

Navigating Career Selection: Unveiling Generation Z's Pathways

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Abstract

The process of selecting a career path is critical for university students as it determines their future paths. The fastest-growing group, Gen Z, which includes current university students, is rapidly supplanting the Baby Boomer generation when it retires. Therefore, this study explores the factors influencing career selections among Gen Z from the lens of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). In-depth semi-structured interviews with six Gen Z individuals revealed that workplace flexibility and digital-friendly job scopes, which aid mental health and well-being, are among the significant factors impacting their career decisions. This study contributes to TPB by offering insights into the psychological processes that influence employment decisions among Gen Z. The study provides practical insights for educational institutions, employers, and government bodies seeking to attract talent, underlining the importance of adapting organizational procedures to fit Gen Z preferences, particularly in digitally oriented employment rolls, to align with the changing employment landscape.

Keywords: Talent Attraction, Career Selection, Gen Z, Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), Employment Decision

Introduction

Employment plays a role in an individual's daily life. A fulfilling job that provides stability leads to increased happiness levels and reveals one's position in society and financial rewards and life quality. The process of selecting a career path involves multiple complex factors. As for university students, they face a crucial decision when choosing their first job because it determines their future career path and personal development. In Malaysia, 197,400 graduates remained unemployed in 2021 (as reported by Utusan Malaysia in 2023), a figure that highlights a persistent mismatch between higher education outcomes and labour market demands. One of the factors contributing to this unemployment is the choosiness of graduates when it comes to job opportunities. Many graduates, particularly those from the younger generation, are hesitant to take on roles that fall outside their preferred career aspirations or require them to step outside their comfort zones (Anuar, 2020; Utusan Malaysia, 2023). People choose to delay available career opportunities because they are pursuing a "perfect fit" with their personal interests and

academic qualifications and lifestyle aspirations and values. The understandable viewpoint leads to prolonged periods of unemployment together with underemployment and wasted talent potential.

This phenomenon is particularly evident among Generation Z (Gen Z); the cohort born between 1997 and 2012 whose oldest members are now in their mid-twenties and are actively entering the workforce (Twenge et al., 2010; Barhate & Dirani, 2021). The members of this generation exhibit identical traits and behaviors and are often referred to as digital-natives in education and marketing research because they experienced their development during a period of technological advancement (Twenge et al., 2010; Twenge, 2017). The influence of the world and technology is expected to have a significant impact on the lives and personalities of young graduates, and their endeavors must align with capabilities (Savira, 2020), leading to reduced face-to-face communication due to their reliance on technology. Hence, they are also pursuing a “perfect fit” with their different workplace expectations, including work-life balance and career freedom and learning opportunities and expertise development (Lalic et al., 2019), seeking career goals, and plans for advancement (Barhate & Dirani, 2021).

However, while these preferences lead to positive changes in modern work environments, it creates potential misalignments between employer offerings and employee expectations because organizations struggle to fulfill Gen Z's evolving needs. Thus, research on Gen Z career selection choices becomes increasingly important at this time, as they are the latest workforce generation that will shape the future employment sector. Understanding Gen Z expectations remains essential because it helps organizations attract new talent and prepare for their workforce entry which leads to career success. Furthermore, organizations must understand the emerging generation of Gen Z because this knowledge will help them meet the needs of all their employees (Perilus, 2020). The presence of four generations in workplaces will give more challenges to organisations, which has led to work value conflicts and variations in learning approaches as well as communication styles (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Solaja & Ogunola, 2016). Therefore, the comprehension of how Gen Z approaches career selection helps especially business organizations that want to attract and retain these young professionals.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) serves as the theoretical basis for this study to analyze how Gen Z makes career decisions based on their attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. The study implements TPB to identify the core drivers behind Gen Z's decision-making process so that employers, especially, can develop practical applications. Knowledge of Gen Z's decision-making process and attraction factors will help organizations create effective recruitment strategies while enhancing workplace retention and making their culture match the values of this digital-native generation. Ultimately, the exploration of this topic helps to resolve graduate unemployment as an important socioeconomic issue in developing countries, including Malaysia. With the above preliminary, this study aims to explore the factors influencing career selections among Gen Z university students from the Gen Z cohort in a single institution, through the lens of the theory of planned behavior (TPB). Therefore, understanding the career decision-making patterns of Gen Z is critical for educational institutions, employers, and government bodies aiming to address employment gaps and develop future-ready workers.

