences, while indicating that hospitality-specific issues-such as emotional labour and seasonal fluctuations-remain central. (Ghani et al., 2022; Deery & Jago, 2015)

Future research should build on this pilot through larger multi-hotel samples, mixed-methods designs, longitudinal tracking of Gen Z career trajectories, cross-generational comparisons and cross-national studies situating Indian findings within global hospitality trends, as summarised in Table 7

4. Findings and Analysis

The pilot interviews with the select Gen Z employees provide a detailed account of how young workers in five-star hotels view their work environments. The stories show both similarities and differences in satisfaction, dissatisfaction, motivation and retention, revealing how generational expectations mix with hospitality conditions (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2018; Deery & Jago, 2015). The analysis is organized by themes while highlighting the exploratory nature of the pilot.

Satisfaction Drivers

Satisfaction Drivers Gen Z employees expressed satisfaction with chances for creativity, peer recognition and working in luxurious service settings. One respondent stressed the pride of being trusted with high-profile client interactions and how those experiences helped build skills and professional confidence. Another appreciated teamwork, describing colleagues as a support system that eased the stress of long shifts. In a resort-style hotel, satisfaction came from working at an eco-friendly property where management focused on sustainability, wellness and employee well-being. This aligns with findings that sustainability-oriented workplace practices and green leadership contribute positively to employee engagement and organisational attachment in hospitality contexts (Ayad et al., 2023).

These findings align with Herzberg's distinction between intrinsic motivators and extrinsic hygiene factors, underscoring that recognition, autonomy and alignment with organisational values constitute critical motivators for Gen Z (Herzberg, 1966; Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Table 1 synthesises the key satisfaction drivers across cases.

Table 1: Satisfaction Drivers Identified by Gen Z Employees

Satisfaction Variable	Illustrative Account	Source
Creativity and innovation	Pride in developing guest experiences beyond routine tasks	Primary coded evidence (anonymised excerpt)
Peer support and collegiality	'Team members are like a family… they reduce the stress.'	Primary coded evidence (anonymised excerpt)
Eco-friendly culture	Recognition of wellness initiatives and green practices	Primary coded evidence (anonymised excerpt)
Exposure to luxury clientele	Motivation from collaborating with high-end guests and standards	Primary coded evidence (anonymised excerpt)

Notes: Motivators per Herzberg (1966); Gen Z purpose/values per Francis & Hoefel (2018), Deloitte (2020).

Dissatisfaction Drivers

While satisfaction was grounded in intrinsic motivators, dissatisfaction was consistently tied to structural and operational deficits. Long working hours and poorly managed shifts emerged as recurring themes. Such patterns are consistent with broader hospitality evidence linking excessive workloads and poor work–life balance to psychological strain and increased turnover intention (Dayour & Adongo, 2023). One participant described 14 to 16-hour shifts, including break shifts that fragmented personal time and exacerbated fatigue. Salary dissatisfaction was pronounced, particularly compared to educational investment in hospitality schools. Another participant noted that compensation lagged effort and living costs, leading to disillusionment with long-term prospects.

Operational inefficiencies also undermined satisfaction. Instances of inadequate staffing and insufficient resources-such as cutlery shortages during peak service-created stress and embarrassment in front of guests. A third form of dissatisfaction emerged around monotony, with one employee expressing frustration at routine-driven work that limited opportunities for innovation.

The data confirm global findings that hospitality employees often leave due to work intensification and poor work-life balance (Deery & Jago, 2015). However, Gen Z's lower tolerance for structural inequities suggests heightened turnover risk if such issues remain unaddressed. These dissatisfaction drivers are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Dissatisfaction Drivers Identified by Gen Z Employees

Dissatisfaction Variable	Illustrative Account	Source
Long working hours	'Sometimes 14 to 16 hours… with very few offs.'	Primary coded evidence (anonymised excerpt)
Salary, Also, education mismatch	Perception of underpayment given the investment in training	Primary coded evidence (anonymised excerpt)
Resource constraints	'Shortages of cutlery… create stress during service.'	Primary coded evidence (anonymised excerpt)
Monotony and routine	Frustration with repetitive work processes	Primary coded evidence (anonymised excerpt)

