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## Toxic Work Environment Among Cross-Generational Employees

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### Abstract

Toxic work environments not only negatively impact the mental and physical well-being of employees but also affect employee productivity and retention. A cross-generational perspective is crucial to providing more comprehensive insights and helping organizations create a healthy work culture. This study aimed to describe the toxic work environment perceived by cross-generational employees and the demographic variables that influence it. The quantitative research used a convenience sampling technique. The sample consisted of 783 Indonesians aged 19 to 60 years who had worked for at least 1 year. The study examined the perceived toxic work environment using descriptive statistics. In addition, researchers also used Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis statistical analyses to see the differences based on the demographic data collected. The results found that the majority of the toxic work environments perceived by employees were in the low category (91%). The analysis also showed that differences in generation, type of work, and length of service affect the toxic work environment felt by employees. The toxic work environment is more prevalent among Generation Z, employees who work in the private sector, and those who have worked for 5 years or less.

Every organization strives to enhance work productivity, yet such efforts often overlook the needs of employees, who are among its most vital assets. These needs include opportunities for learning and growth, work-life balance, and a positive workplace culture that fosters a sense of appreciation and belongingness (Deloitte, 2022). In reality, the work environment significantly influences employees' behavioral patterns within an organization. Several studies have found that the work environment influences employee performance (Dullah et al., 2023; Parashakti et al., 2020; Rabuana & Yanuar, 2023; Zhenjing et al., 2022). How the work environment perceives and responds to an individual's contributions affects their subsequent performance

Simply put, Anjum and Ming (2018), in their study on Pakistani health-care employees, identified two primary spectrums of work environments in organizations. These spectrums are the collaborative work environment and the toxic work environment. A collaborative work environment refers to a workplace with high morale and a community-centered approach. In this spectrum, employees and leaders maintain empathetic relationships, mutually supporting the physical and psychological well-being of each other's. On the other hand, a toxic work environment leads to unpleasant work experiences, resulting in negative performance, harm, and reduced work engagement.



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A collaborative work environment is characterized by cordiality, workplace enjoyment, a sense of engagement, empathy, and organizational citizenship behavior (Wang et al., 2020). This type of environment tends to be conducive and comfortable due to adequate facilities and the presence of positive relationships between colleagues and supervisors that foster a sense of ease. Such an environment makes employees feel comfortable and supported, thereby boosting their work morale (Herawati et al., 2021; Putri et al., 2019). Furthermore, Herawati et al. (2021) found that employee performance influenced by this type of work environment ultimately has a broader impact on organizational performance.

Conversely, Anjum and Ming (2018) discovered that a toxic work environment, marked by exclusion, incivility, harassment, and bullying, can increase work fatigue in employees. The negative emotion may impair productivity and exacerbate stress (Anjum & Ming, 2018; Anjum et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2020). Wang et al. (2020) also found that a toxic work environment leads to employee stress, which subsequently undermines their ability to complete future tasks. Moreover, a toxic work environment negatively affects not only employees' mental and physical well-being but also their productivity and retention. Research has indicated that a toxic work environment influences turnover intentions (Iqbal et al., 2022), productivity (Anjum & Ming, 2018; Larasati & Prajogo, 2022) work-related stress (Larasati & Prajogo, 2022; Wang et al., 2020), and employee engagement (Rasool et al., 2021; Tambunan et al., 2024). Given these findings, the work environment requires significant attention.

Tracing its origins, the term "toxicity" first emerged from English and Latin around 1880. The term "organizational toxicity" was introduced by Frost in 2003 (Kasalak, 2019), in the literature on organizations and management. According to Frost (Kasalak, 2019), a work environment is considered toxic when it causes employees to suffer and experience problems, diminishes their interest in work, and negatively impacts their morale and motivation. This, in turn, leads to damaged self-confidence and dignity among employees in the workplace. Kasalak (2019) concluded that a toxic work environment is a situation that causes an organization to become dysfunctional or damaged, harms employees, brings about problems, is unprofitable, and causes distress.

In many organizations, toxic workplaces are marked by dysfunctional interpersonal dynamics. These environments lack awareness that human resources are a critical driver of sustainable growth and innovation (Anjum et al., 2018). Furthermore, Anjum et al. (2018) argued that most organizational cultures are shaped top-down, making it difficult to reverse toxicity once leaders neglect early signs of workplace dysfunction.

