

Soft Living as a Paradigm Shift in Modern Work Culture: A Qualitative Literature Review of Generation Z and Millennials

Sudung Simatupang^{1*}, Marto Silalahi², Debi Eka Putri³, Hendrick Sasimtan Putra⁴, Vivi Candra⁵

Sultan Agung College of Economics

Corresponding Author: Sudung Simatupang; selitaefraim@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Soft Living, Work Culture, Generation Z, Millenial, Employee well-being

Received : 5 July

Revised : 23 August

Accepted: 25 September

©2026 Simatupang, Silalahi, Putri, Putra, Candra: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine “soft living” as a new paradigm in the transformation of modern work culture among Generation Z and millennials. The increasingly dynamic nature of the workplace is driving a shift from a productivity-oriented approach toward a more flexible one that prioritizes employee well-being. As the dominant groups in the workforce, Generation Z and millennials possess characteristics that emphasize work-life balance, the meaning of work, and attention to mental health, thereby influencing changes in workplace culture within organizations. This study employs a qualitative approach using a literature review method, drawing from various scientific journals, books, and relevant publications. The findings indicate that soft living serves as a response to the pressures of modern work culture by emphasizing balance, self-awareness, and healthy stress management. The implementation of this concept within organizations is reflected through work flexibility and increased attention to employee well-being. Thus, soft living can be viewed as a relevant paradigm in fostering a more humane, adaptive, and sustainable work culture

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of the modern workplace reflects increasingly complex dynamics driven by advancements in digital technology, globalization, and shifting social values within society. These changes not only impact work systems and mechanisms but also transform how individuals perceive their work and life as a whole. A work culture that was previously synonymous with a focus on high productivity, long working hours, and intense competition is now shifting toward a more flexible approach centered on employee well-being as part of efforts to foster sustainable performance (Guest, 2017). This shift is becoming increasingly evident, particularly among Generation Z and millennials, who tend to prioritize work-life balance in their careers.

This shift has become increasingly evident with the growing dominance of Millennials and Generation Z in the workforce. These two generations exhibit distinct characteristics compared to previous generations, particularly in terms of their expectations regarding work. Millennials and Generation Z tend to place greater value on work flexibility, a supportive work environment, and work-life balance as key factors in determining job satisfaction (Schroth, 2019). As work demands and pressures in the professional environment increase, issues related to workplace burnout are becoming increasingly relevant. A work culture that emphasizes unlimited productivity—often referred to as “hustle culture”—has the potential to negatively impact employees’ mental health. Burnout not only affects individual well-being but also leads to a decline in work performance and productivity (Maslach & Leiter, 2016)

In response to these conditions, various new approaches have emerged that emphasize the importance of work-life balance and individual well-being. One such concept is “soft living”—a lifestyle that prioritizes simplicity, self-awareness, and efforts to reduce stress in daily life, including in the workplace. This concept offers an alternative to a fast-paced and demanding work culture by emphasizing the importance of quality of life and mental health. This approach aligns with research on mindfulness in the workplace, which shows that self-awareness and stress management contribute positively to individual well-being and performance (Good et al., 2015). In an organizational context, the implementation of values aligned with the concept of “soft living” is beginning to be reflected in various modern workplace policies, such as flexible work arrangements, remote work, and a focus on employee well-being. This indicates that organizations are beginning to adapt to the needs of a new generation of workers who prioritize work-life balance and the meaning of work (Allen et al., 2013)

However, although the concept of soft living is gaining traction in discussions about lifestyle and the workplace, academic research specifically examining this concept in relation to the transformation of work culture remains relatively limited. Most studies focus primarily on aspects of workplace well-being or work-life balance in isolation, so few have integrated soft living as a new paradigm, particularly in the context of Generation Z and millennials (Twenge, s). Based on the above discussion, this study aims to examine “soft living” as a new paradigm in the transformation of modern work culture among Generation

Z and millennials through a qualitative literature review. This study is expected to contribute to enriching the body of research on modern work culture and to offer new perspectives on creating a healthier, more balanced, and sustainable work environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Soft Living

The concept of soft living is a lifestyle approach that emphasizes a balance between productive activities and individual well-being. This concept has emerged as a response to modern lifestyles that tend to demand speed, efficiency, and high productivity. Soft living encourages individuals to live more mindfully, simply, and without excessive pursuit of achievement, thereby reducing psychological stress and improving quality of life (Kasser, 2016). In the workplace, "soft living" refers to an individual's efforts to manage their energy, time, and work expectations in a healthier way. This approach also emphasizes the importance of work-life balance, as well as an individual's ability to set boundaries to maintain mental health (Sonnentag, 2018)

