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THE GENERATION Z HANDBOOK: A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH TO
MOTIVATION IN THE WORKPLACE

BY

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This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for
the master’s degree and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. 
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ABSTRACT

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Organizations must develop human capital to remain competitive in today’s economic landscape (Crook, Todd, Combs, Woehr, & Ketchen, 2011; Noe, 2017). Motivation is one aspect of human capital development that organizational research has difficulty understanding (Kovach, 1980), and given the recent introduction of Generation Z into the workforce (Ferri-Reed, 2016), this thesis seeks to understand the process of organizational motivation for Generation Z from a communication perspective. By applying grounded theory methods to 13 interviews, I illustrate several exploratory relationships within an emergent framework to describe the process of motivation for Generation Z participants. Primarily, subjects demonstrate that through the use of task and personal communication, they are able to connect work to values and personal identity in order to achieve motivation within organizations. Additionally, I discuss my process of analysis, implications for research, theoretical, and practical applications, study limitations, and future directions for research.
Chapter 1

Introduction

In the information age, companies have transitioned (and continue to transition) from local to regional to global (Barry, 2007). These transitions represent positive change for businesses and consumers: as organizations cash in on efficiencies of scale, prices drop and products become more readily available (Mourao & Enes, 2017). For this reason, the economic landscape today is much different than it has ever been (Ezcurra & Rodriguez-Pose, 2013). These changes in the economic landscape benefit many organizations, as earnings are reinvested in new business opportunities and social causes (Erhemjamts, Li, & Venkateswaran, 2013). However, when a business reaches an optimal scale (i.e. when increasing its level of operation does not result in an on average decrease in input cost per output unit), it finds no additional competitive advantage from increasing its size (Mourao & Enes, 2017). Competitiveness refers to a company’s ability to survive in a particular industry by maintaining or expanding its market share (Noe, 2017). Without the path to competitiveness through scale available, organizations must consider other options. Toward that end, the purpose of this thesis is to investigate how communication can keep organizations competitive. The following paragraphs will describe some fundamental elements of organizations, the various perspectives that relate those elements together, motivation as one specific factor influenced by communication, and generational differences in the workplace.

Background

To understand options available for organizations, it is first necessary to highlight some key features of organizations. From an economic perspective, organizations exist
and endure only to the extent to which they benefit stakeholders—the shareholders, communities, customers, workers, and other groups that profit from seeing the organization succeed (Noe, 2017). Organizations achieve this goal through the accumulation, development, and management of their capital (Crook, Todd, Combs, Woehr, & Ketchen, 2011). Capital refers to the resources that an organization uses or has access to use for its operation (Noe, 2017). Capital can be either tangible or intangible (Bohm & Vachadze, 2008; Crook et al., 2011; Noe, 2017).

Tangible forms of capital include financial capital—money—and physical capital—equipment and facilities (Bohm & Vachadze, 2008; Noe, 2017). Tangible forms of capital are relatively uniform across organizations (Noe, 2017). In other words, a piece of equipment holds the same monetary value and can perform the same tasks regardless of the organization that owns it, and any organization has access to purchase that equipment. Additionally, efficiency related to scale is apparent for tangible capital: if a piece of equipment (with a set cost) goes from being used only 4 hours in a given workday to being used 8 hours every day, then the value produced by that equipment doubles while the actual cost of the equipment is unchanged. Because of these attributes of tangible capital, it does not create a unique competitive advantage for organizations, especially similarly sized organizations (Noe, 2017). In other words, because the qualities of equipment and facilities are relatively uniform across organizations, the only advantage they create for an organization is based not on the quality of the resource but on using it more efficiently than other organizations, and organizations of the same size (scale) can be expected to use a resource with similar efficiency.
The other type of capital is intangible, which includes intellectual capital, customer capital, social capital, and human capital (Crook et al., 2011; Noe, 2017). Intellectual capital is the knowledge that exists through various structures (such as databases or training materials) within an organization (Noe, 2017). Customer capital refers to relationships an organization makes with others outside a company (customers, suppliers, agencies, etc.) to accomplish goals, while social capital refers to relationships and company culture internal to an organization (Noe, 2017). Finally, human capital refers to the experiences, attitudes, knowledge, skills, energy, and motivation that members of an organization possess (Crook et al., 2011; Noe, 2017).

Unlike tangible capital, intangible capital is not uniform across organizations (Crook et al., 2011). Some of these types of capital are difficult to acquire or take significant time to create (Crook et al., 2011; Noe, 2017). For instance, an older organization has had more opportunities to accumulate intellectual capital because of its history of experiences and has made more contact with customers to build external relationships than a new startup company. The key difference between tangible and intangible capital is that quality matters for intangible capital because an organization cannot simply upgrade its intangible assets to match the competition, whereas a company could buy equipment on par with competition quite easily (Crook et al., 2011). Therefore, intangible capital represents a very distinct competitive advantage for organizations (Crook et al., 2011; Noe, 2017). Consequently, organizations must focus on intangible capital to maintain competitiveness after reaching an efficient scale in order to benefit stakeholders (Noe, 2017).
Problem

While the economic perspective of organizations clearly lays the foundation for understanding competitive success within organizations, it does not necessarily address the methods required to achieve that competitive advantage—to accumulate, develop, and manage intangible capital. To that goal, other social science perspectives are much more attuned. According to Crooks and colleagues (2011), “maximizing the impact and efficiency of human capital in organizations is one of the cornerstones of industrial and organizational psychology inquiry” (p. 443). They go on to analyze 66 previous studies linking human capital to performance metrics for organizations and find that human capital does relate positively to organizational performance.

While such results provide support for the economic perspective previously described, they still lack the specificity to explain methods or processes to develop human capital. In order to better understand the process, Ployhart, Iddekinge, and MacKenzie, Jr. (2011) distinguish between general human capital (which can be applied broadly) and unit-specific human capital (which is contextually-bound—job specific) and find that general human capital assists in developing unit-specific human capital. Results like theirs give organizations clearer guidelines for improving their human capital to achieve competitive advantages in their respective industries because they highlight the development process. Accordingly, a great deal of social science literature exists concerning training and development to detail the procedures necessary to achieve valuable organizational results (Noe, 2017). Rather than focus on the results of that entire body of literature, this thesis narrows in on a particular strand of inquiry—motivation—from one social science perspective—communication.
Apart from other social science perspectives, the communication perspective holds a great deal of value for understanding the process of human capital development. While the imperative of organizations may be to benefit stakeholders, the essence of organizations is interaction (Daft & Weick, 1984). The communication perspective is appropriate for this topic because it is sensitive to interactions between people in ways that other perspectives are not. Through these interactions, organizations derive their value and evolve to fit new circumstances (Daft & Weick, 1984; Pace & Faules, 1994). Communication can therefore be viewed as a conduit for developing human capital. Sensitivity to the symbols and language people use to create meaning can help illustrate effective pathways for shaping their development process (and, thus, for building human capital).

**Motivation.** One of the elements of the human capital development process that is particularly difficult to pin down is motivation. Pace and Faules (1994) define motivation as “the basic conditions that impel action” (p. 79). Though the definition is simple enough, motivation is difficult to understand and develop for organizations partly because there are disagreements about what constitutes those “basic conditions” (Noe, 2017; Pace & Faules, 1994). For example, expectancy theory suggests that people are motivated by the value of anticipated rewards for behavior, such as achieving goals, getting money, or being of service to others (Childs-Kean & Fawaz, 2018; Noe, 2017; Pace & Faules, 1994). On the other hand, needs theories, such as Maslow’s needs hierarchy, stress that people are motivated to act to satisfy perceived deficiencies in their lives (e.g. if you are hungry, you need to eat; Acevedo, 2018; Noe, 2017; Pace & Faules, 1994).
Each conceptualization of motivation offers its own implications for organizations on how to best motivate employees, such as by linking behaviors to outcomes valued by employees (expectancy; Noe, 2017) or by communicating how organizational participation satisfies various employee needs (needs; Noe, 2017). However, the various theories of motivation do not seem to converge around a common method to achieve motivation. Kovach (1980) clearly articulates the problem:

> Employee attitudes should provide insights into motivation, but by the time data on these are studied and the results disseminated, it is already too late. Rapidly changing technology, crumbling traditions, media influence, and so forth have all conspired against the manager by changing the workers’ attitudes, desires, and motivations. These changes take place so rapidly that most theories of motivation are outdated by the time they are implemented. (p. 54-55).

Rather than spending time identifying particular motivators, theory is better served illustrating the processes by which various factors produce motivation. Even with a process in mind, it is still difficult to know the best practices to improve motivation for a particular organization at a given time in order to gain a competitive advantage without details about employee motivators.

**Generational differences.** In addition to the dynamic nature of motivation (Kovach, 1980), another striking issue is that motivation may not be static between generational groups (Ferri-Reed, 2016). Factors influence people in different ways depending on the life stage a person is in (Levenson, 2010) or the generational cohort to which one belongs (Rentz, 2015). For example, Baby Boomers frequently list monetary rewards as a primary motivator, whereas Gen X prefer time off to balance work and life
responsibilities (Rentz, 2015; Tang, Cunningham, Frauman, Ivy & Perry, 2012). One of the critical failures of organizations is grounding “decisions about employee motivation on erroneous information about what actually motivates employees” (Pace & Faules, 1994, p.78). With a new generation of workers (Generation Z) beginning to enter the workforce en masse (Hernaus & Vokic, 2014; Ferri-Reed, 2016), it is paramount that research clarifies what motivates Gen Z in organizational contexts (motivators) and how it does so (process) in order to be responsive to the current and future needs of organizations and employees.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this thesis is to better understand the process of motivation for Generation Z in the workplace from a communication perspective. This chapter began by explaining an economic perspective of organizations and organizations’ prerogative to endure. In order to accomplish this goal, organizations must focus attention on intangible assets. Social science perspectives, like communication, give valuable insight into how to grow intangible assets, such as human capital. One interesting dimension of human capital is motivation. Though the social sciences have spent considerable time investigating motivation, the process of motivation still is not well defined. Furthermore, it varies by generation, and as a new generation enters the workforce, motivation must once again be re-contextualized to fit this new cohort. The following chapters will detail literature related to motivation and generational differences in organizations, pose research questions, develop a method for explicitly investigating communication-related motivation for Generation Z, provide results of that investigation, and discuss the implications and limitations of those results.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

One of the problems organizations face is finding ways to successfully motivate employees (Kovach, 1980). Despite evidence showing the benefits of motivation for organizations, the actual processes and methods for motivating employees are not well understood (Kovach, 1980). This chapter reviews literature on motivation, motivating language, and generations in the workplace to explain what is already known and gaps in that knowledge. Significant research gaps include unquestioned assumptions of motivating language theory (MLT), a lack of qualitative investigation of MLT, a lack of scholarly literature about Generation Z in organizational contexts, and a need for clarification on how leaders should handle the upcoming generation as they begin to integrate with the current workforce. This thesis seeks to begin filling the latter two gaps by investigating communication-related motivation for Generation Z in organizations. Additionally, it will address the first two gaps by closely comparing results with MLT in discussion. The following chapters will review literature, clarify the methods used to adequately research this topic, analyze data collected using those methods, explain results, and finally, discuss the limitations and implications of results and analysis within the context of the literature presented in this chapter.

Motivating language theory

One theory bridges the gap between motivation, organization, and communication. MLT was first developed by Sullivan (1988) to explain how varied speech acts by leaders function in conjunction with one another to achieve motivation within organizations. Three types of speech acts are important for this theory—
perlocutionary, locutionary, and illocutionary (Sullivan, 1988). Perlocutionary speech acts refer to utterances that reduce uncertainty and confer knowledge (Mayfield, Mayfield & Kopf, 1995; Sullivan, 1988). Locutionary speech acts are those that transmit norms and establish meaningfulness (Mayfield et al., 1995; Sullivan, 1988). Finally, illocutionary speech acts refer to speech that expresses emotion and bonds people together (Mayfield et al., 1995; Sullivan, 1988). According to MLT, the use of a variety of all three types will result in improved employee motivation (Mayfield et al., 1995; Sullivan, 1988).

Sullivan (1988) illustrates this process in a theoretical model. The model shows the various pathways affected by each speech act and eventually resulting in motivation. Perlocutionary language helps employees assess the relationship between tasks and goals, which results in work directed at achieving goals. Illocutionary language improves employees’ perceptions of self-worth, and work precedes and follows as a necessary contextual factor that brings people together to allow for bonding to occur. Locutionary language facilitates the creation of cognitive schema (mental models of reality), which produce work to sustain the schema. Additionally, the assessment of the relationship between tasks and goals (from perlocutionary speech acts) and the perception of self-worth (from illocutionary speech acts) may play a role in further developing cognitive schema. Work produced by each of these processes demonstrates the motivation achieved by MLT. While the original model connects motivating language with work, J. Mayfield and Mayfield (2009) additionally connect motivating language to organizational outcomes by suggesting that motivating language affects outcomes by changing employee attitudes. Furthermore, they encourage future research to “travel
beyond simple input-output relationships to a deeper understanding of how these processes operate” (p. 474). Their statement captures the primary goal and intention of this thesis: to understand the process of motivation.