Literature Review*Career Selection*

Career development is closely tied to a person's life growth, which holds great importance. Employment can reflect a community's standing, status, and earnings. It can lead to growth and impact both oneself and others in the respective field of work signifying active participation in one's job (Salem, 2018). Research has shown that a successful career can pave the way for a future and increase financial rewards. Making a career choice involves considering various factors to influence one's decision regarding their career path. When choosing a career, one crucial factor to take into account is interest. Interest plays a role as the primary consideration when selecting a career path (Salem, 2018). Accordingly, choosing a career based on interests can greatly impact how happy you are in your job (Vanneste, 2015). Thus, interest acts as motivation for individuals to pursue their passions while also earning an income.

The elements of the work environment play a role and can sway career decisions. Factors such as company reputation, salary, growth opportunities, job security, and employability are in consideration. The image of a company has been found to influence career choices well therefore, to attract employees, organizations need to enhance their reputation (Ko & Sidhu 2012). What is more, providing a salary or income is essential to fulfill the physiological needs at work (Salem, 2018). Therefore, individuals take into account these workplace factors before deciding on a career since they need resources to cover their expenses. The elements of the work environment play a significant role and can sway career decisions. Factors such as company reputation, salary, growth opportunities, job security, and employability are considered crucial by job seekers. The image of a company has been found to strongly influence career choices; therefore, to attract employees, organizations need to enhance their reputation (Ko & Sidhu, 2012). Additionally, providing a competitive salary is essential to fulfill the physiological needs at work (Salem, 2018). Individuals take into account these workplace factors before deciding on a career because they need resources to cover their expenses.

Additionally, parents play a role in their children's lives even before they start school. Beyond that period and long after school ends, parents remain influential individuals to their children (Yahya & Mahmud, 2021). During childhood years, children often receive informal career guidance from their parents. The influence of parents also plays a role in shaping their career choices. Parents act as their teachers, guiding them on how to navigate life and plan their professional paths early on. Moreover, parents trust their children entirely when it comes to choosing careers (Pesa, 2020). This indicates that parents don't push their children into selecting a career but rather offer them the freedom to choose. Besides, close friends also can impact career decisions. These close friends hold the closest position after parents and might be peers or older companions. While they may not always share their interests, some individuals prefer working alongside friends because peer influence affects their career decisions (Pesa, 2020).

In relation to Gen Z, they are characterized by their drive for success (Barna Group, 2018), seeking engaging and meaningful work opportunities (Schroth, 2019), and feeling disconnected without challenging jobs (Bresman & Rao, 2017). Generation Z is known for being less patient due to their strong beliefs and ideals, often struggling to accept differing

opinions or suggestions if they don't align with facts (Mokhtar, 2020). This generation's heavy reliance on technology influences their career choices, as they tend to have specific criteria when pursuing their desired career paths (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). They prioritize careers based on the salary offered relative to their qualifications and are unlikely to settle for lower-level positions or inadequate pay (Turner, 2015). Additionally, Generation Z values work-life balance and places importance on being respected, challenged, and having opportunities for innovation in their endeavors (Twenge, 2017; Kowske et al., 2010).

Moreover, Gen Z faces challenges when working as part of a team, particularly if the team is unproductive or doesn't meet its pace for achieving goals (Bresman & Rao, 2017). However, research consistently shows that Gen Z values interactions with colleagues as a means of expanding their professional network and building relationships in the workplace (Schroth, 2019). This suggests that while Gen Z may prefer working to achieve personal goals, they still recognize the significance of teamwork and social connections in reaching broader career objectives (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Previous studies in this domain have primarily used quantitative methodologies. Barhate and Dirani's (2021) comprehensive literature analysis revealed just four qualitative research on Gen Z's employment preferences. These two research used face-to-face interviews, meanwhile, Fodor and Jäckel (2018) used focus groups to investigate Gen Z's organizational expectations for their careers. Therefore our study will incorporate a qualitative approach along with the theory of planned behavior (TPB), as its conceptual framework.

Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) was originated by Icek Ajzen in 1985 as a significant psychological theory aimed at explaining human behavior in various situations. According to TPB, individual actions are guided by intentions, which are shaped by attitudes towards the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. This model has been extensively used in different areas such as healthcare, marketing, and organizational behavior to anticipate and comprehend behaviors and decision-making processes.

Attitudes towards the behavior refer to the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the behavior in question. In the context of career selection, this can include an individual's views about the outcomes of choosing a specific career, as well as their personal assessment of these consequences (Ajzen, 1991). For example, students who perceive high work satisfaction and chances for progression in a specific sector are more likely to acquire a strong desire to enter that field (Kim et al., 2019). This demonstrates how attitudes shape career objectives and decisions.