Modern Work Culture

Modern work culture has undergone significant changes alongside technological advancements and shifts in organizational structures. Today's organizations tend to adopt more flexible work systems, such as remote work and more adaptable work schedules. These changes aim to improve efficiency while providing employees with the opportunity to achieve a better work-life balance (Robbins & Judge, 2017). In addition, modern workplace culture is also beginning to prioritize employee well-being as part of organizational strategy. A supportive work environment, open communication, and a focus on mental health are key elements in creating a sustainable workplace culture (Schein, 2012)

Generation Z and Millennials in the Workplace

Generation Z and millennials are groups with unique characteristics in the workplace, particularly in terms of values, motivations, and expectations regarding work. These generations tend to value flexibility, freedom, and a sense of purpose in their work more than mere financial compensation (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). In addition, Gen Z and millennials are also known to be more concerned about mental health and work-life balance. They tend to avoid overly stressful work environments and prefer organizations that provide support for employee well-being (Dimock, 2019)

The Relationship Between Soft Living and Work Culture

The concept of soft living is closely linked to the transformation of modern work culture, particularly in efforts to create a more humane and sustainable work environment. Applying the values of soft living within an organization can help reduce work-related stress, increase job satisfaction, and improve the work-life balance (Cieri et al., 2005). Thus, soft living can be viewed as a relevant approach to addressing the challenges of the modern workplace, particularly for Generation Z and millennials, who have different work needs and preferences compared to previous generations.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using the literature review method. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the concept of “soft living” as a new paradigm in the transformation of modern work culture, particularly among Generation Z and millennials, based on various relevant sources of literature. The literature review method allows the researcher to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize findings from previous studies (Creswell, 2009). The data sources for this study consist of secondary data obtained from scientific journals, academic books, and research reports related to the topics of work culture, employee well-being, work-life balance, and the characteristics of Generation Z and millennials. The literature used was selected based on criteria of relevance, credibility, and year of publication, with priority given to sources from the relevant timeframe to ensure alignment with the latest research developments (Snyder, 2019).

Data collection was conducted by searching academic databases such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and other international journals using keywords such as “soft living,” “modern work culture,” “work-life balance,” “Generation Z,” and “millennials.” This process was carried out systematically to ensure that the retrieved literature was relevant to the research focus and of high academic quality (Tranfield et al., 2003). The data analysis technique used is qualitative descriptive analysis, which involves examining, comparing, and interpreting various findings from the collected literature. The analysis was conducted by grouping the main themes related to the concepts of soft living and the transformation of work culture, which were then systematically organized to gain a comprehensive understanding (Miles et al., 2013).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Transformation of Modern Work Culture from a Contemporary Perspective

The transformation of modern work culture is not only understood as a change in work systems resulting from technological advancements, but also as a paradigm shift in the very meaning of work itself. The development of digital technology has eliminated the constraints of space and time, enabling individuals to work flexibly without being tied to a specific location. This phenomenon has given rise to various new work models, such as remote working and hybrid working, which are now part of contemporary work practices (Kniffin et al., 2026). However, this transformation also brings complex consequences. On the one hand, work flexibility gives individuals the freedom to manage their own time and work pace. On the other hand, this flexibility has the potential to expand work boundaries uncontrollably, making it difficult for individuals to separate their personal lives from their work. This situation gives rise to the “always-on culture,” where individuals feel they must always be available for work, even outside of formal working hours.

Furthermore, modern work culture also reflects a shift in values from a productivity-oriented approach toward well-being. Organizations are beginning to realize that productivity cannot be separated from employees’ psychological well-being. Employees who experience constant work-related stress tend to see a decline in performance, making a well-being-based approach increasingly

relevant for fostering organizational sustainability (Pfeffer, 2018). Thus, the transformation of modern work culture is not merely technical in nature, but also touches on the values and philosophy of work.

The Dynamics of Generation Z and Millennials as Agents of Change in Workplace Culture

Generation Z and millennials are not only part of the workforce but also serve as agents of change in the transformation of modern workplace culture. Having grown up in an environment saturated with technology, widespread access to information, and rapid social change, these two generations have developed characteristics that make them more adaptable and critical of existing work systems. In the context of work, Generation Z and Millennials have a more complex orientation compared to previous generations. They consider not only economic factors but also psychological and social aspects when choosing a job. Work flexibility, the meaning of work, and work-life balance are the primary factors influencing their decisions (Stillman & Stillman, 2017).