Several assumptions underlie MLT (Mayfield et al., 1995; Sullivan, 1988). One such assumption is that “the effect of motivating language on worker outcomes will be moderated by leader behavior in the majority of cases,” such that when language and behavior are incongruent, behavior will take precedence (Mayfield et al., 1995, p. 332). Holmes and Parker (2017) test this assumption by measuring behavioral integrity and credibility as precursors to motivating language, finding “that walk and talk alignment is more than an assumption—it is a vital antecedent necessary for the implementation of ML [motivating language]” (p. 78). In other words, leaders must act in accordance with their words if they wish to meaningfully impact employee motivation. Another assumption is that the use of all three types of speech acts will more greatly impact employee motivation than the use of just one or two (Mayfield et al., 1995; M. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2016; Sullivan, 1988). A final basic assumption of MLT is that what a leader says impacts followers—that words have the capacity to motivate in the first place (Sullivan, 1988). While a plethora of research has addressed motivating language and its many functions and impacts on organizations (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009, 2012; M. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2016, 2017; Sharbrough, Simmons, & Cantrill, 2006; Sun, Pan, & Ho, 2016), those studies do not explicitly investigate this final assumption. One of the simple goals of this thesis is to qualitatively investigate that assumption—to validate whether or not words matter to employees.
Most MLT research uses quantitative data collected from the Motivating Language Scale (MLS, Mayfield et al., 1995) to show how motivating language impacts organizational outcomes. Motivating language has been positively correlated with job satisfaction, perception of leader effectiveness, perception of leader communication competence, and worker communication satisfaction (Sharbrough et al., 2006). Most research, however, uses causal modeling to show the effects of motivating language on organizational outcomes. Motivating language has positive, direct effects on job performance, job satisfaction (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2006; Mayfield, Mayfield, & Kopf, 1998), worker innovation (M. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2004), employee attitude toward attendance (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009), employee self-efficacy (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2012), supervisory effectiveness, intrinsic motivation, organizational citizenship behavior (Sun et al., 2016), effective worker decision making (M. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2016), and perception of creative work environment (M. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2017). It additionally has indirect effects on employee performance via self-efficacy (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2012), job satisfaction (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2006), and intrinsic motivation (Sun et al., 2016); employee absenteeism via attitude toward attendance (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009); and organizational citizenship behavior via intrinsic motivation (Sun et al., 2016). Each of these studies provides significant and substantial evidence supporting motivating language as a powerful tool to improve organizations.

The work of Sun et al. (2016) is uniquely interesting in the context of this thesis. Their structural equation model connects motivating language to employee outcomes via intrinsic motivation for a sample of army and airline employees in Taipei, which
demonstrates that motivating language activates the internal affective states of employees, rather than simply providing external reinforcement. By demonstrating this connection, Sun et al. (2016) help to clarify the process through which language motivates people. Additional research elaborates on how to successfully implement motivating language within an organization by using it as a diagnostic tool for needs assessment (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002) or by using it to frame top leader (C-suite leadership) communications about organization vision (Mayfield, Mayfield, & Sharbrough, 2015).

In comparison to the number of quantitative studies of MLT, there is a significant lack of qualitative research using MLT despite calls for its qualitative application and validation (M. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2016). While this thesis does not use MLT deductively (as a guiding framework for investigation), the grounded theory produced through this thesis will be compared and discussed with MLT to help fill this gap. Because of this design, any areas of independent convergence between the two theoretical frameworks will provide substantial support to the validity of those areas, whereas areas of divergence will represent opportunities for additional investigation and reflexivity (May & Pattillo-McCoy, 2000). Furthermore, although research suggests that motivating language is applicable across a variety of organization types (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009; Sun et al., 2016), its application across generations is untested. Therefore, this thesis seeks to understand communication-related motivation for Generation Z (see RQ1[b])—the most recent generation to enter the workforce (Ferri-Reed, 2016).
Generations

One of the difficult components for generation-based research is defining the various generational groups. All generational categorizations are in some way arbitrary because the lines between generations are human-created and blurry (Hernaus & Vokic, 2014), but the goal of generational categorization is to lump individuals together based on common factors and experiences, distinct from the commonalities of other generation groups (Levenson, 2010). Rentz (2015) notes that even with that goal in mind, studies have nevertheless defined different boundaries around these groups. For example, Rentz (2015) defines Generation Y as those born between 1980 and 2000, and Hartman and McCambridge (2011) define Generation Y as those born between 1980 and 2002. Schullery (2013) defines the same group as born between 1982 and 1999.

While these definitions only differ by a couple years on either side, those differences can affect how we interpret generational research when participants are chosen from those fringe years. While one study may attempt to offer insight into Generation Y by studying participants born in 1980, another study might try to offer insights into Generation X using the very same participants. To avoid this problem, it is necessary to recognize the overlap which occurs between generations rather than strictly generalize findings to one generation (Ferri-Reed, 2016). For the present study, I define Generation Z as those born from 2000 to the present, Generation Y as those born from 1980 through 1999, Generation X as those born from 1965 through 1979, and Baby Boomers as those born prior to 1965. These parameters represent a synthesis of the several definitions used by various generational scholars (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011; Levenson, 2010; Rentz, 2015; Schullery, 2013).
As additional justification for building organizational categories around
generations, Desai and Lele (2017) found that birth year significantly relates to one’s
perceptions of ideal work and ideal workplace. In other words, differing views on
organizations from different age groups are not merely coincidental; they are impactful.
Furthermore, Schullery (2013) states “generational cohorts do hold similar values and
differ from other cohorts” (p. 259). Therefore, generational differences benefit
researchers by providing a meaningful structure in which organizational knowledge can
be arranged.

One of the ways scholars classify generations is through the formative
experiences that shape each group (Vincent, 2005). These experiences represent the
common life experiences shared by every member of a generation (Johnson, 2013), and
they also serve to influence the attitudes, beliefs, and values of a particular cohort
(Hernaus & Vokic, 2014; Morton, 2002). In this way, “generations are constituted as a
result of ‘lived through’ history, the product of experience” (Vincent, 2005, p. 581).
Therefore, it is important to contextualize results in terms of formative experiences when
studying generations. For example, Baby Boomers grew up during Vietnam and the
Watergate scandal, which contributes to their tendency to question government authority,
and Generation X grew up during a time when both parents began working (often leaving
them alone), which contributes to the value they place on independence (Johnson, 2013).

**Generation Z.** This thesis deals specifically with the workplace identity of
Generation Z. The formative experiences of Generation Z may help to shed light on that
identity. While it is not clear yet which formative experiences will be most impactful for
this generation, scholars point to many experiences when describing Generation Z (Grow
Among the most commonly referenced experiences, technology is a frontrunner. Generation Z has never lived in a time without the Internet (Dupont, 2015; Grow & Yang, 2018), which gives them access to more information than previous generations during their formative years (Miller, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2017; Wellner, 2000).

The ubiquitous access to information and connectivity through the Internet has both positive and negative impacts on Generation Z. On one hand, the Internet has brought social issues closer to this generation (Grow & Yang, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2017), inspiring engagement and interest around topics such as personal branding (“Making way for Generation Z at the workplace”, 2016), climate change, gay marriage, and marijuana legalization (Dupont, 2015). On the other hand, the darker sides of the Internet—privacy concerns, information leaks, identity theft, and online bullying—have pushed Generation Z to focus on information security (Grow & Yang, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2017).

Social changes also distinguish this generation from others. Broadly speaking, Generation Z is growing up during significant demographic changes unlike previous generations (Grow & Yang, 2018; Miller, 2018). For example, the proportion of White and Black people in the United States is shrinking as other races and ethnicities grow (Wellner, 2000). In conjunction with broad demographic changes and increases in connectivity, Generation Z also has greater access to global, intercultural perspectives than did the Baby Boomers or Generation X (Miller, 2018; Paul, 2001). Social changes are also apparent at a household level as families move away from traditional two-parent homes and toward single-parent or other family structures (Wellner, 2000).
Finally, Generation Z grew up in a volatile world. The global terror epidemic has been persistent for the entire lifespan of Generation Z ("Making way", 2016), and incidents of school shootings and violence have received increasing media coverage throughout their lives (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). Together, these violent trends contribute to safety concerns for the entire generation (Paul, 2001). Additionally, Generation Z lived through the Great Recession as children (Seemiller & Grace, 2018) and consequently developed competitive, entrepreneurial, and financially-focused attitudes (Miller, 2018) reminiscent of the children who grew up during the Great Depression ("Making way", 2016).

**Generation Y.** As Generation Z’s closest counterpart, Generation Y developed with some of the same formative experiences, but they also have many unique experiences. While Generation Z grew up in the Internet age, Generation Y grew up to witness the birth of the Internet and have embraced it wholeheartedly (Johnson, 2013). Similarly, while Generation Z grew up in an era of school violence and global terror, Generation Y saw the beginnings of these problems—with memories of 9/11 and the Columbine school shooting (Morton, 2002; Paul, 2001). Other similarities between the two generations are the changing household dynamics, increasing diversity, and access to global perspectives, though the scope and potential impacts of those similarities may be different between the two generations (Duh, 2016; Johnson, 2013; Morton, 2002; Paul, 2001). For example, members of Generation Y were raised during an increase in single-parent households, and the lower financial status of such families contributes to Generation Y materialism (Duh, 2016). Generation Z also is experiencing different household dynamics but not necessarily just an increase in single-parent households, so
the same results may not apply. As a young generation, Generation Z has not received all of the research necessary to answer such questions.

Generation Y also has several different experiences than Generation Z. Foremost, Generation Y experienced several high profile celebrity and political scandals, such as OJ Simpson’s trial, the Clinton scandal, and the 2000 election crisis (Paul, 2001). Not only the incidents themselves but also their botched media coverage (at times) contributes to Generation Y’s rising mistrust in government and commercial news media (Paul, 2001). Television was also significant for Generation Y for other reasons. Generation Y experienced the height of MTV, the rise of reality television (Paul, 2001), and the creation of an entire culture around video games (Morton, 2002). Consequently, the influence and diversity of music for Generation Y is greater than for previous generations (Paul, 2001), and Generation Y has a higher expectation for interactive, gamified experiences in both their personal lives and workplaces (Morton, 2002).

**Generation Y in the workplace.** The formative experiences of different generations help to categorize and understand how individuals operate (Vincent, 2005). In a workplace setting, however, it is difficult to know exactly how a formative experience will translate how an individual functions in an organization. Therefore, the following paragraphs discuss what we know about generations on the job. While scholarly research is currently lacking for Generation Z in a workplace context (Hernaus & Vokic, 2014), their closest generational counterpart, Generation Y, has received significant attention from organizational scholars (Rentz, 2015). As with other neighboring generations, some overlap is probable between Generation Z and Generation Y simply due to the unclear boundaries and similar experiences. More importantly,
understanding the characteristics of Generation Y in the workplace is necessary because they will likely play a large role in smoothing the transition of Generation Z into the workplace, in the same way that Generation X helped to smooth Generation Y’s transition into the workplace (Rentz, 2015).

On the job, several stereotypes surround Generation Y. One such belief is that Generation Y has a strong desire for work-life balance, emphasizing leisure time (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010; Hartman & McCambridge, 2011; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Rentz, 2015; Schullery, 2013). Ferri-Reed (2016) points out that this stereotype can be taken negatively when desire for balance is interpreted by older generations as poor work ethic or outright laziness. Another negative belief related to poor work ethic is that Generation Y lacks autonomy within organizations (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Rentz, 2015). Hartman and McCambridge (2011) further connect and attribute this belief to stereotypes about the overprotective parents of Generation Y. In organizations, managers experience the lack of autonomy as a constant need for validation by Generation Y (Ferri-Reed, 2016).

Need for validation also relates to the common stereotype that Generation Y has a strong desire for feedback (Ferri-Reed, 2016; Hartman & McCambridge, 2011; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Rentz, 2015). Feedback, however, isn’t strictly negative. Rather, it connects to the positive stereotype that Generation Y has high expectations for success (Levenson, 2010; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010) and the confidence to make significant contributions within organizations (Deal et al., 2010; Hartman & McCambridge, 2011; Rentz, 2015). Together, high expectations and confidence lead to the stereotype that Generation Y wants to express firmly-held and well-informed
opinions and ideas on the job (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Rentz, 2015). However, older generations often perceive the confidence and education of Generation Y as disrespect and unwillingness to submit to the authority of experience (Ferri-Reed, 2016; Hartman & McCambridge, 2011; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Levenson, 2010). The authority of experience problem is compounded by the belief that Generation Y lacks organizational commitment and job hops often, thus accumulating less experience at a single organization than older generations (Ferri-Reed, 2016; Hartman & McCambridge, 2011; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Rentz, 2015).

The final and most ubiquitous stereotype of Generation Y is that they are technology driven, technology dependent, and technology savvy (Deal et al., 2010; Ferri-Reed, 2016; Hartman & McCambridge, 2011; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Rentz, 2015; Schullery, 2013). Much like the other beliefs about Generation Y, this stereotype can be taken positively or negatively. On one hand, technology connects Generation Y to each other, which benefits teamwork and team building (Rentz, 2015); and to organizations, which benefits organizational engagement and information exchange (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). On the other hand, a preference for technology-driven communication by Generation Y isn’t shared among all other generations in the workplace (Ferri-Reed, 2016; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). In fact, conflicting preferences may contribute to the belief by older generations that Generation Y is actually deficient in communication skills (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011).

While these stereotypes can be a starting place for understanding Generation Y, several scholars rightfully raise concerns about their use (Deal et al., 2010; Levenson, 2010; Rentz, 2015). Stereotypes about generational memberships are not fundamentally
different in terms of accuracy or usefulness in application to specific instances than stereotypes based on any other distinguishing category (Deal et al., 2010). Furthermore, some may be outright misguided (Rentz, 2015) or formed based on trends that transcend generational categorization (Levenson, 2010). In other words, stereotypes should not always be taken at face-value for a particular person or particular generational cohort.

While what we can know through stereotypes is limited, some research validates stereotypes. The influence of communication technologies does impact the way members of Generation Y understand relationships and effective communication (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). For instance, Generation Y is more likely to utilize new technology for communication more often than Generation X or Baby Boomers (Deal et al., 2010; Rentz, 2015). Deal and colleagues (2010) go even further to predict that Generation Z will be more proficient with technology than is Generation Y.