Notes: Work intensification per Deery & Jago (2015); Indian HR constraints per Chand & Katou (2007), Bagri et al. (2010

Despite structural challenges, respondents demonstrated commitment to hospitality as a career pathway, motivated by personal growth and organisational alignment. One participant emphasised self-driven learning, noting that promotions were attainable through sustained performance and adaptability. Another highlighted the centrality of peer networks in sustaining motivation, arguing that 'colleagues become a family who keep you going'. In the eco-resort context, organisational values around sustainability and wellness were explicitly cited as motivating factors reinforcing loyalty.

These findings resonate with psychological contract theory, where fulfilling intrinsic expectations such as recognition and alignment with values contributes to retention, even when extrinsic conditions remain suboptimal (Rousseau, 1995; Conway & Briner, 2009). For Gen Z, retention is less about financial incentives and more about purpose, alignment and belonging. Motivation and retention factors are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Motivation and Retention Factors among Gen Z Employees

Motivation Variable	Illustrative Account	Source
Career growth	Promotions are possible with consistent performance	Primary coded evidence (anonymised excerpt)
Peer networks	Supportive colleagues as emotional buffers	Primary coded evidence (anonymised excerpt)
Organizational values	'They care about nature, no crackers, yoga for staff.'	Primary coded evidence (anonymised excerpt)

Notes: Psychological contract per Rousseau (1995), Conway & Briner (2009)

Respondents described the hospitality industry as inherently stressful, citing the demands of service delivery, guest expectations and the physical intensity of work. One participant explained that prolonged standing and multitasking were daily challenges that eroded energy and well-being. Commuting distances, particularly in metropolitan hotels, added further stress, with travel time compounding already long shifts. Seasonal fluctuations in guest volumes created uneven workloads, leading to periods of both overwork and underemployment.

These accounts reflect the broader literature on work intensification in hospitality, where emotional labour, physical demands and unpredictable schedules interact to create persistent strain (Hochschild, 2012; Karatepe & Aleshinloye, 2009). Gen Z employees, however, framed these pressures in terms of their impact on mental health and work-life balance, underscoring the generational salience of well-being discourses.

The influence of leadership and management emerged as a decisive factor shaping engagement. In one case, the participant described mentorship from senior managers as akin to paternal guidance, providing direction and psychological safety. By contrast, another participant lamented weak HR systems that failed to address grievances, noting that feedback mechanisms were 'performative rather than responsive'. A more positive account came from the eco-resort employee, who valued regular one-to-one interactions with owners and management, describing them as authentic engagement. This reflects wider concerns in hospitality research that formal HR systems often fail to translate into meaningful employee outcomes without genuine responsiveness and follow-through (Adeyefa et al., 2023; Bhatt and Rana, 2023).

These findings match studies that show leadership style and management responsiveness are key factors in retention within service industries. Recent studies also show that leadership quality, particularly authentic leadership, can mitigate disengagement and workplace stress, even in high-pressure hotel environments (Khairy et al., 2023).

For Gen Z, authentic leadership, transparency and direct communication are especially important. This agrees with global evidence on generational preferences (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Leadership and feedback experiences are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Leadership and Feedback Experiences of Gen Z Employees

Leadership/Management Variable	Illustrative Account	Source
Mentorship and guidance	'Senior managers guide like family figures.'	Primary coded evidence (anonymised excerpt)
Weak HR responsiveness	'Feedback systems are there, but nothing changes.'	Primary coded evidence (anonymised excerpt)
Direct engagement	Owners' one-to-one interactions with staff are valued highly	Primary coded evidence (anonymised excerpt)

Notes: Supervisory support per Karatepe (2010); leadership salience in hospitality- Köseoglu et al. (2021)