In addition, an awareness of mental health is a defining characteristic of both generations. They are more open to discussing issues such as work-related stress, emotional exhaustion, and the importance of maintaining a healthy work-life balance. As a result, they tend to reject work cultures that are exploitative and do not allow for individual well-being (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). From an organizational perspective, these changing characteristics demand significant adaptation. Organizations can no longer maintain traditional, hierarchical, and rigid management approaches. Instead, they need to foster a work culture that is more flexible, inclusive, and focused on individual needs. Thus, Generation Z and millennials are not merely the objects of change, but also the agents actively driving the transformation of work culture.

Soft Living as an Alternative Paradigm in the Workplace

The concept of soft living can be understood as a form of resistance to modern work culture, which tends to place excessive emphasis on productivity. In this context, soft living is not merely a lifestyle but also an alternative paradigm that offers a new perspective on how to interpret work and life. A work culture oriented toward high productivity often subjects individuals to constant pressure. The demands to constantly meet targets, compete, and improve performance can lead to physical and mental exhaustion. In the long term, this situation has the potential to cause burnout, which is detrimental not only to the individual but also to the organization (Dalton, 2019).

In response to these conditions, soft living offers a more balanced approach by emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, energy management, and the ability to set boundaries at work. Individuals are encouraged to focus not only on achievements, but also on the process and the quality of life they lead. Furthermore, soft living also represents a shift in values within modern society. Success is no longer viewed solely as material achievement or social status, but also as the ability to live a balanced, healthy, and meaningful life. In this regard, soft living reflects the individual's need to find balance amidst the increasingly complex demands of the workplace (Brown, 2018).

Integrating Soft Living into Organizational Practices.

implementation of soft living in modern workplace culture is not limited to the individual level; it is also being adopted by organizations through various policies and work practices. Adaptive organizations are beginning to integrate well-being values into their management systems as part of their long-term strategies. One of the most tangible forms of implementation is work flexibility. Policies such as remote work, hybrid work, and flexible working hours provide employees with the space to manage a balance between work and personal life. Additionally, organizations are also beginning to offer programs that support mental health, such as counseling services, stress management training, and the creation of a more supportive work environment (Richardson & Rothstein, 2008).

However, the implementation of soft living within an organization is not without its challenges. One of the main challenges is the need to shift management's mindset, which remains focused on short-term productivity. Furthermore, not all types of work allow for the optimal application of work flexibility, necessitating contextual adjustments. Nevertheless, various studies indicate that organizations capable of striking a balance between productivity and employee well-being tend to demonstrate more stable and sustainable performance. Employees who feel valued and supported exhibit higher levels of work engagement and stronger loyalty to the organization (Harter et al., 2003)

Theoretical and Practical Implications of Soft Living in Workplace Culture

The concept of soft living has significant implications, both theoretically and practically, for the development of modern workplace culture. Theoretically, this concept enriches the study of workplace culture by introducing a more humanistic and well-being-oriented perspective. Soft living can be viewed as an evolution of the work-life balance concept, placing greater emphasis on self-awareness and quality of life. Practically, the implementation of soft living provides a new direction for organizations in designing work policies that are more adaptive to the needs of today's generations. Organizations that can integrate soft living values into their work culture will have a competitive advantage in attracting and retaining talent, particularly from Generation Z and millennials.

Furthermore, soft living also contributes to creating a more sustainable work culture. By making well-being a part of organizational strategy, companies not only improve short-term performance but also build a strong foundation for long-term sustainability (Brough et al., 2014). Thus, soft living can be viewed as a relevant new paradigm for addressing the challenges of modern work culture. This concept not only offers solutions to work-related stress but also opens up opportunities to create a more humane, adaptive, and sustainable work system in the future.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This qualitative literature review concludes that soft living has emerged as a relevant paradigm in the transformation of modern work culture among Generation Z and Millennials. The findings indicate a shift from productivity-oriented work practices toward more flexible and employee-centered approaches that emphasize work-life balance, mental health, and overall well-being. As the dominant workforce, these generations increasingly value meaningful work, flexibility, and psychological well-being. Therefore, soft living should be viewed not only as a lifestyle trend but also as a strategic approach to fostering healthier, more balanced, and sustainable workplaces.

Based on these findings, organizations are encouraged to incorporate soft living principles into workplace policies by promoting flexible work arrangements, strengthening mental health support, and creating inclusive leadership practices. These initiatives can improve employee engagement, job satisfaction, and long-term organizational sustainability while maintaining productivity. Furthermore, future research should employ quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method approaches to provide empirical evidence on the impact of soft living across different industries, organizational settings, and cultural contexts.

FURTHER STUDY

Future research is recommended to move beyond qualitative literature reviews by conducting empirical studies that examine the implementation and impact of soft living in organizational settings. Quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method approaches can be used to investigate its influence on employee well-being, work engagement, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and productivity. Comparative studies across industries, countries, and generational groups are also encouraged to provide broader insights into the applicability and effectiveness of soft living as a sustainable paradigm for modern work culture.