Another important finding involves norms of respect (McCann, Dailey, Giles, & Ota, 2005). Specifically for young Americans, politeness and deference toward others increase as the target subject’s age increases (McCann et al., 2005). This implies that Generation Y pays more respect to older members within organizations, which decreases as the age gap decreases (McCann et al., 2005). If the same can be said of Generation Z, it may mean that Generation Y is not given due respect for the leadership roles they occupy when members of Generation Z enter the workforce, and as motivating is often seen as a leader’s responsibility (Sullivan, 1988), this may affect the process of motivation for Generation Z.

Other findings run contrary to Generation Y stereotypes (Rentz, 2015). For example, Rentz (2015) found that Generation Y employees were rated highly for hard
work by employers (in contrast to the leisure-focused stereotype) and had modest self-opinions (in contrast to the overconfident stereotype). However, Rentz (2015) cautions that hiring practices at the organization where data were collected may contribute to these findings. As well, other studies describe high achievement standards driven by parental socialization to reject the leisure-focused stereotype for Generation Y (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Furthermore, members of Generation Y “care about authenticity and institutional values because they are counting on working within organizations to drive change” (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010, p. 221). This conclusion helps dispel the stereotype concerning lack of organizational commitment (not necessarily the stereotype about job hopping), but it also illustrates the role Generation Y desires to perform in the workplace: They wish to drive social action by aligning with organizational values and by furthering their own and their organizations’ goals (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010).

Despite the potential parallels and analogies between Generation Y and Generation Z, it is important to remember that each generation is distinct from other generations in meaningful ways (Schullery, 2013). Generation Y may be tech-savvy, hard-working, and value-driven, but that does not necessitate that Generation Z will be. Research shows, however, that generational cohorts are generally more tolerant of and similar to neighboring cohorts than distant ones (Rentz, 2015), so in order to begin to understand how Generation Z will fit in the organizational landscape, it is beneficial to first understand Generation Y. It is worth stressing that Generation Z will be entering the workforce in significant numbers at a time when Generation Y is beginning to assume leadership roles in organizations (Ferri-Reed, 2016). Thus, leadership will likely be a site
of early tension during the workforce transition. Because creating motivation is one function of leadership (as MLT describes; Sullivan, 1988), it is important to better understand the motivational process for Generation Z to prepare current leadership for their integration into the workforce (see RQ1).

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the remainder of this study:

RQ1: What framework explains the relationship between communication and motivation in organizations for Generation Z?

RQ1(a): Can language function to motivate Generation Z in organizations? If so, in what ways?

RQ1(b): What is the role of communication in organizational motivation for Generation Z?
Chapter 3

Methods

This chapter will clarify the qualitative methods used to collect and analyze data to answer my research questions. Qualitative inquiry seeks to understand and describe the social world by uncovering the meanings people share to create it (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). This study uses grounded theory methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to investigate the role of language and communication in organizational motivation for Generation Z. Grounded theory is a research approach that seeks to “generate or discover a theory […] for a process or an action” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p, 82). Grounded theory methodology integrates analysis into the data collection process to inductively develop theory directly from the sample’s genuine responses (Harley, Buckworth, Katz, Willis, Odoms-Young, & Heaney, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Furthermore, grounded theory helps to build a robust framework around little understood phenomena (Holt, 2010). This method is appropriate because little is currently known about Generation Z in the workplace and because the assumption that leader communication has the ability to motivate followers (from MLT) has not been empirically validated.

In this thesis, I use grounded theory to develop a theoretical framework around the process of motivation with an emphasis on the role of communication directed toward members of Generation Z. I completed human-subjects research training through the CITI platform and received IRB approval prior to beginning data collection. Participants read and signed consent documents prior to interviews and were compensated (ten dollars) after the interview was complete. The following paragraphs describe the
sampling, data collection, and data analysis for this thesis based on qualitative, grounded theory methodology.

**Sampling and Proposed Sample**

A small initial sample allows grounded theory studies to begin to formulate initial ideas, which guide additional sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I used purposeful sampling to gather an initial sample of four Generation Z members (an arbitrary small sample to inform subsequent sampling). Purposeful sampling refers to the nonrandom selection of participants based on a preconceived, reasonable expectation of who can provide the most relevant information for the purpose of a study (Coyne, 1997; Frey et al., 2000). These individuals had first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation because they were from Generation Z and had work experience, which makes their participation valuable for this thesis. I selected potential participants only after they met three criteria—membership with Generation Z according to the guidelines of this study (born in or after the year 2000), personal identification of membership with Generation Z, and any previous or current work experience (defined as paid work for which an employer must prepare and submit federal tax documentation). These criteria ensure the data collected are the most relevant for the topic under investigation and the most representative of Generation Z (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Harley et al., 2009).

I recruited the sample for this study using a recruitment flyer. Instructors of the communication basic course (required for all students) at a mid-sized Midwestern university distributed the flyer to the electronic learning management system used in their classes, and I visited several classrooms, as schedules allowed, to recruit by word of mouth. By choosing to recruit from the entirety of a required class, I attempt to avoid
bias based on the academic interests of students to ensure my sample is representative of the largest possible section of Generation Z I can reach. Furthermore, these classrooms contain a readily available Generation Z student population because the class is required for first-year students that are traditionally 18 (and thus born during the Generation Z timeframe). Additionally, this recruitment is convenient for the author to expedite the process. However, this recruitment process may limit the generalizability of results based on potential regional differences and intellectual prowess (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Following the small initial sample, I employed theoretical sampling for nine more participants. According to Coyne (1997), “deciding where to sample next according to the emerging codes and categories is theoretical sampling” (p. 625). Coyne (1997) explains that theoretical sampling is based on the immediate need for additional data, verification, or representation of participants for the emerging theory. Following that guideline, this thesis used theoretical sampling to select additional participants to fully explain the emergent theory by filling out underdeveloped areas of investigation with rich description (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Harley et al., 2009). I also asked participants to suggest other potential candidates to better access this population, which is chain referral sampling (Wright, Decker, Redfern & Smith, 1992). Theoretical sampling continued until all categories were sufficiently well-explained and no new information was uncovered, i.e. until saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mason, 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

I first noted potential saturation during interview 10 for two reasons. First, the participant didn’t provide any data that didn’t fit into my existing coding scheme. Second, I felt as though I knew the words he was about to say before he spoke them.
Furthermore, I attempt to note any disagreements among participants which complicate saturation in the results with reasonable explanations in light of the emerging theory and previous knowledge in order to ensure validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

After the theoretical framework is fully conceptualized, grounded theory studies generally use discriminant sampling on several additional participants. Discriminant sampling refers to the collection of “additional information from individuals different from those people initially interviewed to determine if the theory holds true for these additional participants” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 89). This sampling compares a handful of additional participants to the framework in order to ensure its relevance and accuracy (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Furthermore, in grounded theory, redundancy of responses serves the purpose of supporting the thoroughness of results (Frey et al., 2000).

I did not employ discriminant sampling in this study for two reasons. First, I did not pre-establish a good reference for what characteristics would set these additional participants apart from my study participants. Second, the scope of this thesis is exploratory rather than definitive, so additional sampling wouldn’t achieve any further goals for this study. Rather, this study builds a platform from which additional research can reliably launch. With regard to the total number of participants being sampled, Mason (2010) found that grounded theory studies have a mean sample size of 32. For the exploratory purpose of this study, I set a range from 10 to 20 participants for this study, and ended up with 13 total participants to represent Generation Z.

During the data collection process, I collected data orally on participant demographics (including gender, organizational experience, race, and ethnicity) to offer clear guidelines for the limitations and generalizability of results and to best ensure the
emerging theory adequately addresses a large range of Generation Z individuals. Participants were able to choose a preferred pseudonym for reporting. Of the 13 participants, five were male, and eight were female. Eight were 18 years old, and five were 19 years of age. Ten participants identified as White/Caucasian. One identified as Hispanic/Latino. One identified as American Indian, and one identified as Black/African. This sample is limited in terms of diversity. We can therefore expect much of the results to apply to White/Caucasian people, but they might not hold true for other races and ethnicities.

Additionally, I asked participants about which jobs they’ve held. Several have held multiple jobs, so I include them in multiple career sectors. Of 13 total participants, four individuals held jobs in agriculture or manufacturing, working on farms, on assembly lines, or for agriculture suppliers. Six had foodservice jobs, working restaurants or fast-food. Six also had jobs in education, which includes daycare, education administration, and facilities. One participant worked construction. Two participants worked in health or medical jobs, as interns or assistants. Four individuals worked in entertainment jobs, such as at movie theaters or recreation centers. Finally, three held jobs in retail, at department stores or grocers. Nearly all positions were entry-level, except for one participant who was briefly a foodservice manager. Overall, these careers represent a large range of the options available to Generation Z.

**Data Collection**

I collected data using face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, which allow for probing questions to gather detailed and complete answers to focused questions (Frey et al., 2000). Because of the rich detail provided by interviews, they are an appropriate
strategy for data collection in this study. An initial interview guide (Appendix A) consisting of broad open-ended questions about motivation and language guided interviews by allowing respondents maximum freedom to answer questions with their own words (Frey et al., 2000), and the interview guide changed as categories emerged from my analysis of previous interviews, as per theoretical sampling. The only changes I made to the interview protocol were inclusions of additional probing questions about motivators as they were revealed to me. For example, after hearing several participants talk about respect, I began to ask “How does your level of respect for your manager influence your desire to work?” Because of this design, later interviews often provided more focused responses around theoretical categories. However, I attempt in reporting to demonstrate the prevalence of themes throughout every interview by utilizing each participant relatively equally throughout results (rather than reporting only the focused responses of later participants).

I reserved a neutral, quiet place convenient to the participants (a library study room) in which to conduct interviews in order to minimize distractions and ensure that interviewees felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences. I limited interviews to a maximum of one hour to respect participants’ schedules while still allowing ample time for the deep conversation necessary to generate grounded theory. After consent from the interviewee, I also recorded each interview digitally and transcribed it prior to data analysis.

**Data Analysis**

This study utilized the constant comparative method of data analysis whereby new information is compared with inductively-emerging categories as it is collected.
This iterative method is consistent with other grounded theory studies (Harley et al., 2009; Holt, 2010). Throughout the research process, I also used a research notebook to record significant ideas, connections, and observations and marked all transcripts with memos to note possible emerging themes and similar ideas (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, I reduced all transcripts to thought units prior to coding, wherein each unit contains only a single idea and responses can contain multiple thought units (Lapinski, Anderson, Cruz & Lapine, 2015).

I conducted the interviews, transcribed them, read the responses from each interview once to create memos and divide responses into thought units, and read them a second time to code thought units. The hearing-writing-reading-rereading process ensured a deep immersion in the data, which is necessary to generate theory and represent data validly (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

I used open coding on the initial set of interviews. Open coding is the first step of coding wherein researchers segment data into small categories of information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During this stage of coding, I developed in vivo (using the words of participants) categories based solely on collected data, memos, and research notes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, I would code a hypothetical response which states “my manager always shows appreciation for my work” as “appreciation.” Appreciation may then categorize all responses that refer to appreciation, thanks, or praise. My codes at this point in the analysis were primarily descriptive. Open coding categorizes and hierarchizes data (Rabinovich & Kacen, 2013). I coded all data such that whenever a new piece of data emerged (i.e. a piece of data that
did not fit current categories), I created a new category for it. This systematic process ensured that the total data set was represented in the results of this study.

After the initial round of manual open coding, I selected codes that were pivotal to explaining the role of communication in the process of motivation for Generation Z to serve as a core construct. The core category is something that appears frequently in the data and connects other major categories (Rabinovich & Kacen, 2013). Researchers refer to the selection of a core category and additional coding to explore the connections between categories as axial coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). At this point, I began axial coding on additional data (and upon revisiting previous codes) to locate and place other categories around the core construct (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). When complete, axial coding creates a full theoretical framework that coherently and logically explains the data (Rabinovich & Kacen, 2013).

After a framework emerges, selective coding defines, clarifies, and validates (or refines) the connections and relationships between the different categories within the framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). When complete, selective coding provides a full picture of the data, which researchers demonstrate by illuminating the narrative captured by the data, diagraming the process, or comparing to other literature (Rabinovich & Kacen, 2013). This thesis utilizes selective coding to pursue all three of these goals. This analytic process yielded a descriptive theoretical construct to answer Research Question 1.

The initial round of open coding helped to inform and create a preliminary codebook to consistently guide subsequent coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018), though the codebook remained flexible in order to allow the theory to further develop. After the
initial descriptive codebook, I created a second codebook to reflect the interpretive process of deeper levels of coding. An external audit by a communication expert (a volunteer communication graduate student) ensured that codes intuitively matched responses for each version of the codebook. External audits are one method to ensure validity during the process of research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I used the first codebook only on the first four interviews before creating the second codebook for the remaining interviews. The volunteer was given each codebook and a random list of unitized data (every 10th item starting at a location determined by a six-sided die). She and I both applied the codebook to the data independently. Then, I counted the number of times we agreed upon codes and divided it by the total number of items before turning it into a percentage (formula: [Agreement / total] * 100). Coders consistently coded data 82 percent of the time using the first codebook and 94 percent of the time using the second codebook.