Several factors contribute to toxic work environments, including despotic leadership (Iqbal et al., 2022), excessive workplace stress (Soqair & Gharib, 2023), poor organizational leadership, overly formal cultures, ineffective communication, and a culture of fear (Soqair & Gharib,

2023). A literature review by Sulaeman et al. (2024) identified destructive leadership styles, flawed organizational structures, and negative employee interactions as primary catalysts for toxicity.

Previous studies have also identified several demographic factors that influence employees' perceptions of their work environment, e.g., generational differences, duration of employment, and type of job. Different generations may perceive the workplace in distinct ways. For example, younger nurses tend to prioritize flexibility and work-life balance, while older generations place greater value on job security and hierarchical structure (Stuenkel et al., 2005). Likewise, Bell (2008) found that different generations may view their work environment differently. In addition, tenure can influence employee perceptions; employees who have worked longer tend to develop a more critical view of their work environment (Saylor & Wright, 1992). Furthermore, the nature of the job has also been found to affect employee perceptions. Based on these findings, demographic factors have been shown to influence how employees perceive their work environment, although the work environment itself has not been specifically examined in some of these studies.

McCulloch (2017) specifically found that perceptions of toxic work environments vary significantly by job type. In their study, social workers rated their workplace environment more favorably than other professions. While these findings suggest that demographic factors influence employees' perceptions of their work environment, prior research predominantly focused on positive workplace perceptions. However, as previously established, work environments exist across two primary spectrums (Anjum et al., 2018). This study specifically examined one spectrum: toxic work environments.

Research showed that employees with positive perceptions of their work environment exhibit higher job satisfaction (Turnip & Nurwidawati, 2023) and improved performance (Sihaloho & Siregar, 2020). This occurs because employees' environmental perceptions directly shape their behaviors and output (Bell, 2008). Bell (2008) further emphasized that understanding generational differences in workplace perceptions is critical for designing targeted performance interventions that address each generation's unique needs and preferences. Additionally, such understanding helps organizations allocate resources more effectively (Bell, 2008).

There has been a shift in workplace behaviors in the modern workforce, due to technology, the internet, and the pandemic, which inevitably affect employee behavior in organizations, especially those coming from different generations. A generation is a group of individuals identified by common birth years and influential events during their developmental phases (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Putra, 2018). Initially, there were four distinct generations in the workplace: veterans (1925-1946), baby boomers (1946-1960), generation X (1960-1980), and generation Y (1980-1995). However, this composition changed as the fifth generation, generation Z (1995-2010), gradually entered the workforce, coinciding with the departure of vet-

eran workers (Bencsik et al., 2016; Tanner, 2020). Each generation has different values and attitudes due to being born in different eras and experiencing different events Alshop as cited in (Adi & Indrawati, 2019), which subsequently influences how they work and prevail in professional environments.

The generations of the workers affect workplace climate and job satisfaction because generational differences inherently shape perceptions, which, if not addressed, can lead to conflicts (Teclaw et al., 2014). Generational differences indicate that perceptions change over time, where the amount of work experience shapes employee perceptions of their work environment, including criteria for toxic work environments.

This study aimed to describe the toxic work environment perceived by cross-generational employees in Indonesia and the demographic variables that influence it. Research on demographic differences in viewing toxic work environments is crucial to guide improvements in the design and management strategies of the workplace, ensuring that they align with the needs and unique characteristics of employees. Considering cross-generational perspectives is essential to provide more comprehensive insights and help organizations create a healthy work culture. Different generations have different perspectives on what defines a quality work environment (Leslie et al., 2021). A comfortable workplace for one generation may differ from another, so understanding the needs of employees across generations can enhance cooperation and prevent organizational issues (Becton et al., 2014; Kapoor & Solomon, 2011; Leslie et al., 2021).

## Method

### Participants

This study employed a quantitative descriptive approach, with participants consisting of Indonesian citizens who had worked for at least one year. Data were collected through an online questionnaire using Google Forms, with the data collection period running from November 7 to 25, 2021. Convenience sampling was used to select participants, yielding 783 respondents (318 men, 465 women), aged 19 to 60 ( $M = 32.71$ ;  $SD = 10.5$ ), from various regions in Indonesia (Bali, Java, Kalimantan, Papua, Sulawesi, and Sumatra).

### Instruments

The research instrument consisted of two parts: 1) Demographic questions; 2) the Toxic Workplace Scale, developed based on Taştan (2017) theory. The Toxic Workplace Scale consists of two main categories: a) Behavioral Toxics, which have two subcomponents—toxic behaviors of coworkers (e.g., "Speaking harshly to me in public") and toxic behaviors of managers (e.g., "Taking credit for my work") – and, b) Contextual Toxics, which also divided have two subcomponents—toxic social-structural factors (e.g., "Having an unfair performance appraisal system") and toxic climate (e.g., "Sudden and unpredictable policy changes"). The scale has 39 items,

with a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of 0.957, and item discrimination indices ranging from 0.280 to 0.732.

