

GILE Journal of Skills Development

Generation Z: Increasing Self-Perceived Employability and Well-being through Serious Leisure

Ponn P. Mahayosnand

National Coalition of Independent Scholars and Ronin Institute, USA

 ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8979-2806>

SM Sabra

Islamic University of Gaza, Palestine

 ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8682-4811>

Abstract

Generation Z (Gen Z) is the best-educated, technologically adept, and most racially and ethnically diverse generation entering the workforce today. Gen Z also has the highest rate of diagnosed depression and anxiety. They prefer to have a side hustle on top of their full-time jobs; however, the act of monetizing their leisure activity has been shown to add more stress. The benefits of serious and casual leisure are shared; with emphasis on the need for Gen Z to engage in more forms of serious leisure to enhance their well-being and self-perceived employability. Employers and schools should encourage, promote and invest in more serious leisure activities for Gen Z. Continuing the emerging focus on research in leisure studies and careers, specifically focusing on Gen Z is highly recommended.

Keywords: Generation Z, Gen Z, workplace burnout, serious leisure, casual leisure, wellbeing, leisure activities, hobbies, mental health

1. Generation Z is a Highly Skilled Workforce Yet More Anxious and Depressed

Generation Z (which includes those born from 1996–2013) has been rapidly entering the workforce and (Mahayosnand & Sabra, 2023), alongside Millennials, are becoming the predominant demographic. These individuals are on track to becoming the best-educated, technologically adept and more racially and ethnically diverse group than any other generation (Cirstea & Anagnoste, 2023; Mahayosnand & Sabra, 2023; Parker & Igielnik, 2020). With the highest rate of diagnosed anxiety and depression (Pichler et al., 2021), these negative impacts on well-being can impact self-perceived employability and organisational performance (Leitão et al., 2021).

Stress and depression showed the strongest associations with burnout and negative productivity (Leitão et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic saw 3 in 4 students and recent graduates in the UK report lower levels of well-being in September 2021 compared to March 2020 (Donald &

Jackson, 2022). Individuals who proactively manage their lives by dedicating time to forms of serious leisure such as hobbies compared to those who dedicate time to casual leisure such as watching TV experience increased productivity and well-being, as improved mental health translates into higher energy levels and enhanced performance (Donald & Nimmi, 2023; Nimmi & Donald, 2023). Therefore, the relentless pursuit of productivity and constant busyness can lead to work-related burnout, resulting in diminished mental well-being and compromised overall health (Leitão et al., 2021). Additionally, employers incur significant costs from burnt out employees because it leads to lower job performance.

2. Self-imposed Stress of Trying to Monetise Side Hustles

Entrepreneurial in spirit, the majority of Gen Z prefer to start their side hustles in addition to and on the side of their primary job (Cirstea & Anagnoste, 2023). While participation in serious leisure increases entrepreneurial intention and well-being in Generation Z (Donald, Mouratidou et al., 2024; Mouratidou et al., 2024), it can also worsen mental health if such side hustles are mandated due to financial necessity (see Donald, Baruch et al. financial capital as a form of employability capital). In the 2023 American Psychological Association Stress in America survey (Medaris, 2023), Gen Z and millennials reported having more stress and financial worries than older populations. This unnecessary pressure to monetize all skills overlooks the importance of balancing work and leisure (Meier et al., 2021). While finding fulfilment in one's side work is crucial, failing to distinguish between work and leisure can lead to increased depression levels due to resource depletion rather than replenishment.

Turning passions solely into commercial pursuits may result in disillusionment and adverse mental health outcomes. This commodification of leisure time restricts personal fulfilment and may lead to increased psychological distress. It's essential to maintain a boundary between personal interests and professional obligations. Embracing opportunities for leisure activities and quality time with loved ones beyond the workplace is vital (Meier et al., 2021). Therefore, while pursuing one's passion can be rewarding, transforming it solely into a commercial pursuit may have negative consequences on mental well-being.

Monetizing leisure activities and hobbies can undermine the intrinsic motivation behind engaging in them. External rewards, such as money, diminish their intrinsic values. It is essential to engage in activities for the sheer enjoyment they bring, rather than seeking mastery or an external validation. Prioritizing intrinsic enjoyment and skill development over external rewards (such as money) can contribute significantly to one's overall well-being and mental health, and increase one's employability (Donald & Nimmi, 2023).