Additionally, this study asks how language functions to motivate Generation Z within organizations. This topic relates closely to MLT. Therefore, I will discuss the categories of the grounded theory presented in this study in relation to MLT. Specifically, I will analyze similarities and differences between the themes of this grounded theory and the three elements of MLT presented in the literature review—uncertainty-reducing language, meaning-making language, and human-bonding language. A comparison of this data against the theoretical framework of MLT will yield a more robust understanding of the concrete processes through which the three types of language achieve employee motivation. Next, I report the results of these methods.
Chapter 4

Results

My first research question asks what framework explains the relationship between communication and motivation for Generation Z. Figure 1 (Appendix B) diagrams the framework derived from participants’ responses to address this question. Essentially, the model shows that members of Generation Z experience organizations through two types of communication. These types of communication are evident in various workplace actions, interactions and experiences. In turn, those experiences variably affect Generation Z motivation depending on how each individual interprets that experience and integrates it into their workplace identity. The following paragraphs demonstrate the communicative experiences important to Generation Z and explain conditions whereby the same experience may have different results, which leads to or detracts from their motivation to work.

Communication

Generation Z participants all described communication as important for them. When I asked Juan how necessary he felt communication was for his job success, he said “extremely” and went on to exemplify this importance for four of his previous jobs. For his job at an outdoor recreation park, he gave directions to customers to ensure their safety. In this case, effective communication was his best tool to prevent injury. At his department store job, he explained that communication was necessary to coordinate employees, so the company could complete every necessary task. For this workplace, effective communication was the difference between helping and failing to satisfy customer needs. As a hospital employee, he pointed to communication with experienced
coworkers as the primary way he learned about his job, and as an audio technician, coworkers reassured him of his work quality by communicating with him regularly. For his third and fourth jobs, communication served as a tool for potential career advancement and a support mechanism to avoid burnout, respectively. The experiences of Juan highlight the many ways communication functions for Generation Z members at this stage in their career lives. I explain these functions further throughout the remainder of this section.

**Task Communication.** Task-related communication facilitates successful work. In the words of Scott, “Without communication, you just don’t know what you’re doing.” By task communication, I refer to communication that pertains to various aspects of the job. Clarifying tasks or processes, discussing payment, setting goals, giving and receiving feedback, and modeling job behaviors are all examples of task communication.

Generation Z utilizes questioning as one type of task communication. Sarah explained her view on this type of communication by stating “if you know what you’re doing, you’re going to do well, but if you don’t know, you need to ask somebody because you can’t have the ‘oh, it will be fine’ attitude because sometimes it’s not fine.” Questioning serves two functions within this quotation. First, it clarifies job processes to ensure successful task completion. Kayla reaffirmed this benefit for her: “if you don’t have good communication, like ‘did you get this out?’ or ‘did you get this sent already?’ it sort of messes up the whole process.” Sarah also recognized the drawback of not asking questions because “then you have to redo stuff, which pushes back orders, and that can incur fines for the company.” This quotation shows that Generation Z asks questions not
because they are inferior or needy employees but rather because they recognize the big-picture importance of successful task completion in their organizations.

Second, questioning serves to convey the workplace identity Generation Z wishes to perpetuate—that Generation Z is serious about work. They ask questions to demonstrate that they do not ascribe to the lackadaisical “it will be fine” attitude. Danny explained his workplace identity by saying “I’m more of a detail-oriented person and a perfectionist, and I feel like my work reflects who I am, so I have to give 110 percent into what I’m doing, or I just feel like it’s what people think of me—that I’m not hard-working.” Jake also demonstrated how serious he takes his jobs, “I want to do well in the workplace because I’m going to be working for the rest of my life, so I want to develop a good work ethic and character, starting while I’m young.” Simply put, establishing one’s value as an employee pushes Generation Z to work harder.

Fun. Despite their serious orientation toward work, Generation Z is not out to work in joyless workplaces. Elizabeth voiced this sentiment:

I think [fun] should be a big part of most workplaces. Obviously there are times when you have to put goofing to the side and get down to work, but I think the more bubbly and loose a work environment is, it’s going to be better for new employees and older employees because you aren’t focusing on the negative mistakes people make. Everyone makes some mistakes from day to day, but if you have a more open and fun environment, you’re not going to let those mistakes get to you, and you’ll feel successful no matter what you do.

Jake amended this statement slightly by emphasizing “I don’t know if I value fun so much; it’s more just enjoyment.” He does not want future employers to see the word fun
and associate it with unproductive horseplay. Rather, Generation Z hopes to enjoy work. When they do find that enjoyment, Cara said “it makes you feel better about yourself—that it’s going to be okay, and that we’re all in this together.” In other words, an enjoyable workplace counteracts negative workplace experiences to produce motivated work for Generation Z.

**Payment.** Payment refers to monetary compensation for work. Most participants talked about payment in relation to motivation. Participants did not unanimously agree on the motivating power of payment. For some individuals, money “motivated [them] 100 percent” (Tissas). When money was a motivating factor, participants describe working for payment as meeting their needs (Tissas and Abby) or as fulfilling an obligation to merit the compensation (Jackson and Kayla). For examples, Abby explained “because I spend a lot on clothes and stuff, it’s like, if you want this, you have to work for it,” but Jackson, on the other hand, explained “if I’m getting paid more, I want to do a better job.” These quotations demonstrate that Abby used her material needs to justify work, while Jackson used a sense of duty. Differing individual values may explain part of this difference. Jackson stated this point directly, “My personal values are if you work, you should get paid.”

Money did not motivate other individuals. (Lauren, Sarah, Cara, and Summer). When asked about payment as a motivator, Cara voiced the common sentiment among this group by saying “I’d rather just be a good human being and work to do something with my life.” When Generation Z associates personal fulfilment with work, they tend to ignore or de-emphasize monetary payment as a motivator. Summer explained that “[she] just like[s] having a job and a reason to get up every day and have a purpose.” For
her, a personal sense of fulfilment motivated her work. Others received relational fulfillment. For example, Lauren described her social experience, “There was a group of us coworkers that most of us are in college now, […] and we talk all the time.” In summation, some members of Generation Z prioritize other motivators above payment.

A final group of participants takes a middle ground, expressing that payment is important only as a secondary consideration (Juan, Danny, Elizabeth, and Jake). Elizabeth expressed that “the main reason [she] got a job was [her] parents and the money, but at the same time, it [money] wasn’t the main thing.” Jake amended this stance by adding, “depending on the job—if I like it or not.” For Generation Z, money can motivate, but they express preference for enjoying their job, which partially substitutes for payment. This group also expressed that the pay had to seem fair to be ousted to a secondary role. For example, Juan explained, “As long as I was compensated like 10 dollars per hour, it wasn’t much of a factor because the jobs weren’t terrible. If they were like, ‘go outside for 12 hours a day in terrible weather,’ I’d be like, ‘yeah, payment needs to be there.’”

**Goals.** Setting personal goals for workplace accomplishments motivated some Generation Z participants. Jackson gave an example, “If I had to weed a certain area and if it’s a goal for me to get done in an hour, I like the challenge. I like the mini-challenges that a job can bring you.” Generation Z enjoys feeling a sense of accomplishment, which goals provide. However, large goals are intimidating and may have the opposite effect. Elizabeth states her preference for small goals because she likes to “take it one day at a time, and just set small goals because the smaller the goal, the more realistic it was for [her] to do.” This quotation echoes the “mini-challenges” that drive Generation Z.
Generation Z individuals set goals for two main reasons. First, they believe goals will propel their careers forward and offer them additional opportunities later in life. For example, Scott stated, “getting more work experience is a goal, and just working more helps me.” These future-oriented goals begin even in career selection. Abby explains her more general occupational goal, “As I get older and figure out what profession I want, I’m trying to get more higher-up jobs related to my field.” Many select entry-level jobs they perceive as related to their future career aspirations, such as Sarah who worked at a daycare in preparation for a career in education.

Alternatively, some participants connect goals to their personal values. Kayla highlights this motive:

My goals influence my work because I want to make things easier for people, so my goal is to make people’s days better. If I do a better job, it makes everyone’s day better because my coworkers don’t have to do as much work, my managers see their worker is doing the right job, and the customers—because if you’re doing a good job talking to them, you’re going to make them have a better day. She values supporting other people, so she sets goals to demonstrate that value in her work. While the values of each individual are variable, this script for integrating them into work holds true for many participants.

Feedback. Task-related communication also facilitates successful work when managers supervise Generation Z. Managers provide feedback to Generation Z to variable effect. Positive feedback (feedback about what an employee is doing well) greatly impacts the motivation of some members of Generation Z while having little effect on others. When asked how positive feedback impacted her desire to work, Tissas
responded “I don’t think it has that much effect because I just take it as an ‘okay’ sort of thing.” On the other hand, Jake described a time when that type of feedback had a positive effect:

One of my older coworkers is like a boss. She always told everyone that my friend and I need a raise because we were the only ones that did hard work. […] It motivated me a lot.

Scott also expressed that “if [he’s] getting praise for what [he’s] doing, it helps a lot.” In short, positive affirmation of work fosters desire to work for some members of Generation Z.

Furthermore, Danny explained that positive feedback motivates because of “the validation of it.” Validation increases Generation Z confidence. Juan said “I feel like [my manager] can be supportive toward me and think I can do well, so that I want to improve more.” That small validation and confidence in his ability to do well motivated him to improve his work performance. Additionally, when a manager acknowledged the hard work of Danny, he felt good and wanted “to live up to that.” Elizabeth described the feeling produced by this type of feedback, “It made me feel empowered to work that day because someone noticed that […] I was doing a good job no matter what.”

The key difference between participants that shrugged off positive feedback and participants that were motivated by it is the way each connected with their supervisors. While Tissas did not have a strong personal relationship with her managers, Juan, Danny, Elizabeth, and Jake each had close relationships with their managers. The relationships members of Generation Z form with managers appear to regulate the effect of positive
manager feedback because the acknowledgement and validation only holds value if it comes from someone they care about.

Generation Z generally receives negative feedback poorly (feedback about what an employee is doing poorly or should be doing differently). Tissas illustrated one reason for this, “I feel like I’m doing my best, so sometimes that [negative] feedback has the opposite effect. It feels like it slows me down and makes me feel bad.” In general, Generation Z associates negative feedback with doing work wrong, such as when managers told Kayla she was not being personable with customers and she took it as a challenge to change her introverted identity.

Lauren was an exception to this rule. Her manager “would correct us in a respectful way, and then you would always remember that sort of thing and not be mad or upset about it—just fix it and keep going because she wasn’t mad, so there was no reason for you to be upset or down on yourself.” One potential explanation for this exception is that managers are not always giving negative feedback to members of Generation Z in ways that Generation Z perceive as constructive. Sarah addressed this point by explaining that “it’s the approach: if you handle people well, it impacts how they receive the feedback, and if you don’t do it well, it doesn’t make them happy.”

**Modeling.** Another task-related way managers communicate to Generation Z employees is modeling the work they want to see. Lauren gave one example of modeling at an ice cream shop she worked at, “My boss especially liked personal connections with customers because it would help them want to buy something or want to come back. […] We have little cones, so she wanted us to get cotton candy ice cream and give it to [kids] for free.” This quotation demonstrates that for Generation Z, modeling serves a couple
purposes. First, it teaches employees what to do and how to conduct themselves on the job. In this instance, Lauren learned that she should be giving away small ice cream samples. Kayla also demonstrated this mirroring behavior at her fast food job, “[My managers] would just sit in the back office and slack off, and we learn from them.”

Second, modeling teaches organizational values. Danny voiced a common sentiment among many of the participants, “[the company’s values] weren’t really said, but you could kind of feel it […] through the customers and managers—what they wanted and how they interacted.” However, proximity to managers seems to regulate the effect of modeling. Tissas exemplified this, “Sometimes there won’t be a lot of people, so we’ll just talk with the coworkers until people come, but if the manager is there, we won’t be talking even if there’s no one around.” In this example, the physical presence of her manager reminded Tissas of her task responsibilities and pushed her to continue working. In short, Generation Z readily observes experienced members of organizations, and their observations then impact their desire to work.

**Personal communication.** Apart from task-related communication, personal communication about non-work-related topics profoundly affects Generation Z motivation in the workplace. It affects Generation Z through the development of close relationships and friendships. Lauren clearly articulates this shared sentiment:

I feel like personal connections drive you to do something better. If you have something in common with someone, it makes you want to talk to them more. It makes you want to be friends with that person. I feel like the same thing goes with your job. If you’re able to make that personal connection, you care about
them and they care about you. Then, it makes you want to do better because you have respect for them and you care about them.

For Lauren, personal connections led to caring, and caring led to emotional investment in the success of her workplace, which resulted in motivated work. Other participants also echoed this care for coworkers. Juan described the motivation produced by this caring when he said, “Once you build those connections and the only way you can be with that certain individual is at work, you’re going to want to go to work.” For Generation Z, the positive relationship—considered in isolation—impels them to work.

**Respect.** While caring was certainly a motivating factor related to close relationships, participants more frequently pointed to respect as the catalyst for their motivated work. Care and respect are not always mutually exclusive, however. Summer notes that for her, respect shows she cares about her manager and about the job. Subjects often discussed respect apart from caring, though. Kayla demonstrated the impact of respect by making a comparison to substitute teachers in education, “It’s kind of like with a substitute teacher. You’re still going to do your job, but if they don’t have the same level of respect, then you’re not going to want to do the best job you possibly can.” This quotation highlights several implications of respect shared by other members of Generation Z. First, it shows that Generation Z will still complete work in the absence of respect. Danny affirmed this by “trying to do a good job regardless of what you think of the manager.” However, this effort is attached to other motivators, such as personal responsibility. Simply put, Generation Z is “not going to want to do a very good job” if they do not respect managers (Jackson).
Second, Generation Z has a higher motivation to work when respect is present. Sarah explained, “If I respect my manager, I want to work harder because you have to earn my respect.” Respect forms a reciprocal relationship for Generation Z. Several participants closely exemplify this relationship. Cara states, “If you have respect, you’re willing to fulfill their needs as well as yours because they will give that respect back.” Scott also expressed, “If I respect him and he respects me, I’m going to do a better job.” Finally, Jackson agrees, “If I feel my manager is respectful and I’m respectful of my manager, I’ll do a better job.” When a manager works to become respected, their employee works to honor and acknowledge that relational dynamic. Part of this acknowledgement serves to perpetuate the relationship. Juan addressed this, “If I build a connection with my manager, I don’t want to let him down.” In this case, letting the manager down by not working hard would alter the relationship between Juan and his manager in a negative way for Juan, so he acts to avoid that consequence.