### Data Analysis

The data in this study were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to understand the overall picture of the toxic work environment as perceived by employees. In addition, the researchers employed the Mann-Whitney U test to examine gender-based differences in perceptions of the toxic work environment, and the Kruskal-Wallis test to identify differences based on generation, education level, type of job, region, and length of employment.

## Results

### Demographic Characteristics

Women (59.4%) dominated the gender of the study participants. In terms of generational distribution, Generation Y (38.8%) and Generation Z (34.5%) comprised the largest groups, while Generation X accounted for 26.7% of participants. Regarding educational attainment, 51.1% held a bachelor's degree (S1) and 23.8% were high school/vocational school (SMU/SMK) graduates, with the remainder consisting of primary school (SD), junior high school (SMP), diploma, master's (S2), and doctoral (S3) graduates. Most participants were private sector employees (52.1%), with the rest working either as civil servants (ASN/PNS) or academic staff/lecturers. Complete demographic data are presented in Table 1.

Descriptive statistics were used to illustrate the data distribution among the research participants. The empirical mean and the hypothetical mean were obtained from the participants' responses using the toxic workplace scale (see Table 2), and the results showed that the majority of employees perceived the toxic work environment to be in the low category (91%), while the rest perceived it as moderate (8%) and high (0.9%) (see Table 3).

The analysis extended beyond general toxic work environment prevalence to examine demographic variations in employee experiences. Kruskal-Wallis tests revealed significant differences in toxic environment perceptions across generational groups ( $H(2) = 10.36$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ,  $\epsilon^2 = 0.011$ ), job types ( $H(2) = 45.12$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\epsilon^2 = 0.055$ ), and working periods ( $H(2) = 19.09$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\epsilon^2 = 0.019$ ). While statistically significant, the small-to-medium effect sizes (the strongest effect for job types at  $\epsilon^2 = 0.055$ ) suggest these demographic factors produce meaningful but relatively modest differences in daily workplace experiences. The findings indicate that although measurable variations exist between employee groups in their perceptions of workplace toxicity, these differences manifest as subtle gradations rather than dramatic contrasts in organizational climate perception. This pattern offers implications for targeted workplace interventions, suggesting they should account for demographic influences while recognizing that fundamental toxicity issues likely transcend different employees. The results underscore the importance of considering both statistical significance and practical effect magnitude when

**Table 1**  
Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N=783)

	Characteristics	N	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	318	40.6
	Female	465	59.4
Generation	X	209	26.7
	Y	304	38.8
	Z	270	34.5
Education	Elementary School	1	0.1
	Junior High School	6	0.8
	Senior High School	186	23.8
	Diploma	117	14.9
	Bachelor's	400	51.1
	Master's	68	8.7
	Doctorate	5	0.6
Occupation	Civil Servants	289	36.9
	Private Sector Employees	408	52.1
	Lecturers/Academic Staff	86	11
Domicile	Bali	22	2.8
	Java	701	89.5
	Kalimantan	14	1.8
	Papua	14	1.8
	Sulawesi	1	0.1
	Sumatra	31	4.0
Working Period	< 5 years	435	55.6
	6–10 years	117	14.9
	11–15 years	83	10.6
	16–20 years	48	6.1
	>21 years	100	12.8

**Table 2**  
Descriptive Data of Toxic Workplace Among Employees

Variable	N	Empirical Means				Hypothetical Means			
		Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Toxic Workplace	783	39.00	175.00	61.25	21.116	39	195	117	26

**Table 3**  
*Categorization of Employees' Toxic Workplace Scores*

Variable	Category	Score	N	Percentage (%)
Toxic Work-place	Low	$x < 91$	713	91.1
	Medium	$91 \leq x < 143$	63	8.0
	High	$x > 143$	7	0.9

interpreting workplace environment research.

The study further examined demographic differences across specific subcomponents of toxic work environments (Table 4). Analysis revealed significant generational differences in perceptions of toxic coworker behaviors ( $H(2) = 17.76, p < 0.001, \epsilon^2 = 0.020$ ). When analyzing all four subcomponents by job type, significant variations emerged across each dimension ( $p < 0.001$ ). Working period similarly showed differential effects on three sub-components: toxic coworker behaviors ( $H(4) = 24.71, p < 0.001, \epsilon^2 = 0.032$ ), toxic social-structural factors ( $H(4) = 10.86, p = 0.028, 0.007$ ), and toxic climate ( $H(4) = 11.28, p = 0.024, 0.007$ ). However, no significant differences were found across genders, education levels, or geographical regions.