Subjective norms involve the perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behavior. For career decisions, subjective norms may include the influence of family, friends, mentors, and societal expectations on an individual's career choices (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). The expectations and opinions of significant others can have a considerable impact on job decisions. For example, parental expectations and encouragement have been shown to have a considerable impact on students' career goals and choices (Ferry, 2006). This demonstrates the significance of social context and interpersonal ties in career decision-making.

Perceived behavioral control refers to the perceived ease or difficulty of doing a task, which is thought to be influenced by experience and anticipated challenges. This could refer to an individual's perception of their abilities, as well as the availability of resources and possibilities in their chosen field (Ajzen, 2002). According to research, students who believe they have the essential abilities and competencies and observe a lot of opportunities in their chosen field are more likely to pursue and continue in that job (Lent et al., 2002). This emphasizes the role of self-efficacy and perceived opportunity frameworks in career planning.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors influencing career selections among Gen Z from the lens of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). In this study, an in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interview with six participants was done to investigate the factors impacting career selections among Gen Z university students. This study employs the purposive sampling method, which ensures that the sample meets all of the criteria, traits, and information required for the study.

The sample was drawn from university students in their final year of study since they are the most appropriate key informants. They are Gen Z, who will enter the workforce, and they understand and carefully consider what is best for them before joining their dream workplace. Thus, the sample criteria are i) Gen Z university students, ii) final-year students who will enter the workforce, and iii) study at the same university. The interview and data collection for all six participants came to an end when data gathering achieved saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Table 1 summarizes the profile of participants in this study.

Table 1
Profile of Participants

Gen Z			
University Student	Age	Gender	Work experience
PUGZ1	21	Female	Yes
PUGZ2	21	Male	Yes
PUGZ3	23	Female	Yes
PUGZ4	22	Male	Yes
PUGZ5	22	Female	Yes
PUGZ6	22	Female	No

In-depth structured interviews with six participants were conducted at a public education institution in Bandar Baru Bangi (BBB), which is recognized as a suburban city and a popular destination in southern Selangor, Malaysia (Usman et al., 2021). The average interview session lasts for one hour and is controlled with a complete set of interview protocols, which is an investigative method to obtain in-depth information related to the purpose of the study (Patton, 2015). The interview protocol is divided into three parts, namely i) the background of Gen Z university students, ii) experiences related to work, and iii) questions about career selection factors. In analyzing the data, thematic analysis was applied to derive themes from the interview transcriptions using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. In addition, ATLAS.ti software is also utilized in facilitating data management and analysis.

Findings

An interview with six Gen Z university students revealed the factors that influence the decision to pursue a dream career. The findings can be classified into three categories: attitudes toward acts, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control.

Attitudes

Attitudes refer to the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the behavior in question (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of career selection, attitudes encompass beliefs about the outcomes of choosing a particular career path and personal evaluations of these outcomes. The sub-categories that emerged from this study are perceived rewards, job opportunities, interest, digital-friendly job scopes, and workplace flexibility.

Perceived Rewards

The participants agreed that they have positive attitudes towards careers that offer substantial financial rewards and benefits. The emphasis on salary and monetary incentives shows a favorable evaluation of careers that provide economic stability and growth. As expressed in these quotations:

"...I will look at the salary first when I want to choose this career." (PUGZ3)

"I am interested in this one company, there are many advantages I see in that company, including in terms of salary and it is a pretty good salary." (PUGZ4)

"When I chose to go to industrial training, I did take into consideration in terms of monetary rewards so when choosing a job after this, salary is important..." (PUGZ2)

Interest

The study revealed the importance of personal interest and passion in career choice. Positive attitudes towards careers that align with personal interests and passions make those careers more appealing and satisfying as expressed in the following quotations:

"... When I did the practical training, I didn't even know what sales and marketing were like at first, but when I was exposed I was interested in the scope of the work that had been given to me at that time. After this, I will also look for a job in that field." (PUGZ3)

"I am a person who likes data and numbers thus I will find a job related to numbers... I don't need to memorize a lot in the field of finance, no need to memorize theory, memorize history. I just need to know what the formula is, then I just key in the number." (PUGZ4)

Digital-Friendly Job Scopes

The participants revealed that they are drawn to technologically compatible positions, thereby facilitating remote work. This demonstrates a favorable assessment of contemporary work environments. This is clear from this quotation:

"I really appreciate jobs that integrate the latest technology. It makes the work more efficient and keeps me engaged. Plus, I'm already familiar with certain tools from my studies. Having access to these technologies also reduces stress and improves my mental well-being by making tasks more manageable." (PUGZ5)