Over time, respect forms scripts for how members of Generation Z desire to work. For Elizabeth, her respect for a previous manager “made [her] want to work harder to get that relationship [she] had in the past.” Her desire for a particular relationship with managers prompts motivated work aimed at achieving that type of relationship. For some members of Generation Z, respect connects directly to their internalized values. Sarah stated that “I’ve been taught that respect is earned.” By then working in ways that adhere to that script, she is able to reaffirm her values. This script is also true for Jake, who wants respected managers to “trust in [him] and see [his] good character.” When he works harder, his manager then acknowledges him and affirms his self-image. In this
sense, respect assumes a partially egoistic role for Generation Z because participants use it to validate their own identities.

Several participants also gave advice for how to earn their respect. Listening was a major component of developing respect for their superiors. Lauren provides one example, “sometimes [my coworkers and I] would be talking and figure out a problem with the shop or something to make it better, so we would talk to our boss, and she would really take it into consideration depending on what it was, so that was really nice because she actually heard us and understood what we were saying.” Sarah echoed this sentiment, “One of my managers will literally stop a meeting if I have something to say because she wants input from everybody—not just the full-time adults, but the part-timers and high-schoolers, too.” By listening to the ideas of Generation Z, a manager reciprocates and compounds their respect.

**Belonging.** Personal communication also affects Generation Z motivation through a sense of belonging. Unanimously, participants felt more motivated to work if they felt like they belonged at the job. Kayla illustrated this effect, “I feel like they want me there, and then it’s like I want myself there!” When Generation Z feels that sense of belonging, work follows. Juan explained it this way: “If you have friends that want to do something, you’re more inclined to do it with them instead of being solo.” For Generation Z, that inclination is the same for a friendly activity and a work responsibility.

One result of belonging for Generation Z is higher willingness to approach work. Several participants expressed this willingness as a desire to see their coworkers, such as Cara, who stated, “Being close to someone and having that relationship with them leads you to want to go there and see them.” Belonging achieves this motivational effect in part
by altering the perceptions of work held by Generation Z. Jake described this process, “It makes work not seem like a job, but like a friendly task that you can do together to get the job done, and it makes the time go faster.” This quotation suggests that the perception of work becomes more positive when friends are involved.

While a small change in perception may be enough to motivate Generation Z, several participants further explain how that change impacts their experience of work. For many, it creates feelings of fun. Cara explained that “if you can have a little fun and laugh a little after all of it, it makes the job way easier.” This feeling relates closely to the discussion of fun under the earlier section on task-related communication. Generation Z produces motivated work when it is perceived as fun, and they perceive work as fun when they are with friends.

Another result of belonging is decreased stress associated with difficult or negative workplace experiences. When Generation Z experiences conflicts in the workplace, they often turn to their relationships with coworkers or managers for consolation. Elizabeth had frequent conflicts with customers due to the nature of her workplace. She described the experience as “frustrating” and that it “shoots down your confidence” and “doesn’t make you want to work.” She turned to coworkers because they helped her feel “more valued than the customer believes you to be.” Similarly, Abby had a personal conflict with a coworker who openly disliked her, but she received reassurance from coworkers that “would talk to [her] and hype [her] up.” By providing social support, personal communication counteracts the negative feelings caused by workplace conflict.
Without this social support, the outcome is much different. Tissas described conflicts with coworkers as creating an “awkward” feeling that “change[d] [her] mood.” She ultimately left that job because her conflict was unresolved. Negative social interactions are a common reason for leaving a job among participants of this study. Juan left a job, which he described as “cliquey,” and Cara left a job because she said there was “too much drama.” Each of these examples demonstrates that Generation Z requires a supportive social environment. Without that support, organizations lose their Generation Z employees.

When conflicts do arise, however, Generation Z does not rest the primary responsibility for resolving those conflicts on the shoulders of managers. Multiple participants walked me through the same procedure for dealing with inter-coworker disputes. Kayla articulated this most clearly by saying that coworkers should try to “work it out themselves” because “they’re people and they’re old enough to be working at the job, so they should be able to handle it, but if they can’t, then the manager needs to step in.” In other words, Generation Z wants the opportunity to solve their own problems, only deferring to management when they cannot make progress on a solution.

Developing a sense of belonging in the workplace can be a difficult process. Belonging requires an open, friendly, and inclusive social environment. The cliques that Juan experienced at one of his jobs reveal that non-inclusive social environments do not work for Generation Z. Rather, they hope for environments where managers and coworkers are “not going to interrupt you or judge you: they’ll let you talk, and they’re going to understand,” according to Elizabeth. When Sarah experienced this type of social environment, she described it as “calming, in a sense, because you know somebody is
still looking out for you.” A sense of safety and trust is the essence of open social environments.

As time passes, that openness transitions into friendliness. Friendliness pushes work forward by creating a cadence or routine. Summer described this, saying “We talked all the time because it was the same work every single day. We got into a rhythm, so we were always talking.” Friendliness also creates buy-in from Generation Z. This commitment is evident when Lauren described her transition from a job into college as a process of “checking in with the rest of the girls […] because [she] loves that ice cream shop so much.” Not only do they facilitate the creation of care, friendly social atmospheres also inspire respect. For example, Danny explained “I’d always talk with the office ladies; I grew a friendship with them,” and then eventually he recognized that they were “doing all the work and doing a good job, so [he] just really respected that.” Respect then builds scripts that motivate, as noted previously.

**Identity.** Consistently throughout participant responses, an underlying motive or impulse that seems to inform most things that my Generation Z participants do within their organizations bubbles up. They each explain it with different words, but essentially, Generation Z wants to be known. They want to prove themselves, and they want to be acknowledged. Early in a new job, Danny “didn’t know the manager, so [he] had to show who [he] was through [his] performance.” Similarly, Cara explains that “I want to be a nurse, so at the daycare working with the kids and making sure they’re okay reflects on that.” In each case, Generation Z feels that by working a particular way, it communicates their identity to others.
Because members of Generation Z want to communicate their identities in their work, they will use available means to fulfil that desire. Sometimes, as above, individuals communicate through the work itself. At other times, they communicate through their language. Elizabeth let managers know who she is through personal communication. She explained the practical outcome of this direct communication for her:

They knew what I liked or didn’t like, so if they knew I hated taking out groceries, […] they would do it, but if they needed me to do it, I would step up and do it, and then they would thank me for it, and I would feel more rewarded because they knew I was doing it when I didn’t really want to.

This quotation also demonstrates some of the power that transmission of identity holds within organizations. When managers know their Generation Z workers well, that knowledge helps direct workflow in ways that are productive and rewarding, despite any negative aspects.

**Values.** The identities that members of Generation Z wish to communicate inexorably tie into their personal values and convictions. Oftentimes, family and religious teachings establish these values. For example, Tissas explained that her Christianity affected her work ethic because it taught her to “work for the eyes of God, not the eyes of man.” This value prompted her to continue working “because that’s what [she] should do.” Other participants, such as Sarah and Elizabeth, list grandparents and parents as motivating, respectively. When asked to elaborate, they explain that their family instills a value in them, such as “if you’re going to do something, you’re going to do it right” or “jobs are necessary […] to keep you rolling.” Working reinforces that personally held value, but it also symbolically reinforces the family and religious ties of
the individual. The tying together of personal, family, and professional helps Generation Z integrate work into personal identities, as well. Earlier, I quoted Danny, who believes that his work reflects who he is. That quotation is exactly the idea presented here: Generation Z communicates their identity through their workplace actions, and those actions affect that identity in turn.

**Responsibility.** While the identity of each individual is unique (and should be considered distinct), several general personality characteristics are prevalent among the majority of my Generation Z participants. The first characteristic is personal ownership and responsibility over assigned work (N = 11). A sense of personal responsibility is what I referred to previously by saying that members of Generation Z want to prove themselves. Sarah referred to this responsibility as setting a “precedence of excellence.” Jake called it “develop[ing] a good work ethic and character, starting while [he’s] young.” In each case, Generation Z values high-quality hard work as a starting place that they plan to build upon. Many participants allude to this future orientation by explaining the benefits they can reap by working hard early on. Some look to simple rewards like Danny being allowed some “slack” when he might need it, but most participants point to career advancement through personal references (Abby, Summer, Jake, Kayla, and Lauren) or by learning and developing as an employee (Cara, Sarah, and Juan).

**Competitiveness.** Another characteristic prevalent in many of my interviews was competitiveness (N = 9). This trait links closely to their personal sense of responsibility. While they experience their personal sense of responsibility intrapersonally, they instead experienced competitiveness interpersonally. In other words, competitiveness extends their internal sense of identity and responsibility and compares it against the way they
perceive the identity and responsibility of coworkers. Several participants use comparative language to directly establish that they want to be better than actual coworkers. For example, Jake said, “When we see other people doing stuff, it makes us want to do even better to not sink down to their level.” Danny, on the other hand, compares himself to imagined others when he states that “[his] work sometimes just fuels [his] ego—like, [he] want[s] people to think [he’s] the best or acknowledge [his] hard work.” Whether it is weighed against real coworkers or an imagined ideal, that competitiveness is a driving force for part of Generation Z.

These discussions of responsibility and competitiveness also necessarily meld work into the identities of Generation Z. If the work held no apparent value to them, they would not feel obligated to complete it. Juan explains that he “always tr[ies] to go to a job that [he] identifies with […] because if you don’t care about doing it...” He trailed off at that point, but his implication was that if you do not care, you will not do the work. Organizations should not overlook the simple act of completing a task for Generation Z because each task relates to their reason for working, their values, and their identities.

**Feedback.** This connection creates additional implications for feedback, which was previously discussed as task-related communication. I mentioned that one participant received feedback as a challenge to her identity. This instance is true more broadly for Generation Z, as well. Members of Generation Z that assume ownership over their work inevitably perceive feedback about their work as feedback about them because they see themselves reflected in their efforts. Jake explained that especially for negative feedback, he worried “that’s how [managers] view me.” For this reason, some participants (N = 5) voiced that they “prefer [negative feedback] comes from a coworker
because I know them and trust them” (Jake). Tissas also echoed this preference, “The feedback [from coworkers] can be better because we’re young and […] they don’t really care about those things.” Several participants (N = 6) did not receive coworker feedback or did not weigh in on their feedback preferences.

The motives for this coworker feedback preference are not clear. Scott described coworker feedback as a “lighter blow” when compared to manager feedback. Generation Z perceives coworker feedback as potentially less damaging than manager feedback, which may be one reason they prefer it. However, Summer expanded this further by clarifying that “All my coworkers had a lot more experience than me, so I didn’t mind if it came from a coworker, but I think the manager had more effect on me.” This quotation suggests that the weight carried by both positive and negative feedback was greater when coming from managers. In other words, the feedback is more likely to inspire action on the part of the employee if it is given by a manager. The preference for coworker feedback, then, is possibly attributable to Generation Z’s increased ability to ignore it when it does not validate their identity.

Whatever the motive may be, one can see some of the conditions that must be met for coworkers to give feedback. First, the member of Generation Z receiving feedback must trust the coworker. Second, the receiver must perceive that the coworker is similar to them, at least in terms of occupational role. Third, the coworkers must give the feedback casually to avoid damaging the identity of the person being critiqued. When these conditions are not met, Generation Z worries that feedback from coworkers causes unnecessary drama. Cara, one of only two participants to directly state a preference for manager feedback, explained her reasoning by saying that she prefers to hear from “the
manager because then I know she said that first before my coworker is making up a rumor.” Jackson also stated this preference, “If it’s a coworker who just gets on my nerves a lot and always corrects me, I’d prefer the manager.” In each case, the participants point to potential negative social interactions as the reason for their preference. The social environment partially explains the difference between those who prefer manager feedback and those who prefer coworker feedback. In positive social atmospheres, Generation Z prefers coworker feedback, but in negative social environments, they prefer the manager gives feedback because they don’t trust that their coworkers’ words are sincere.

**Learning.** Many participants also emphasize the value they place on learning (N = 9). Sarah expressed her stance on learning with an example:

I like learning new things. When I first went to [my current job assembling windows], they put me on heights, which is basically putting two parts on the window and passing it along. You have to do it in a certain way or two people down the line struggle to do their job. There’s always something new to learn on the assembly line because they want you to know every part of the line, especially because if they’re training someone new, they can tell you to go here or there instead. It gives them some freedom with who they put where. […] There are still a couple of things that are like, “let me learn this, please!” because if I learn it, then I know how to do it, and then they won’t struggle with it so much later.

As this quotation demonstrates, Generation Z views learning as part of the larger picture of their workplaces. They see it as a way to be more valuable to their companies and avoid problems with workflow.
Encountering new experiences is at the heart of learning in organizations for Generation Z. For Generation Z, novelty “really piques [their] work because [they] want to be interested in things” (Kayla). Some view new things as “something new to try and get good at […] like a game” (Summer), which can be rewarding by itself. However, participants also mention learning about new things as a means to achieve their best work and be responsible for their jobs. For example, when starting a new job, Danny explained, “Because I was new, I wanted to do a really good job and not mess up. I was striving to be the best. […] I put in hard work to show I wasn’t just some kid at a job.” For Generation Z, novelty provides both motivation and a challenge. They see conquering new experiences as a way to prove themselves. For Jake, encountering new things “made [him] want to get to that, like being a leader—taking up that challenge and getting to it right away.”