REFERENCES

- Allen, T. D., Johnson, R. C., Kiburz, K. M., & Shockley, K. M. (2013). WORK – FAMILY CONFLICT AND FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS: DECONSTRUCTING FLEXIBILITY. *Personnel Psychology*, 66(2), 345–376. <https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12012>
- Brough, P., Timms, C., Driscoll, M. P. O., Siu, O., Sit, C., & Lo, D. (2014). Work-life balance: a longitudinal evaluation of a new measure across Australia and New Zealand workers. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 25(19), 2724-2744,. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2014.899262>
- Brown, B. (2018). *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.* Random House.

- Cieri, H. De, Holmes, B., Abbott, J., & Pettit, T. (2005). Achievements and challenges for work / life balance strategies in Australian organizations Achievements and challenges for work / life balance strategies in Australian organizations. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 16(1), 90–103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0958519042000295966>
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Ed.3). Sage.
- Dalton, T. (2019). *The Joy of Missing Out: Live More by Doing Less*. Thomas Nelson Incorporated.
- Dimock, M. (2019). Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>
- Francis, T., & Hoefel, F. (2018). True Gen': Generation Z and its implications for companies. McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/true-gen-generation-z-and-its-implications-for-companies#/>
- Good, D. J., Lyddy, C. J., Glomb, T. M., Bono, J. E., Brown, K. W., Duffy, M. K., Baer, R. A., Brewer, J. A., & Lazar, S. W. (2015). Contemplating Mindfulness at Work: An Integrative Review. *Journal of Management*, XX(X), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206315617003>
- Guest, D. E. (2017). Human resource management and employee well-being: towards a new analytic framework. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 27(1), 22–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12139>
- Harter, J. K., Schmidt, F. L., & Keyes, C. L. M. (2003). WELL-BEING IN THE WORKPLACE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO BUSINESS OUTCOMES A REVIEW OF THE GALLUP STUDIES. In *Flourishing: The Positive Person and the Good Life* (pp. 205–224). American Psychological Association.
- Kasser, T. (2016). Materialistic Values and Goals. *The Annual Review Of Psychology*, 67, 489–514. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-122414-033344>

- Kniffin, K. ., Narayanan, J., Anseel, F., Antonakis, J., Ashford, S. P., Bakker, A. B., Bamberger, P., Bapuji, H., Bhawe, D. P., Choi, V. K., Creary, S. J., Demerouti, E., Flynn, F. J., Gelfand, M. J., Greer, L. L., Johns, G., Kesimal, S., Klein, P. G., Lee, S. Y., & Ozcelik, H. (2026). COVID-19 and the workplace: Implications, issues, and insights for future research and action. *American Psychologist*, 76(1), 63–77.
- Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (2016). Understanding the burnout experience : recent research and its implications for psychiatry. *World Psychiatry*, 15(2), 103–111.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, J. (2013). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (Ed.3). SAGE Publications,.
- Pfeffer, J. (2018). *Dying for a Paycheck: How Modern Management Harms Employee Health and Company Performance--and what We Can Do about it* (Ed.Rev). HarperCollins.
- Richardson, K. M., & Rothstein, H. R. (2008). Effects of Occupational Stress Management Intervention Programs : A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 13(1), 69–93. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1076-8998.13.1.69>
- Robbins, S. P., & Judge, T. A. (2017). *Organizational Behavior* (Ed.17). Pearson Education.
- Schein, E. H. (2012). Organizational Culture and Leadership,. In *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* (ED.4, Vol. 33, Issue 4). Jossey-Bass Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01437731211229331>
- Schroth, H. (2019). Are You Ready for Gen Z in the Workplace? *California Management Review*, 61(3), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0008125619841006>
- Seemiller, C., & Grace, M. (2016). *Generation Z Goes to College*. Jhon willey and Sons Inc.
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology : An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104(March), 333–339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>
- Sonnentag, S. (2018). Research in Organizational Behavior The recovery paradox : Portraying the complex interplay between job stressors , lack of recovery , and poor well-being. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 38, 169–185. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2018.11.002>

- Stillman, D., & Stillman, J. (2017). *Gen Z @ Work: How the Next Generation Is Transforming the Workplace*. HarperCollins.
- Tranfield, D., Denyer, D., & Smart, P. (2003). Towards a Methodology for Developing Evidence-Informed Management Knowledge by Means of Systematic Review *. *British Journal of Management*, 14, 207-222.
- Twenge, J. M. (2017). *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. Simon and Schuster.