While these demographic factors demonstrated statistically significant associations, the observed effect sizes ranged from small to negligible, suggesting that although demographic characteristics do influence perceptions of specific toxic workplace elements, their overall impact remains relatively limited. This finding implies that core aspects of workplace toxicity may transcend demographic boundaries, manifesting similarly across diverse employee groups within organizations. The results highlight the complex interplay between individual characteristics and environmental factors in shaping workplace perceptions, while underscoring the fundamental nature of toxic organizational elements that affect employees regardless of demographic background.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the majority of employees who participated in this research did not perceive their workplace to be toxic (91%). This is an encouraging result, as it suggests that the work environment—at least for the study participants—did not cause suffering or problems for employees, allowing them to perform their organizational tasks optimally.

This finding aligns with the Government Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia No. 88 of 2019 (2019) on occupational health, which mandates employers to protect everyone in the workplace to ensure their well-being and that they are free from health problems and harmful effects caused by work. This includes being protected from behaviors like insults, slander, bullying, manipulation, and other negative actions from coworkers, superiors, or the organization itself.

A healthy work environment enables employees to deliver quality performance, increase work engagement, retention, and job satisfaction (Johansen et al., 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO) defined a healthy work environment as a place where workers and managers collaborate to create a safe, healthy, and supportive workplace (Gasparino et al., 2024). Research has also shown that a healthy work environment can reduce burnout and increase job satisfaction (Albashayreh et al., 2019; Kelly & Todd, 2017). Employees who do not experience toxic behavior from colleagues and supervisors, as well as unpleasant social climates or structures, are more likely to achieve better job performance. They can work more optimally and positively impact their organization's performance (Herawati et al., 2021; Kurniawan & Heryanto, 2019; Putri et al., 2019). A study conducted on Pakistani employees found that employees who avoid toxic work environments are more productive and successful in their projects (Wang et al., 2020). However, in the present study, there were still 0.9% of workers who reported discomfort due to exclusion, incivility, harassment, and bullying in the workplace.

Furthermore, the researchers also found significant differences in the perception of a toxic work environment across generations ( $H(2) = 10.36, p = 0.006$ ). The results showed that, compared to Generations X and Y, Generation Z perceives their work environment as more toxic (Mean Rank = 410.43). In more detail, the researchers discovered that among the four components of the toxic work environment, toxic behavior from coworkers was reported to differ significantly by generation ( $H(2) = 17.76, p < 0.001$ ). Generation Z reported experiencing more toxic behavior from coworkers than Generations X and Y (Mean Rank = 417.19).

Panggabean and Satwika (2024) found that Generation Z tends to prefer supportive, inclusive work environments that allow them to grow. Consequently, an uncomfortable work environment affects their loyalty to their job (Panggabean & Satwika, 2024). Data show a tendency for Generation Z employees to leave their organizations (Afandi et al., 2022; Pinandito & Savira, 2022; Sidorcuka & Chesnovicka, 2017).

Additionally, Töröcsik et al. (2014) said that Generation Z is the first global generation (Homo Globalis). Growing up in an era of technological and internet advancements sometimes makes other generations in the organization have difficulty understanding them. Meanwhile, the information they receive as a result of technological and internet advancements makes them more sensitive to issues related to discrimination, including workplace discrimination (Deloitte, 2022). This sensitivity makes Generation Z employees more likely to perceive certain behaviors as "toxic."

A positive, enthusiastic work environment that offers learning opportunities and fosters mutual respect makes Generation Z employees feel valued and important in the organization (Kodithuwakku et al., 2018). However, what is perceived as the best way to support employees in one generation may be perceived as unpleasant by em-



**Table 4**  
Results of Difference Test Based on Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Data	Toxic Behaviors of Coworkers	Toxic Behaviors of Managers	Toxic Social-Structural Factors	Toxic Climate	Toxic Workplace
Gender	-0.259	-0.478	-0.351	-1.310	-1.163
Generation	17.762*	4.980	2.606	3.327	10.362*
Education	4.609	5.661	1.019	1.468	2.401
Occupation	31.502*	32.559*	25.318*	47.026*	45.116*
Domicile	2.178	8.814	3.331	1.964	3.800
Working Period	24.705*	6.648	10.859*	11.276*	19.093*

Note. \* $p < .05$

employees in other generations. For example, Generation X and Y tend to prioritize leisure time and extrinsic rewards, which differs from Generation Z (Hampton & Welsh, 2019). For Generation Z, money and work are reported to be the highest sources of stress (81% and 77%), with issues like bullying and social interactions also adding to their stress (35%). This is because Generation Z pays more attention to their mental health compared to previous generations (Ali et al., 2020). According to Rasool et al. (2021), this is one reason why Generation Z struggles with organizational engagement.