Others view new experiences in practical ways. For example, Juan described his job at a hospital, “it was more interesting than anything, and I was able to learn. It was a career-setting environment.” For Juan and other members of Generation Z, learning is a practical pathway to career advancement. By seeking new experiences, they set themselves along a path toward a desired job in the future. Alternatively, Cara explained the practical effect novelty had on the current job, “If you’re doing the same thing every day, you’ll get bored of it. […] With the café, there’re new customers every day, so it makes it more interesting—gives you more to do because I’d rather not work at a place you have to do the same thing all day.” For Generation Z, avoiding stagnation on a daily basis is a way to maintain enthusiasm for their jobs. Furthermore, they avoid stagnation by interacting with people. New and interesting experiences allow this generation to
prove themselves, better their workplaces, support their future endeavors, and stay motivated.

**Organizational values.** Members of Generation Z consider more than just personal values important: organizational values also play a large role in their motivation. They learn these values through different channels of communication. Some companies explicitly teach their values early in the onboarding process or during ongoing training. Danny, for example, learned a little about his company’s values—“self-determination and honor”—based on the creed of his organization, posted on a banner in the workplace. Additionally, Juan, Elizabeth, and Cara described learning values in meetings by “going through scenarios, like this happened, so this should be the response.” This training offered insight into the values of companies by showing employees what principles should guide their actions.

While formal teaching played a role in learning company values, members of Generation Z learn values far more often by observing and interacting with others over time. Most frequently, Generation Z looks to their managers for this information. Elizabeth explained, “[managers] are very open about customer service, honesty, and keeping cool, so they voice their values very publically.” Additionally, Kayla said she learned values “by observing mostly” and that her managers “sit down with you and tell you kind of how the company goes.” Through these interactions with managers, managers communicate the values for which a company stands. However, Sarah explained that it is more than just a process of observing managers because “the manager has to tell you certain parts—tell you it’s a great because they have to sell you their
company.” Generation Z is especially critical of the information they are receiving about organizational values.

Because of this critical perspective, Generation Z also tries to learn company values from other sources. Coworkers are a primary source of this information. Jake described mentorship from senior coworkers as pivotal for his evaluation of organizational values, “The ways I’ve learned is like every older person—they tell the younger people what to do every day, which helps get us in line, pass those values on, and ensure everything is getting done well and correctly.” It is not enough simply for a manager to represent the values of a company. They must also instill those values in their employees. Sarah illustrated this point:

You get everybody’s opinions, so you can assess for yourself whether you want to work there. […] You can tell that by the way people around you are. They’re happy and content with what’s going on around them. They can come at six in the morning, work all day, and still be happy by the time they leave. They don’t dread going to work.

By observing managers and employees, Generation Z gets a better sense of what values an organization keeps. This quotation also alludes to an important consequence of company values: Generation Z individuals do not want to work for companies that do not align with their personal values.

When organizational values do not align with personal values, Generation Z does not respond well. Cara explained that if the company’s values were incongruent with her own, she would not “like [her] job very much […] because [she] wouldn’t want to be treated unfairly.” For her, it was not simply that she did not like the work. She also
perceived the potential for negative treatment because of the misalignment. In other words, a company will respond to her differently if their values are incongruent. Because Generation Z identities are fused to their work, the company’s response would likely challenge her identity in uncomfortable ways, as well. Juan exemplified this effect, “I was offered to go to Stanford on the law track, but there’s something about defending someone who I would [hypothetically] know at that point is guilty that doesn’t sit well with my values, so I decided not to do that.” Furthermore, this quotation demonstrates the ultimate effect of value incongruity between companies and Generation Z: Generation Z will quit or not enter that organization altogether.

When organizational values align with personal values, Generation Z produces motivated work, and work becomes easier. Elizabeth best captured this theme:

My company’s values and my values overlapped a lot, so it was easy to be myself on the job. I didn’t have to try to change my values, and since they overlapped a lot, it made it easy to work because I could just do what I do every day. […] It made me want to work a lot harder because I knew I never had to force reactions out of me.

This quotation illustrates that work comes naturally when personal values and company values are aligned. While it does seem possible for Generation Z to “force reactions,” this generation seems unwilling to do so for a job. Rather, they work because they are motivated to be who they are. If work aligns with that, it does not feel like work. Furthermore, the work validates them when values are congruent. Cara explained this effect, “Being around people with the same values [as yours] lets you know your values are good and that you have other people that you can share your values with.” In other
words, value congruity in a workplace creates a synergistic environment of mutual
support that perpetuates workplace and personal values.

**Research Sub-Questions**

The first sub-question of this study asks about the ways language can function to
motivate. As my theoretical model shows, language can motivate Generation Z
indirectly. Wherever task and personal communication intersect with language usage,
language functions to motivate by connecting individuals and their values to the work.
For example, questioning is a specific type of language usage for “knowing what you
need to do and what needs to be done next” (Scott). As the model and my previous
results show, questioning (a manifestation of language) functions both to improve clarity
and transmit the serious-about-work identity of Generation Z. Through these two
avenues, it also motivated my participants by improving their confidence about
successful task completion and allowing them to connect the work to their identity,
respectively.

This indirect effect of language on motivation was also true for personal
communication when participants discussed belonging. Language was a primary tool for
building a motivating social environment. Simply by talking to coworkers, many
members of Generation Z developed friendships at work, which changed their
perceptions of work and allowed them to be themselves on the job. Summer described
how she and her coworkers “got into a rhythm” by talking during monotonous tasks,
which made work go by faster. This quickened perception of time is one example of how
language helps to change the perception of work for Generation Z, which results in
motivated work. Furthermore, the friendships that language helped to establish “pushed
[Summer] to work, too, because [she] wanted to keep up and show [she] was dedicated to [her] job.” In other words, language creates friendships, which result in motivated work aimed at establishing and reaffirming personal identity.

Throughout these responses, I demonstrate times when language, from managers and coworkers, has functioned to affirm individuals’ identities, clarify tasks or processes, correct mistakes, reinforce desired behavior, alter perceptions, and bond members of Generation Z within and to their workplaces. All of these functions subsequently motivate Generation Z. Thus, language functions to indirectly motivate within my theoretical model.

However, language is not the only form of communication Generation Z uses to achieve that motivation. Just as often, Generation Z communicates through actions and labor. In many cases, the actional form of communication is the more prevalent for Generation Z. For example, Danny often mentioned how his actual labor was aimed at proving that he “wasn’t just some kid at a job.” Jackson, as well, tried to communicate through the work itself that “he knows what to do and how to do it.” This type of actional communication, much like language, allowed Generation Z participants to establish and connect their identity within the workplace, ultimately resulting in motivated work. Thus, communication—verbal and nonverbal—functions to indirectly motivate within my theoretical model.

The second sub-question of this study asks what the role of communication is in the process of motivation. As I have analyzed results, I have had difficulty separating communication from motivation to respond to this research question. This section began with an extended example of the ways Juan felt that communication was important for his
jobs. He related communication to the primary elements of each of his jobs, such as maintaining a safe work environment, directing workflow, developing as a professional, and providing support for coworkers. Other participants added relationships like “showing them I can be this awesome employee” (Abby) and “mak[ing] you feel better about yourself and that it’s going to be okay and that we’re in this together” (Cara). Each of these communication relationships to the workplace helped to inform the categories of the theoretical model.

As these results and the theoretical model exemplify, communication plays a very intimate role in the way members of Generation Z view themselves in organizations and, thus, in the way they are motivated. The top half of the theoretical model deals closely in the role of communication, which branches into task and personal. Personal communication and task communication further branch into care, belonging, and respect; and questioning, modelling, goals, feedback, and payment, respectively. Together, these branches represent the meaningful—and motivational—organizational experiences of my participants based on their explanations of communication in the workplace.

Ultimately, it was difficult to separate communication from motivation because communication served multiple purposes within organizations for my participants. To the extent that communication is the primary channel through which Generation Z engages with and understands organizations, communication is the glue, the medium, and the building blocks—the fabric of reality—for organizations. Within this interpretation, communication’s role is both to create a space in which work can occur and to make those work experiences meaningful and motivational by allowing Generation Z individuals to express themselves within their organizations.
Chapter 5

Discussion

The organizational research community does not understand Generation Z well (Ferri-Reed, 2016). The results presented here help us better understand who Generation Z is when Generation Z encounters organizations. I have attempted to paint a picture of what this generation embodies. Several prominent Generation Z characteristics from this study connect with previous generational research. The following pages summarize results and parse out the implications, limitations and analytical assumptions, and future directions of this study.

Summary of Results

Foremost, my results show that communication is an important aspect in the process of motivation for Generation Z. In particular, two types of communication—task and personal—work through various pathways to achieve motivated work. This model is reminiscent of MLT, which essentially demonstrates how three types of language work to achieve motivation (Sullivan, 1988). The types of language from MLT are perlocutionary (uncertainty-reducing), locutionary (meaning-making), and illocutionary (human-bonding; Mayfield et al., 1995; J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2012). These types key in on specific communication events, whereas task and personal communication are broader, inclusive categories. Still, the categories from my model and from MLT are very similar.

Uncertainty-reducing language and task communication are highly comparable in terms of content because both focus on the tasks and processes inherent to a job. For MLT, uncertainty-reducing language views “work as a tool to attain goals,” which is
ultimately why uncertainty-reducing language is motivating (Sullivan, 1988, p. 110). In this study, as well, goals are one of the important aspects of task communication and motivate Generation Z. However, goals are not the only reason task communication is motivating in this study. Task communication often led to the transmission of values and the communication and reinforcement of personal identity. In this way, task communication often boiled down to human-bonding experiences and scripts of personal values and identity, which are vital parts of other categories of language usage within MLT.

Additionally, personal communication is similar to human-bonding and meaning-making language. For MLT, those two types of language treat work as a natural part of human interaction and a reaction to cognitive scripts, respectively (Sullivan, 1988). Both of these motives are also present in the results of this study. Several responses about individuals wanting to go to work just to see coworkers support the idea that work is simply a part of the process of living and interacting with others—i.e. human-bonding. Furthermore, I explicitly point to several cases in the results of this study where work was perpetuated by participants’ cognitive scripts, such as the scripts Generation Z individuals make surrounding respect to either nostalgically seek previous relational dynamics with managers or to seek affirmation and reaffirmation of their personal identities. The results of this study are relatively congruent with Sullivan’s theoretical model on this issue.

**Questioning.** One of the pathways under task communication in my theoretical model addressed questioning. According to the results of this study, Generation Z uses questioning as a communication strategy to receive clarification and to demonstrate their serious attitude toward success. Clarification improves confidence in successful task
completion, and the transmission of identity and personal values generates work aimed at reaffirming that identity. In this way, questioning was motivating for Generation Z in this study.

Questioning connects to several stereotypes laid out previously in the literature review. First, Generation Y individuals prefer clear expectations and guidelines (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011). On this issue, the results of this study imply that Generation Z partially overlaps with their closest generational counterpart. Questioning serves to achieve clarity with expectations and guidelines for task completion, which allows Generation Z to achieve their best work, much like Generation Y. According to the results of this study, Generation Z also overlaps with Generation Y on high standards of achievement (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). By demonstrating their commitment to successful task completion through seeking clarity with questioning, according to the results of this study, Generation Z is establishing its high achievement standards within organizations.

**Fun.** My results also indicate that Generation Z places significant emphasis on enjoying the work they are completing. When work is enjoyable, Generation Z changes its perception of work from “work” to “friendly activity,” according to this study. This altered view of work makes work easier to approach, and Generation Z is motivated to complete work when it feels more like an activity than a chore. This process of motivation connects to Generation Z’s formative experiences. Generation Z is growing up in a time of unprecedented connection and within an entertainment culture (Morton, 2002; Paul, 2001). Because they are constantly surrounded with messages of entertainment, they likely expect to feel entertained more often than previous generations.
In this way, fun motivates their work because it aligns work with expectations of entertainment.

**Payment.** Participants were split on their interpretation of the motivating power of compensation. Several participants found payment motivating because it met their material needs or because they felt like they needed to work hard to merit payment. Another group did not find payment motivating because they just wanted to feel like they had a purpose. For this group, a sense of personal or relational fulfilment substituted for payment, and the fulfilment inspired motivated work. A third group viewed payment as a secondary factor. For this group, other motivators overpowered payment as a motivator, but the payment had to seem fair relative to the task responsibilities of a job to be discounted.

These results partially contradict previous research. Previous literature suggests that because Generation Z was raised through the Great Recession, they are more financially-focused and have higher levels of materialism (“Making Way”, 2016; Miller, 2018). While payment was motivating for some because it met material needs, the majority of participants disregarded or de-emphasized the value of payment for their work. Therefore, the results of this study imply that Generation Z is not as financially-focused as generational research previously believed.

The three groups that formed around payment from this study are also reminiscent of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which shows that physiological needs (like food) must be satisfied before individuals are motivated to work for higher level needs (Acevedo, 2018). A reasonable explanation for the three groups that formed based on Maslow’s hierarchy is that the first group (motivated by money) had not satisfied their
physiological needs, the second group (not motivated by money) had completely satisfied their physiological needs, and the third group (money as a secondary factor) had partially satisfied their physiological needs. In this regard, my results very much support the principles of needs theories of motivation.

Goals. Goals were another aspect of motivation for Generation Z within the results of this study. This study shows that completing goals gives Generation Z a sense of achievement, though they prefer small goals because large goals are often intimidating. For Generation Z participants, goals served a dual-purpose. First, they were a method for participants to work toward a future career, which motivate because participants want to see themselves in those future positions. Second, goals served to demonstrate the personal values of Generation Z participants, which motivate because achievement of the goal affirms the value it represents.