3. The Importance of Casual and Serious Leisure

Engaging in leisure activities is essential as they satisfy life's values and requirements, acting as a recognized factor positively influencing health and well-being. Studies consistently show that exercise, a common leisure pursuit, has antidepressant effects on physiological and neurological functions (Bian & Xiang, 2023). However, engaging in non-physical forms of leisure like reading, texting, watching television shows and movies at home, and digital leisure also promotes better mental health.

Within the sphere of leisure activities, there are two distinct forms: serious leisure and casual leisure (Stebbins, 1992). Serious leisure activities like speaking, writing, or creating content involve active engagement (Bian & Xiang, 2023; Cosma et al., 2021; Mansfield et al., 2020).

Serious leisure activities demand dedication and effort offering greater, sustained mental benefits and increased creativity (Nimmi et al., 2023). Serious leisure pursuits require individual effort hence a “deeper” commitment, and often a greater challenge for individuals. In contrast, casual leisure activities, such as watching shows and scrolling through social media offer immediate pleasure but lack long-term mental health benefits (Stebbins, 1992). In today's fast-paced environment, casual leisure activities have surged in popularity due to their easy commercialization and accessibility through various products and services.

Casual leisure activities, especially when paired with highly stressful workplaces, have the potential to exacerbate work-related burnout. The dependence on instant gratification may hinder individuals from experiencing genuine long-term peace and fulfilment (Cosma et al., 2021). While a balance between serious and casual leisure activities is essential, prioritizing dedicated time and effort in serious leisure pursuits, even after a demanding workday, can lead to heightened energy levels, enhanced well-being, improved work performance and self-perceived employability (Ma et al., 2024).

4. Benefits of Serious Leisure Activities for Gen Z

Serious leisure consists of a person being actively engaged in their activities as opposed to being passively or casually engaged (Iso-Ahola & Baumeister, 2023; Stebbins, 1992). A person seeks to be seriously engaged in their leisure activity such as reading, rather than escaping to a more trivial activity like watching TV. Iso-Ahola and Baumeister state that engaging in such serious leisure activities is beneficial as it helps in creating meaning *in* one's life and increases one's meaning *of* life.

Serious leisure activities have the ability to improve one's physical, mental and emotional health and well-being (Donald & Nimmi & Donald, 2023; Iso-Ahola & Baumeister, 2023; Pichler et al., 2021). Since serious leisure activities typically involve seeking to meet a goal, time spent is purposeful which also increases one's life satisfaction. Iso-Ahola and Baumeister (2023) explicitly differentiate between a “work relation” goal that is extrinsic value such as money, versus seeking to meet a goal without force—having the freedom to seek out a goal. Once such a goal is met, the sense of pride developed also increases one's self-worth. Therefore, there are great benefits for Gen Z youth to engage in serious leisure activities solely for these intrinsic values (Ma et al., 2024).

Self-perceived employability may be increased through serious leisure activities (Donald & Nimmi, 2023; Nimmi et al., 2023). Iso-Ahola and Baumeister (2023) found that serious leisure activities like honing a new skill as a hobbyist or amateur allow one to be challenged and enter a “flow” state. In doing so, a person has the potential to develop rich, new skills without much strain. The acquisition of such skills which are oftentimes work-related or career development skills, thereby may also make Gen Z youth more employable (Ma et al., 2024). For example, one may increase their social interactions in a community of new people who also participate in the shared serious leisure activity. Critical employability skills such as written or verbal communication skills or leadership skills may be further developed.

5. Conclusion

Generation Z can benefit from undertaking more forms of serious leisure as it improves mental health and employability. Although such intensive leisure activities have the potential to become a lucrative side hustle, seeking external rewards such as money can cause increased

stress and take away the joy from engaging in the activities due to resource depletion. As the current and incoming workforce, it is crucial that employers and schools understand that Generation Z is already more depressed or anxious than others. Therefore, employers and schools should support, encourage, promote and invest in more serious leisure activities and programs for Gen Z. While leisure and well-being studies are already a discipline (Mansfield et al., 2020), further research should be conducted specifically with Generation Z and their unique employability and mental health characteristics in mind, such as emerging interest in integrating serious leisure into the higher education and careers literature (Donald, Mouratidou et al., 2024; Ma et al., 2024; Mouratidou et al., 2024; Nimmi & Donald, 2023; Nimmi et al., 2023).