Additionally, as one of the largest proportions of employees in the current workforce (BPS, 2020), Generation Z employees should communicate their preferences and expectations clearly to the organization. Their involvement in discussions to develop organizational policies can create a supportive workplace that aligns with their values and enhances overall job satisfaction (Fatima & Srivastava, 2024).

The present study also found that different job types affect the toxic work environment experienced by employees ( $H(2) = 45.12$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Private employees experience a more toxic work environment compared to those working as civil servants or educators (Mean Rank = 443.79). Differences arise based on the work environment. Private employees work in companies with the primary motive of maximizing profits and avoiding losses. On the other hand, in government or public service organizations, profit is not the main goal (Pramono et al., 2018). This influences how work processes in organizations are formed, including interactions with colleagues and supervisors, social structures, and organizational climate. This aligns with McCulloch (2017) study, which also found differences in assessments of toxic work environments based on job types. However, in that study, social workers perceived higher toxicity in the workplace compared to other job types.

Employees with less than five years of tenure also reported experiencing a more toxic work environment compared to those who have worked longer than five years ( $H(2) = 19.09$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; MeanRank = 415.03). Individuals with longer work experience tend to be more resilient to the pressures experienced in their jobs than those with shorter tenure (Kawatu as cited in (Manabung et al., 2018). Unlike those who have worked longer, employees

with less than five years of tenure are still adjusting to the work processes in the organization. Based on this, it is very likely that employees with shorter working periods encounter undesirable behavior from their surroundings that aim to shape them to fit the organization. Additionally, it was found that gender, education, and residence do not influence the perceived toxic work environment.

The limitation of this study lies in the data collection, which did not proportionally represent the overall population in Indonesia, especially those outside Java Island. Therefore, caution must be taken when generalizing the results. However, this study is still valuable in helping organizations gain an understanding of the behaviors, habits, and values emerging in employee interactions with coworkers, superiors, and their work environment.

## Conclusion

The study findings indicate that the majority of employees perceive their work environment as having low toxicity levels (91%), with smaller proportions reporting moderate (8%) and high (0.9%) levels of toxicity. Demographic analysis revealed significant variations in toxic work environment perceptions across different generational groups, job types, and work durations. Notably, Generation Z employees reported higher toxicity perceptions compared to other generations, while private-sector workers and those with less than five years of work experience were more likely to report toxic work environments than their peers in other sectors or with longer tenure.

## Recommendation

These results suggest that while workplace toxicity in Indonesia generally remains at manageable levels, organizations should not become complacent. The presence of even a small percentage (0.9%) of employees experiencing high toxicity at the workplace warrants serious attention, as unchecked negative workplace dynamics could potentially escalate and undermine organizational performance over time. The particularly heightened sensitivity of Generation Z employees to workplace toxicity presents both a challenge and an opportunity for organizations. As the emerging workforce, Generation Z brings different expectations and needs that require thoughtful consideration.

To address these findings, organizations would benefit from implementing targeted interventions. Mentorship

programs that facilitate knowledge transfer and mutual understanding between senior employees and Generation Z workers could help bridge generational gaps linked to expectations in the workplace. Establishing dedicated support systems to assist new employees in adapting to organizational culture may prove particularly valuable. Simultaneously, creating structured opportunities for open dialogue where younger employees can contribute ideas for workplace improvement would foster a more inclusive environment. Organizations should also consider implementing a regular monitoring system to proactively identify and address emerging workplace issues before they escalate.

The study underscores the importance of maintaining vigilance against workplace toxicity while recognizing the evolving needs of a multigenerational workforce. By adopting proactive measures that address the specific concerns of different employee groups, particularly the Generation Z workforce, organizations can cultivate work environments that promote well-being, productivity, and sustainable performance. These efforts should be viewed not as discretionary initiatives but as strategic investments in organizational health and future readiness.

## Declaration

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## Author's Contributions

RNK and PAS designed the study. RNK collected the data, PAS analyzed the data, and wrote the manuscript. All authors read, provided feedback, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in the research, writing, and/or publication of this manuscript.

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