Goals also relate to previous literature about generations in the workplace. Levenson (2010) cautions generational scholars that much of what is presented as generational research is actually attributable to career-stage regardless of generation. Goals as a motivator are at least partially attributable to career-stage. To the extent goals are motivating because they are a method to achieve future careers, goals are not necessarily a generational motivator. Rather, they can be expected to play the same role for anyone looking to advance their career but not play that motivational role for those in terminal career positions.

Feedback. Another pathway of my results relates to feedback. Positive feedback was motivating for Generation Z when it came from respected peers and managers, according to the results of this study. It motivates Generation Z because they feel like it
validates their workplace identity. Negative feedback, on the other hand, has the opposite effect because it challenges that identity. The results of this study indicate that Generation Z generally receives negative feedback poorly for that reason. However, the approach for giving feedback changes how Generation Z receives it. According to this study, Generation Z sometimes prefers negative feedback from coworkers in a supportive social environment because the feedback does not impact them as negatively under those conditions.

Feedback results also connect to previous research. Hartman and McCambridge (2011) characterize Generation Y as craving feedback, and Hershatter and Epstein (2010) attribute that need for validation to being raised as “trophy kids who spent their childhood receiving gold stars and shiny medals just for showing up” (p. 217). Furthermore, Generation Y is “uncomfortable with criticism” (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011, p. 24). These results imply that Generation Z overlaps somewhat with these Generation Y characteristics. Because of the close proximity of these two generations, their childhood experiences were highly similar, and thus, the results of those experiences on feedback preferences are also closely matched within this study.

Furthermore, Carr and Foreman (2016) found that “individuals internalize self-presentations when presented with confirmatory feedback” (p. 348) and that feedback from relationally close partners more intensely affects the internalization of those messages than feedback from less relationally close partners. The results of this study seem to support those findings: positive feedback motivates because it validates workplace identity, and that feedback only carries meaning when it comes from relationally-close coworkers and managers.
**Modeling.** My results also define a pathway to motivation through modeling. Modeling motivates Generation Z because it clarifies tasks, as demonstrated by the results of this study. This clarification is similar to the clarification provided by questioning. Results also imply that modeling motivates because it demonstrates organizational values, which Generation Z employees compare to their personal values and internalize (resulting in motivated work) or reject (resulting in quitting). These results connect very closely with social learning theory. Social learning theory states that people learn by observing and mimicking others (Noe, 2017). Specifically, when individuals see the positive results of others’ behaviors, they may become motivated to adopt those behaviors (Noe, 2017). Alavi, Habel, Guenzi, and Wieseke (2018) found that salespeople mirror their managers in this way while negotiating prices. This effect appears similar for my participants because several participants adopted behaviors based on what they observed their managers doing, such as handing out free ice cream to children.

**Care.** Personal communication also motivated Generation Z within this study. One pathway for this process was through caring. The results of this study imply that Generation Z is motivated to work when they care about the job. Part of this motivation is aimed at perpetuating the relationships developed on the job by working hard to ensure the business can continue (and thus the relationship can continue). This result also ties into formative experiences for Generation Z. Specifically, Generation Z grew up during the era of smartphones and social media, which contributes to the value they place on forming relationships (Grow & Yang, 2018). Because of the connectedness that social media has forced on Generation Z, they view connectedness as integral to their success as
human beings. Working is one method they connect themselves to others, and care demonstrates the value placed on that connection.

**Respect.** Respect was another key pathway to motivation for Generation Z. Consistently, results indicate that Generation Z feels more motivated to work when they respect their managers. Respect forms scripts for completing work to acknowledge and reaffirm respect within the relational dynamics between Generation Z and their managers. In other words, respect inspires work, which demonstrates respect. Furthermore, respect for managers connected to the personal values of participants, so motivated work inspired by respect also validated personal values. My participants viewed respect as a reciprocal relationship: they respected managers when managers respected them. Furthermore, they suggested that managers should demonstrate respect by listening to and considering their ideas.

This category has several connections to previous knowledge. First, respect relates to generational research. Rentz (2015) states that Generation Y has less respect for authority than older generations. Generation Z, however, seems to place much emphasis on respect, and thus diverges from Generation Y on this characteristic according to the results of this study. Furthermore, Generation Y expects their opinions to be heard within organizations, regardless of their organizational inexperience (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011; Rentz, 2015). This characteristic seems more aligned between Generation Z and Generation Y according to the results of this study. My participants voiced their desire to be heard by suggesting managers listen to their ideas. Combined with the idea that respect should be reciprocal, the desire to be heard turns into an expectation for Generation Z: results imply that members of Generation Z expect
managers to show respect by listening because they believe they have demonstrated respect by listening.

Second, my participants’ suggestions for achieving respect are reminiscent of scholarship on immediacy behaviors. Immediacy refers to “behaviors that reduce the physical and psychological distance” between people, which is generally studied as a factor in teacher-student relationships directed toward learning outcomes (Andersen, Andersen, & Jensen, 1979; Myers, Goodboy, & Members of COMM 600, 2014, p. 16). Active listening is one aspect of achieving psychological closeness, and higher levels of immediacy are associated with increased learning (Myers et al., 2014). The effect seems apparent with motivation for my participants as well. Specifically, by demonstrating immediacy behaviors like listening, managers form closer relationship with employees and show them respect, which results in motivated work on the part of employees.

**Belonging.** My results also show a pathway to motivation through belonging. Generation Z feels motivated when they feel like they belong at organizations according to the results of this study. Belonging achieves motivated work by altering perceptions of work to create feelings of fun and enjoyment. The altered perception of work increased participants’ willingness to engage in work by creating enjoyable routines. Furthermore, my results imply that an open, supportive social atmosphere helps develop feelings of belonging by facilitating care and respect and providing a social safety blanket—a stable and supportive network—to Generation Z, which they utilize when they encounter difficult or negative workplace experiences in order to stay motivated.

This category of results relates to formative experiences of Generation Z. First, Generation Z has been bombarded by messages of connectedness through technology
throughout their lifetime (Dupont, 2015). These messages highlight the value of belonging for Generation Z by stressing that relationships should matter, and consequently, feelings of belonging are highly sought in the workplace. As many participants explained, when they did not feel like they belonged, they found a different job instead.

Belonging also ties closely to Maslow’s hierarchy. In fact, love and belonging form the third tier of the hierarchy (Acevedo, 2018). Thus, my results align with needs theories of motivation in this regard. Furthermore, the social atmosphere necessary for belonging to develop closely mirrors the second tier of the hierarchy—safety. Safety deals with a sense of personal security (Acevedo, 2018), and the social environment of the workplace provided that security for my participants because they felt like their social network at work would look out for them through negative experiences.

**Conflict.** While discussing belonging and social environments, my participants frequently brought up conflict as a subtopic. While conflict is not motivational, it highlighted some pieces of motivation, such as when participants utilized coworkers to feel valued despite conflicts with customers. When encountering workplace conflicts, Generation Z expresses a desire to solve their own problems, according to the results of this study. Generational scholars point to events such as the Great Recession and a rise in single-parent households to explain Generation Z independence (Dupont, 2015; “Making way”, 2016; Seemiller & Grace, 2018). These formative events have taught Generation Z to be self-reliant, and my results suggest that they bring that attitude with them when encountering workplace conflicts.
Identity. The summary of results up to this point concerned itself with the facets of task and personal communication. As my theoretical model shows, much of communication filters through Generation Z identities and the values that comprise those identities before becoming motivational. Essentially, various types of task and personal communication serve to demonstrate the values embodied by members of Generation Z, and successful work, as a result of those communication processes, validates the identities of individuals who hold those values. This process is motivational for Generation Z according to the results of this study. Furthermore, results indicate that the motivational effect of completing work successfully compounds when the organizational values inherent in that work align with personal values of the individual.

This total process reflects what is meant by “locutionary language” (Sullivan, 1988). Sullivan (1988) describes the effect of locutionary language as allowing an employee to “construct a view of himself within the work context, […] as a specific part within a specific whole” (p. 109). By communicating values and then working in alignment with those communicated values, Generation Z establishes a workplace identity and defines their “specific part” in the “specific whole” of the organization within this study. Thus, my model centralizes the role of meaning-making within the process of motivation for Generation Z by filtering communication through identity and values.

Responsibility. Several values stood out among the responses of participants. Responsibility was most prevalent among those values. The majority of participants felt that they had a personal duty or responsibility to complete work. They viewed being responsible for work as setting a precedent for their work lives and providing an avenue
for advancement. Much like with goals, responsibility directed toward career advancement is probably more connected with career stage than generational differences (Levenson, 2010). Thus, when Generation Z enters terminal positions within organizations, the effect of responsibility on their motivation will likely decrease (as advancement is no longer a priority).

**Competitiveness.** Competitiveness was another of the values articulated by most participants. Participants felt a competitive desire to be the best at whatever their job entailed. Several participants calculated their success against the success of their workplace peers, while other participants imagined an ideal version of their workplace identity against which to compete. Generational scholars characterize Generation Z as an ambitious group (Dupont, 2015), and they have learned their competitive nature through years of academic and athletic comparison (Miller, 2018). The results of this study support the image of Generation Z as a competitive bunch.

**Learning.** Finally, Generation Z places much emphasis on learning according to the results of this study. Learning is a method to increase an individual’s value to an organization and avoid problems with task completion. Learning centers on new organizational experiences, which spark interest for Generation Z according to the results. This finding validates previous findings that there are positive associations between interest, motivation, and learning (Weber, 2003). For my participants, interest in new experiences motivates because it provides challenges that allow Generation Z individuals to prove themselves, advance their careers, and avoid boredom. One participant likened these challenges to be like games that provide small challenges that are rewarding to overcome.
Learning connects to generational research. Generation Y individuals view themselves as “indispensable” to organizations (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011, p. 24). By learning, my results imply that Generation Z sees the opportunity to become valuable and indispensable to their organizations, much like Generation Y. Furthermore, to the extent that learning motivates because it is perceived as career-advancing, it connects to career cycle more than true generational differences (Levenson, 2010). In other words, we can expect any new employee to value learning if they wish to pursue advancement within organizations. This value may be especially prevalent given Generation Z’s recent transition from education to industry (Ferri-Reed, 2016). Education’s primary emphasis is learning, so Generation Z holds learning in high regard because it has been necessary for their success up to this point. Finally, Morton (2002) notes that the development of a culture around games increases the expectation for gamified experiences within organizations for Generation Y. This same expectation is represented by Generation Z within this study insofar as they view learning challenges as providing game-like rewards and stimulation.

**Implications**

The results of this study carry meaningful implications for researchers, for theory, and for organizations that employ members of Generation Z. First, my results connect to several common criticisms of organizational and generational research, with implications for future researchers. Therefore, in the following several paragraphs, I explain research criticisms and demonstrate how my results attempt to alleviate or partially refute those criticisms.
One criticism of organizational researchers recruiting students as research subjects is that students do not have enough significant organizational experience to be considered reliable sources of information (Mayfield & Mayfield, personal communication, 2019). This study uses those research subjects despite this criticism. Researchers must weigh the potential benefit of each decision they make against the anticipated drawbacks of that decision. Moving into the data collection phase of this study, I felt that the imminent need to know about Generation Z in the workplace (Ferri-Reed, 2016) outweighed the risk of unreliable information that an inexperienced group of workers might provide.

To my surprise, however, my participants were not as inexperienced as I originally imagined. All had worked multiple jobs, and most had been working in organizations for years—dating back to when they turned 16 years old. If this study provides any testimony, it says that the criticism of student research subjects is not always accurate. Organizational communication researchers should weigh their own options for each future research endeavor, but this thesis serves as a small reminder that students can be reliable sources of information in the right study.

Another related criticism is that generational research does not account for the career life cycle stages of participants (Levenson, 2010). In other words, variables interact differently for an employee fresh out of school as compared with an employee in the late stages of retirement planning. Therefore, it is necessary for researchers to contextualize results of generational research in terms of career stage whenever possible to avoid overstating the effect of generational differences. Throughout the summary of results, I note times when career life cycle reasonably explains the responses of
participants. This format of discussion provides a model for non-longitudinal studies to stay grounded in what are and are not generational differences.

**Theory.** A major goal of this study is to compare results to the three types of communication present in MLT. During the summary of results, I describe a close connection between the categories of this study and the fundamental speech acts of MLT (Sullivan, 1988). Specifically, task communication and uncertainty-reducing language are highly similar, and personal communication is comparable to human-bonding and meaning-making language. Additionally, my theoretical model centralizes the role of meaning-making within the process of motivation. However, my results also expand on MLT in several areas.

First, MLT originally dealt specifically with the language choices of leaders (Sullivan, 1988). For Generation Z, however, the results of this study imply that the language choices of coworkers and customers also make a significant difference on their motivation. In terms of feedback, for instance, participants of this study felt that manager feedback had more effect, but they often preferred coworker feedback, which also inspired feelings of motivation toward work. By integrating coworkers and customers, my model more broadly encompasses the motivational effect of interpersonal communication within organizations.

Second, motivating language under MLT is a multidimensional construct wherein each type of communication is distinct from each other type (Mayfield et al., 1995). This distinction is evident in Sullivan’s (1988) original theoretical model, which defined why each type of language was uniquely motivating. However, the distinction between
human-bonding and meaning-making communication was not as clear in my results as MLT makes it out to be.

In reality, many of the communicative experiences of Generation Z in the workplace are layered through several or all categories of language usage present in MLT and through both categories from my theoretical model. Consider a scenario in which a manager tells an employee to restock napkins at a table by compressing the spring-loaded napkin dispenser with one hand while loading napkins with the other hand. MLT views this language usage as uncertainty-reducing because it clarifies a process. While the employee experiences that clarification, they may also experience shame at not knowing how to load a napkin dispenser or become upset by the way a manager gives those directions. This deeper level of experience is more indicative of the meaning-making and human-bonding sides of MLT, but it is lost when considering one piece of language in isolation.