References

- Bian, J., & Xiang, Z. (2023). Do the various leisure forms have equal effects on mental health? A longitudinal analysis of self-selected leisure activities. *Frontiers in Public Health*, *11*, Article 1134854. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1134854>
- Cirstea, P., & Anagnoste, S. (2023). Young, wild & entrepreneurial: Generation Z's affinity for entrepreneurship. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Business Excellence*, *17*(1), 930–947. <https://doi.org/10.2478/picbe-2023-0085>
- Cosma, A., Pavelka, J., & Badura, P. (2021). Leisure time use and adolescent mental well-being: Insights from the COVID-19 Czech spring lockdown. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *18*(23), Article 12812. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182312812>
- Donald, W. E., Baruch, Y., & Ashleigh, M. J. (2024). Construction and operationalisation of an Employability Capital Growth Model (ECGM) via a systematic literature review (2016-2022). *Studies in Higher Education*, *49*(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2219270>
- Donald, W. E., & Jackson, D. (2022). Subjective wellbeing among university students and recent graduates: Evidence from the United Kingdom. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(11), 6911. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19116911>
- Donald, W. E., Mouratidou, M., Nimmi, P. M., & Ma, Y. (2024). Strategies for enhancing entrepreneurial intention and wellbeing in higher education students: A cross-cultural analysis. *Higher Education*. Advanced Online Publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01133-6>
- Donald, W. E., & Nimmi, P. M. (2023). How seriously do you take your leisure? *GILE Journal of Skills Development*, *3*(1), 7–9. <https://doi.org/10.52398/gjds.2023.v3.i1.pp7-9>
- Leitão, J., Pereira, D., & Gonçalves, Â. (2021). Quality of work life and contribution to productivity: Assessing the moderator effects of burnout syndrome. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *18*(5), Article 2425. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18052425>
- Ma, Y., Nimmi, P. M., Mouratidou, M., & Donald, W. E. (2024). Exploring the impact of serious leisure on well-being and self-perceived employability: The mediating role of career adaptability among Chinese undergraduates. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*. Advanced Online Publication. <https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-12-2023-0346>
- Mahayosnand, P. P., & Sabra, S. M. (2023). Virtual interview preparation for Generation Z science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) Students - a necessity for the post-pandemic Era A Gen Z STEM student virtual interview step-by-step guide. *GILE Journal of Skills Development*, *3*(2), 7–15. <https://doi.org/10.52398/gjds.2023.v3.i2.pp7-15>

-
- Mansfield, L., Daykin, N., & Kay, T. (2020). Leisure and wellbeing. *Leisure Studies*, 39(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2020.1713195>
- Medaris, A. (2023, November 1). Gen Z adults and younger millennials are “completely overwhelmed” by stress. *American Psychological Association*. <https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/generation-z-millennials-young-adults-worries>
- Meier, E., Aziz, S., Wuensch, K., & Dolbier, C. (2021). Work hard, play hard...or maybe not: A look at the relationships between workaholism, work-leisure conflict, and work stress. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 52(3), 330–346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2020.1778589>
- Mouratidou, M., Donald, W. E., Nimmi, P. M., & Ma. Y. (2024). Exploring the relationship between self-perceived academic performance and entrepreneurial intention: The moderating roles of serious leisure, perceived stress and gender. *Higher Education Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 14(4), 767-781. <https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-02-2024-0053>
- Nimmi, P. M., & Donald, W. E. (2023). Modelling the interaction between serious leisure, self-perceived employability, stress, and workplace well-being: Empirical insights from graduates in India. *Personnel Review*, 51(1), 272-287. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-04-2021-0305>
- Nimmi, P. M., Krishna, A., & Donald, W. E. (2023). Enabling educators to foster creativity and perceived employability: The role of serious leisure. In: B. Christiansen & A. M. Even (Eds.), *Examining Applied Multicultural Industrial and Organizational Psychology* (pp. 235-254). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-7212-5.ch012>
- Parker, K., & Igielnik, R. (2020, May 14). On the cusp of adulthood and facing an uncertain future: What we know about Gen Z so far. *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/>
- Pichler, S., Kohli, C., & Granitz, N. (2021). DITTO for Gen Z: A framework for leveraging the uniqueness of the new generation. *Business Horizons*, 64(5), 599–610. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2021.02.021>
- Stebbins, R. A. (1992). *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Declaration Statements

Conflict of Interest

The author reports no conflict of interest.

Funding

The author received no financial support for this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

Ethics Statement

No dataset is associated with this article.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank ZM Sabra for her technical editing assistance.

Open Access Agreement

This article is published under a CC BY 4.0 license. This license allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the creator. The license allows for commercial use. For more information, please visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Corresponding Author

The corresponding author for this manuscript is Ponn P. Mahayosnand, MPH who can be contacted by email via ponn@ncis.org.