Cross-case comparison shows that boutique and eco-resorts aligned more closely with Gen Z values through sustainability and wellness cultures, while traditional metropolitan hotels generated more dissatisfaction around hours and pay. Across both organisational types, respondents shared demands for fairness, purpose and

teamwork, confirming that workplace environment factors are broadly similar while their expression varies by organisational context.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This pilot study examined how Generation Z employees experience workplace environments in five-star hotels in India. It focused on satisfaction, dissatisfaction, motivation and retention. Through purposive ten detailed interviews, the analysis uncovered a dual reality: Gen Z employees are driven by purpose, recognition and alignment with company values, but they also face structural challenges like long hours, low pay and ineffective HR responses. The results support existing research in hospitality while expanding it through a generational perspective, providing both theoretical insights and practical guidance (Deery & Jago, 2015; Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2018).

The study did aim to show whether Gen Z employees find satisfaction mainly from intrinsic motivators like creativity, teamwork and/or organizational culture (Herzberg, 1966; Francis & Hoefel, 2018). On the other hand, whether dissatisfaction arises from systemic issues, such as overwork, stagnant wages and/or operational flaws (Deery & Jago, 2015; Bagri, Babu, & Kukreti, 2010; Chand & Katou, 2007). Self-directed learning, peer networks and alignment with values like sustainability and wellness help maintain their motivation to stay in the industry (Rousseau, 1995; Conway & Briner, 2009; Deloitte, 2020). However, retention is challenged by ongoing problems such as physical strain, commuting issues and poor HR practices Basnyat & Lao, 2020). Across the cases, leadership and management proved to be crucial for employee experience. Authentic leadership, through personal interactions and visible engagement, strengthened loyalty Karatepe, 2010; Deery & Jago, 2015). In contrast, ineffective or superficial HR systems weakened trust. The comparative analysis also pointed out that the type of organization plays a significant role: boutique and eco-resorts better align with Gen Z values than traditional metropolitan hotels. These findings align with global research on shifts in the generational workforce, suggesting that Gen Z employees value balance, recognition and purpose more than traditional markers of loyalty (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2019). They also resonate with research specific to hospitality on work intensification and emotional labor (Deery & Jago, 2015; Hochschild, 2012), highlighting the ongoing challenges in service organizations

Implications for Theory

The findings enhance existing workplace environment models by incorporating generational perspectives into the study of hospitality employment. Herzberg's (1966) two-factor theory is confirmed: motivators like recognition and career growth link to satisfaction, while hygiene factors such as pay and working hours account for dissatisfaction. These findings also resonate with recent hospitality research emphasising the central role of organisational culture, fairness and HR practices in shaping employee retention outcomes in emerging market contexts (Nainggolan et al., 2023; Abou-Shouk et al., 2023Gen Z adds a new dimension, emphasizing values alignment and well-being, which traditional models do not fully capture. Psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1995) also gains generational insights: breaches of fairness or recognition led to quicker disengagement for Gen Z, who see switching jobs as easier in a dynamic labor market.

The contribution demonstrates that generational values must be incorporated into organisational behaviour theories to remain explanatory in contemporary labour markets. For Indian hospitality studies, this fills a significant research gap, as few empirical works have foregrounded generational distinctions in employee retention. Theoretical implications have also been presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Theoretical Implications of Findings

Theoretical Lens	Extension from Findings	Contribution to Literature
Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory	Confirms dual role of motivators and hygiene; adds 'values alignment' as a critical factor	Expands the classic model with a generational dimension
Psychological Contract	Breach of fairness and recognition prompts quicker exits among Gen Z	Highlights the generational fragility of the contract
Hospitality Work Models	Work intensification/emotional labour persists but is framed in well-being terms.	Links hospitality strain to generational well-being discourse

Implications for Practice

The pilot study generates several actionable insights for managers and HR practitioners in the hospitality sector. First, staffing and scheduling practices require urgent reform. Break shifts and extended hours are incompatible with Gen Z expectations of balance and well-being. Introducing fairer rostering systems and ensuring weekly offs would reduce dissatisfaction (Deery & Jago, 2015).