"The ability to work remotely using digital tools is a huge plus for me. It offers flexibility and allows me to balance my work and personal life better. This balance is essential for my mental health, as it helps me avoid burnout and stay productive." (PUGZ1)

"The ability to work remotely using advanced digital platforms is a game-changer. It provides the flexibility I need while ensuring I stay connected with my team even though I am with my family." (PUGZ3)

Workplace Flexibility

The ability to manage one's work schedule, work-life balance, and the freedom to make decisions about how to approach tasks are highly valued by the participants. As expressed in the following quotations:

"Having a good work-life balance is crucial for my mental health. I want a job that respects my personal time and understands the importance of mental well-being." (PUGZ1)

"I look for companies that offer mental health support, like counselling services and mental health days. It shows they care about their employees' overall well-being." (PUGZ4)

"I want a job where there are resources to help manage stress, such as wellness programs and flexible working hours. It's important for me to feel supported." (PUGZ5)

Social Norms

Subjective norms refer to the perceived social pressure to perform or not perform a particular behavior. A person desires something for an object or conduct if those around him influence him to carry out or give him confidence in what he wants to do. The sub-categories that emerged from this study are the influence of parents, peers, and educational experiences.

Parental Influence

The participants mentioned that the supportive and communicative relationship with parents shapes their perceptions and decisions regarding their future careers. As declared by PUGZ3 and PUGZ5:

"...In choosing a career, it was of course my parents who influenced and supported me. I will consult with my parents." (PUGZ3)

"...Because my father and I always share stories including about what I will do after this, where to work... Even though I studied far away, he still called me" (PUGZ2)

"I am interested in finding a job in HR because my interest started from my father's business. So to find a job after this, I will focus on the same field." (PUGZ5)

Peer Influence

Close friends are trusted advisors who provide emotional support and practical suggestions, thereby influencing career choices. As expressed by the participants:

"The encouragement I receive from my friends keeps me motivated to pursue my career goals. They believe in my potential, which boosts my confidence." (PUGZ4)

"Talking to my friends about career options helps me make more informed decisions. Their diverse perspectives open my eyes to possibilities I wouldn't have explored on my own." (PUGZ1)

Educational Influence

This study revealed that exposure to various educational environments and practical experiences provides students with a clearer understanding of career opportunities and challenges, thereby shaping their career decisions. This is clear from this quotation:

"I think this is more about our general awareness, as we have entered the university level, we are aware of job opportunities and where to look for them." (PUGZ1)

“In choosing a career, it is based on the influence and exposure during the matriculation program, then now in the degree, I am exposed to many sources of knowledge.” (PUGZ2)

Perceived Behavioral Control

Experience and anticipated problems affect perceived behavioral control, which is the perceived ease or difficulty of a task. This could apply to a person's self-perception and the resources and opportunities in their field (Ajzen, 2002). Three sub-categories emerged from this analysis, namely, self-efficacy, proactive learner, and technological resource utilisation.

Self-Efficacy

This study revealed a high level of self-efficacy among the students. They express confidence in their abilities and belief in their potential to succeed in their chosen career paths. This is shown in the following quotes:

“I think I have a very high chance of choosing a career in finance because I have a lot of confidence and I'm a fast learner.” (PUGZ4)

“I feel that I have a high opportunity for me to participate in this career as well because I am confident that I can work in that field.” (PUGZ3)

“... to ensure we are accepted for the chosen career, we need to improve our skills, we need to build our confidence... (PUGZ6)

Proactive Learner

The participants highlight their proactive approach to learning and skill development. They recognize the importance of internships, language skills, and additional courses to enhance their employability. This proactive behavior supports their perceived control over their career outcomes, as they actively seek to improve their capabilities and resources. This was expressed in the following quotation:

“At the internship level, there are many opportunities for us to learn... and this industrial training helps a lot, and the boss also understands that there are many things we don't know because he knows we just graduated.” (PUGZ3)

“One of the obstacles to working in a big company is language. Like me even now I'm trying to master more languages.” (PUGZ1)

“I try to expose myself by taking various courses... anything, because for me, now at university, I'm studying more on the theory, but it is not enough for me.” (PUGZ5)

Technological Resource Utilization

The participants agreed that the use of available resources especially technology is to gain control over their career decisions. By leveraging job platforms and utilizing technological tools for self-learning, the students enhance their perceived behavioral control, as they feel more equipped and informed to make career decisions. As quoted:

“To choose a job, research is very important... we can look at many platforms, such as Jobstreet, Kerjaya.com...” (PUGZ2)

“Using job platforms like LinkedIn and Indeed has made my job search much easier. I can find opportunities that match my skills and interests, which gives me more control over my career path.” (PUGZ3)

“Participating in webinars and virtual workshops has expanded my knowledge and network. These experiences enhance my confidence in pursuing my chosen career.” (PUGZ4)

In summary, the opinions sought from the six university students of Gen Z regarding the factors influencing career selections among Gen Z from the lens of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) revealed these important categories; namely, the attitudes (i.e., perceived rewards, interest, digital-friendly job scopes, and workplace flexibility); social norms (i.e., parental influence, peer influence, and educational experience); and the perceived behavioral control (i.e., self-efficacy, proactive learner, and technological resource utilisation).

Discussion

The findings of this study provide insightful implications for understanding the career decision-making processes of Generation Z university students through the lens of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). The findings reveal how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control collectively shape their career choices. This study identified key factors that shape career decisions. Participants expressed a preference for roles offering substantial financial rewards, underscoring the importance of economic stability and growth. This aligns with studies emphasizing the role of financial incentives in shaping career aspirations (Judge & Bretz 1992).

Moreover, personal interests and passions were highlighted as factors in career selection. Students showed an inclination towards roles that aligned with their interests, indicating that intrinsic motivation plays a significant role. This finding resonates with the self-determination theory, suggesting that individuals are more likely to excel in professions that align with their interests (Deci & Ryan 2000). Participants also valued job responsibilities that embrace technology and offer flexibility in the workplace. The integration of technology at work and the option to work remotely were seen as essential not only for productivity but also for mental well-being. The decision reflects the shift in priorities across generations towards valuing workplaces that embrace technology and flexibility, showcasing Gen Z's familiarity with tools.

Subsequently, personal beliefs and societal expectations played a role in career choices. The influence of parents was particularly noteworthy, with many individuals acknowledging their parents' guidance and encouragement in shaping their career paths. This aligns with the view of family influence on career decisions. The strong bond between Gen Z students and their parents, characterized by communication and mutual respect, underscores the importance of family support in navigating career choices. Besides, peers also had an impact as friends provided support and practical advice, acting as reliable advisors during the decision-making process. This observation is consistent with Bandura's theory on learning, which emphasizes the role of social connections in shaping behaviors and choices.

In addition, educational experiences, such as exposure to diverse learning environments and hands-on applications, proved to be pivotal. Through these experiences, students understand potential career paths and challenges influencing their decisions about future careers. This highlights the role that universities play in offering career guidance and practical learning experiences to help students get ready for the job market. Furthermore, belief in oneself, active learning, and using technology all influence how individuals perceive their ability to

take action, whether it is easy or challenging. The students' strong self-belief in their skills and confidence in their success was a factor in selecting their career. This aligns with Bandura's concept of self-efficacy, which underscores the importance of believing in one's capability to achieve desired outcomes (Bandura, 1997).

What is more, the participants taking steps like seeking internships, acquiring new language skills, and enrolling in extra courses also mattered. These actions empower students to feel more confident about their career prospects by enhancing their skills and resources. This proactive mindset reflects a growth-oriented attitude emphasizing learning and adaptability (Dweck, 2006). Moreover, the use of technology emerged as an aspect of the perceived ability to control one's actions. Students leveraged job platforms, webinars, and digital self-learning tools to gain command over their career choices. This underscores the importance of being tech-savvy and having the skill to utilize tools, for modern career planning.

Conclusion

The study delves into the factors that affect job decisions among university students from Generation Z. It discusses how attitudes towards rewards interest in oriented job roles and workplace flexibility as well as the influence of social norms from family, friends, and educational backgrounds and the role of perceived behavioral control through self-confidence, proactive learning and use of technology resources all play a part in shaping their career preferences. This study underscores the pivotal role of mental well-being in career decision-making among Gen Z university students, revealing that workplace flexibility and digital-friendly job scopes significantly enhance their mental health. These factors not only aid productivity but also help avoid burnout, demonstrating the necessity for employers to prioritize mental health support.

This study contributes to the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) in understanding the psychological processes influencing career selection among university students who belong to the Gen Z cohort. Practically, from the findings, organizations can be prepared and adapt their work environments to include flexible schedules, remote work options, and mental health resources to attract and retain Gen Z talent. Future research should include diverse educational institutions and explore the longitudinal impacts of these factors on career progression and mental well-being, providing a comprehensive understanding of Gen Z's career dynamics.

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