Second, structured career growth pathways are essential. Gen Z employees are motivated by visible developmental opportunities; hotels that fail to provide such pathways risk losing talent to other industries. Training programs, internal mobility and transparent promotion systems can be retention tools (Köseoglu et al., 2021; Ghani et al., 2022)

Third, HR responsiveness must move beyond symbolic mechanisms. Employees perceive tokenistic suggestion boxes or surveys as ineffective; they value timely feedback, authentic dialogue and visible managerial responsiveness. Strengthening HR systems to be participatory and solution-oriented would enhance trust.

Fourth, organisational values matter. The pilot interviews cited eco-friendly practices, wellness programs and sustainability initiatives as reasons for commitment. Embedding such initiatives as strategic priorities can improve employer branding and resonate with Gen Z values (Deloitte, 2020; Ghani et al., 2022). Practical implications are given in table 6 as well. This is consistent with evidence that sustainability-driven HR practices and green organisational cultures enhance both employee engagement and long-term retention (Adeyefa et al., 2023; Ayad et al., 2023).

Table 6: Practical Implications for Hospitality Managers

Area of Practice	Recommended Action	Expected Impact on Retention
Staffing and scheduling	Remove break shifts; ensure weekly offs	Reduced dissatisfaction, improved balance
Career development	Implement structured growth pathways, mentoring	Increased motivation, stronger loyalty
HR responsiveness	Strengthen feedback mechanisms, ensure follow-through	Enhanced trust, reduced turnover intention
Organizational values	Integrate sustainability and wellness initiatives	Alignment with Gen Z expectations

The findings also hold implications beyond organisational practice. At the policy level, industry associations and government bodies promoting hospitality as a career pathway must address systemic issues such as wage stagnation and excessive working hours[2]. For example, National Skill Development Corporation initiatives could integrate well-being and retention metrics into training standards. Without such reforms, the sector risks losing young talent to alternative industries offering greater flexibility and recognition.

Future Research Directions

The study recognizes its limitations as an early one and offers clear suggestions for future research. Researchers need larger samples from various hotel chains and regions to confirm and expand the findings. Mixed-method designs could assess the connections between workplace factors and employee retention through surveys while still capturing qualitative insights. Long-term studies would be especially helpful in understanding how Gen Z's career paths change over time. Researchers could also compare different generations to see how Gen Z differs from Millennials and Gen X in the hospitality industry. This research would help clarify whether the differences observed come from generational values or wider industry trends. Finally, studies that compare countries could place Indian findings within global hospitality trends, showing how cultural and institutional contexts shape generational expectations.

Table 7: Future Research Pathways

Research Focus	Suggested Design	Contribution
Larger samples	Multi-hotel, multi-region survey + interviews	Validation of pilot insights
Generational comparisons	Cross-cohort studies in hospitality	Distinguish generational vs. industry effects
Longitudinal designs	Tracking Gen Z employees over 5Also10 years	Capture evolving career and retention dynamics
Cross-national analysis	Comparative studies with global peers	Situate Indian hospitality in the global context

The evidence from this pilot highlights that Gen Z employees present both a challenge and an opportunity for India's hospitality sector. Their creativity, flexibility and dedication to values can drive service innovation and renewal in organizations. However, their intolerance for unfairness, long hours and unresponsive systems increases the risk of high turnover. This duality indicates that the future of hospitality jobs in India depends not on the supply of talent but on the sector's ability to meet generational expectations. The study shows that workplace environment models must include generational values to remain relevant. Practically, this means urgent changes are needed in scheduling, career development, HR responsiveness and company culture. From a policy perspective, industry initiatives should focus on well-being and retention as key measures of sustainability.

Organisations that embrace these shifts stand to benefit from a motivated, dynamic workforce capable of sustaining India's hospitality growth trajectory. Those that ignore them risk alienating the very generation that will define the sector's future.

Ethics Approval

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The study adhered to the ethical standards of academic research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviews. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity and their right to withdraw at any stage. Given the qualitative pilot design, no sensitive personal identifiers have been disclosed.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest related to the content, data collection, analysis, or interpretation of this study

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