MLT’s multidimensional distinction and the task-personal communication distinction of my model simplify the phenomena of language in organizations. However, when applied to data as exclusive categories (wherein each piece of data must adhere to only one category), they do not fully represent the reality of what people experience in their communicative involvements with organizations. Rather, theorists are better served viewing communication experiences in terms of how individual experiences apply across multiple categories of language usage.

This suggestion for theory closely mirrors Watzlawick and Beavin’s axioms of communication (1967). Specifically, all messages consist of a content and a relationship component (Watzlawick & Beavin, 1967). By viewing organizational communication
events in these terms, researchers recognize their place throughout multiple categories of motivation and, thus, achieve a more holistic understanding of the role of communication in the process of motivation.

Finally, MLT deals narrowly in language, while my study deals more broadly in communication. While this broader filter makes it more difficult to capture each minute detail of participants’ lived experiences, ultimately, it expands the view of communication-related motivation available in MLT by capturing communication events that occur beyond language. This extension is also closely tied to the axioms of communication. The first axiom is that “in the presence of another, all behavior is communicative” (Watzlawick & Beavin, 1967, p. 4). My model recognizes that the work-related behaviors of Generation Z are often directed at communicating their identity to their organizations. In this fashion, their work behavior is really communicative behavior.

**Organization.** In addition to research and theoretical implications, the results of this study have many practical implications for organizations and managers of Generation Z. Generation Z is comprised of young people who do not quite know themselves (Dupont, 2015), but my results show that they see work as a method for becoming who they will become. That interpretation should be both frightening and exciting for organizations. Organizations should see an opportunity to bring on enthusiastic people who are willing to help shape organizations into better forms (and be shaped by them, in turn).

For HR managers of organizations, my results suggest several things. First, when hiring members of Generation Z, HR managers should pay close attention to the values of
individuals. My results indicate that Generation Z takes work very personally. They try to present their values in the work they complete, and when their values match the values of the company, they feel motivated to do some of their best work. However, my results imply that when company values challenge the personal values of Generation Z, work suffers as a result. It is unlikely that Generation Z will change or compromise their values at work, so HR managers should strive to hire new Generation Z employees based on value congruence with the company. By making these decisions at the employee selection phase, HR managers can avoid hiring employees that will be unproductive for their organizations and avoid costly new employee training when value-incongruent employees ultimately quit.

Second, HR managers should communicate company values to newly hired Generation Z employees early and often. While several participants describe organizations explicitly teaching values in formal training, many more had no value training whatsoever, especially at small, local businesses. If an organization plans to hire Generation Z employees, establishing firm core values early on will help Generation Z identify with a company and keep them motivated to work. Traditionally, values are one component of onboarding training practices (Noe, 2017). If that is not the case, HR managers should consider creating new training material to cover this topic, even for entry-level positions (which we can expect Generation Z to occupy at this stage in their career life cycles).

Third, HR managers should offer fair wages to Generation Z employees because they will work to merit pay when it is perceived as substantial, but they will focus negatively on payment that they perceive as disproportionate relative to task
responsibilities according to the results of this study. Previous research distinguishes between intrinsic motivation (driven by internal states) and extrinsic motivation (driven by external factors) and demonstrates that intrinsic motivation has a more powerful effect on learning outcomes (Weber, 2003). By offering fair compensation, Generation Z focuses on their internal drive to merit that payment instead of the extrinsic motivator of payment itself. Thus, fair compensation should also be expected to more positively motivate employees than unfair payment.

Finally, HR managers should develop training programs for managers and senior employees to teach effective strategies for giving feedback to Generation Z. The results of this study imply that Generation Z takes feedback to heart. In other words, Generation Z individuals feel that negative feedback reflects negatively on their characters, and given that most of Generation Z is new to the workplace, we can assume much of the feedback they will receive will be corrective (or negative) as they learn how to complete new tasks and processes. Thus, teaching effective feedback strategies will avoid damaging their workplace identities.

For the direct supervisors of Generation Z, my results also suggest several things. First, because values are integral to motivation for Generation Z according to this study, supervisors must play a part in communicating organizational values. Supervisors should model the behavior they wish to see in their employees. Because Generation Z is very observant, they learn values by viewing how supervisors and senior employees interact with customers and each other, according to the results of this study. When those interactions are respectful and productive, Generation Z learns how to be respectful and
productive. This is also a cheaper method for teaching values than HR departments developing training programs (Noe, 2017).

Additionally, supervisors should take time to form relationships with their Generation Z employees. According to this study, these relationships inspire motivation through respect, and they also allow managers to learn about the specific feedback preferences of individuals. Combined with additional training about feedback best practices, knowledge about feedback preferences ensures that Generation Z receives adequate support to develop into successful and productive employees.

Furthermore, the relationships Generation Z forms with managers and coworkers should be monitored to ensure they facilitate motivated work. While participants express a powerful desire to go to work simply to be with the friends they make on the job, that expression does not necessarily mean they go to work to work. If the close relationships that are necessary to motivate Generation Z result in unproductive outcomes at times, supervisors should remind employees that “if your boss sees you two doing a good job together, you’ll probably be allowed to work together more” (Juan).

Finally, supervisors should play a supportive role in conflict mediation whenever possible rather than directly intervening. Findings of this study indicate that Generation Z wants the opportunity to solve their own problems and workplace conflicts. Organizational scholars often consider conflict resolution as one of the responsibilities of managers (Noe, 2017; Pace & Faules, 1994), but when managers are overzealous in mediating disputes, it may have a negative impact on the motivation of Generation Z employees because they see their inability to solve their own problems as a personal flaw, according to the results of this study. Of course, most managers will also recognize that
not addressing a workplace conflict can lead to the conflict escalating, with potential financial and legal implications for the business. Thus, supervisors should take a supportive role to avoid damaging outcomes for the organization while allowing Generation Z some autonomy to resolve the conflict.

**Limitations**

This study is limited by methodological factors. Foremost, research design and sampling procedures limit findings. As noted previously, one criticism of generational research is that it does not account for the career life cycle stages of participants (Levenson, 2010). In other words, variables interact differently for an employee fresh out of school and for an employee in the late stages of retirement planning. I allude to this consideration at several points throughout the results and my discussion of results: the connections that I am illustrating really only generalize to this very early stage of Generation Z’s career life cycle because that is their current stage and my study is not longitudinal. Furthermore, these findings only apply to a small subsection of Generation Z (generally white and college-educated) based on the limited sample I collected.

Many of the participants were explicit about how their stage in the career life cycle was part of their motivation. For example, many participants described wanting to set a precedent for their work ethic or develop connections they could leverage as professional references. Those motivators are likely to fall off as Generation Z enters intermediate or terminal jobs in their organizations later in life. Despite small reminders about the career life cycle, I do not take steps to empirically differentiate which motivators only hold for Generation Z, which are intergenerational, and which are true regardless of generation. The design of this study does not accommodate analysis of
those factors. Rather, I am exploring potential variables and their relationships for Generation Z right now. In this regard, my process is inclusive rather than exclusive or categorical.

Data collection also created several limitations for this study. The biggest limitation in terms of data collection relates generally to interview procedures. Brody (1980) explains that while individuals are “capable of providing reports about psychological states and of explaining their action by reference to these states, […] such states may or not [sic] be accurate, and the explanations developed by subjects may or may not be correct” (p. 143-144). In other words, participants’ explanations of motivation gathered through interviews, while apparently coherent, may not actually reflect the true processes of motivation which affect participants.

The specific interview procedures also limit my findings. While I ask questions to collect data about the process of motivation, I do not ask questions about concrete organizational practices to support that process. This limitation is especially apparent regarding feedback. I have demonstrated why positive feedback is motivating and why negative feedback can be demotivating, and I have uncovered some Generation Z preferences for feedback, but I am not able to generate an empirically-supported list of organizational best practices for feedback based on my line of questioning. The same limitation applies to conflict management practices, as well: while I can tell that Generation Z wants to play a role in solving their own problems, I do not know the best way an organization can support that preference based on my questions.

Assumptions. My analytical process also limits the findings of this study in several ways. First, it is necessary to reflectively walk through the creation process I
used to arrive at my final diagram because it has implications for the interpretation of these results. After gathering a significant portion of my data, I revisited my research question and thesis statement to identify what I should be looking to explain: the purpose of this study is to understand organizational motivation for Generation Z. I started by drawing a stick figure to represent Generation Z and a star to represent motivation. I then drew a line between them to represent the connection I was looking to understand.

After some consideration, I realized that I had left out an important element: the organization. I am looking for how Generation Z is motivated specifically in the workplace, so I replaced the word motivation with the phrase “motivated work” and drew a little house at the center of the line between Generation Z and motivated work to represent the organization. This simple depiction began to show the process I am looking to illuminate. A Generation Z employee walks into a workplace. Somewhere in that workplace, they become motivated, and that motivation produces motivated work. Herein lays the first assumption of my framework: work is the necessary output of organizational motivation.

If there is some other output, I did not see it in the responses my participants gave me, but it is possible this assumption is faulty. Because I chose to define motivation broadly as conditions that impel action (Pace & Faules, 1994), I could then define the action based on the organizational context—motivated work. However, the motivation presented in this model may actually represent motivation beyond that context, and I have no methodological or analytical mechanism to distinguish between organizational motivation and other motivations, except to point out that my interview questions primed participants to talk about organizational experiences. If that was insufficient to focus
responses around organizational motivation, then the framework I have created begins to destabilize.

I continued to consider what I was looking to explain. I want to know what part communication plays in this process, so I started looking at my participant’s responses and asking what their responses were communicating to organizations and what their organizations were communicating back to them. From this, I developed the descriptive categories task communication and personal communication. Then, I revisited my model to try to situate those descriptors. I realized that this communication was happening inside the organization, so I placed those descriptors inside the little house I had drawn, and the model took shape from there as every response my participants gave seemed to tie back to these two descriptors. I do not claim that the framework is complete for Generation Z, but it completely represents the range of information my Generation Z participants provided based on my questioning. Retrospectively, by starting with task and personal communication, I made my second assumption. I found those connections because I was looking for connections to communication, until every part of the organization could be described and connected communicatively.

While this second assumption limits the interpretation of results, it does not invalidate the results of this study. I have demonstrated the power of those communicative connections for my Generation Z participants, and that power is very real for these individuals. Rather, my assumption illustrates my understanding of the essence of organizations: organizations are purpose-driven communicative collectives. Pace and Faules (1994) explain that “subjectivists define organizations as organizing behavior” (p. 11). By assuming that all organization can be dissected into communication behaviors, I
am taking a subjectivist stance on the issue of motivation, and thus all of my interpretation and analysis should be considered subjectively as well. In other words, a cautious reader should not trust every connection I have discussed to remain true for every member of Generation Z at every stage in their career development.

These assumptions further limit my ability to address one of this study’s primary objectives. One of the goals of this study was to independently investigate some of the assumptions of MLT (Sullivan, 1988). The loftiest assumption of MLT was that communication has the power to motivate. However, as I discussed while explaining my diagramming process, I made the same assumption somewhere along the line: I looked for communication’s place, so I found it. I am therefore unable to objectively weigh in on the accuracy of this assumption. The coherence of my results provides subjective support, but every study of MLT provides similar support. Therefore, this study is merely another drop in the bucket of reaching that theoretical milestone.

**Future Directions**

The findings and limitations of this study suggest future directions for research. First, my assumption that all organizational behavior can be reduced to communicative behavior invites reinterpretation using other frames of analysis. Future research can therefore aim to investigate motivation from a sociological or psychological frame of reference or attempt to investigate it using more objective methods wherein the researcher’s bias is significantly reduced. One particular avenue for such research is to reanalyze responses using an external framework rather than a grounded framework. For instance, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs connects with many of the results of this study,
and therefore, I suspect it may embody the full range of responses my participants gave from a psychological (rather than communicative) frame of analysis.

Additionally, the methods for conducting this additional research should change not only to account for researcher bias but also to account for participant bias because participants are possibly unaware of actual motivational processes affecting them despite being able to form cogent explanations about their motivation (Brody, 1980).

Furthermore, interviews, even when conducted confidentially or anonymously, often yield answers that reflect favorably on the interviewee because the interviewee does not generally want to point out his or her own flaws and faults (Frey et al., 2000). Field research using direct observation, for example, may better capture the reality of Generation Z motivation in the workplace, especially when focused around some of the sites of motivation listed in the results of this study, such as respect, belonging, questioning, and modeling.

Furthermore, research methods should implement longitudinal designs. The people that surround Generation Z individuals will change as they move into intermediate or experienced roles within organizations. For one, their supervisors will have more experience at that career stage. Several participants described frustration with the work ethics of managers, but companies will not promote poorly performing managers above Generation Z when Generation Z moves out of entry-level positions. In this regard, modeling and respect may become more positively influential as careers advance, though longitudinal research design is necessary to support that conclusion. Additionally, longitudinal studies allow researchers to differentiate which motivators are truly generational and which are attributable only to career stage. Furthermore, by comparing
the longitudinal results of Generation Z studies to the results of such studies for other generations, we can establish which motivators are intergenerational, as well.

Future research should also investigate some of the themes and relationships suggested within the results of this study in more depth. Because my results are merely exploratory, additional focused research is necessary to establish which relationships powerfully affect organizations and under what conditions Generation Z achieves their highest motivation. Furthermore, this research should better articulate the communication events presented here and begin to demonstrate how the nuances of various communication events impact concrete organizational outcomes (much like MLT research has done up to this point).

Several specific relationships warrant such research. First, future studies should investigate the effects of coworker language usage. While MLT has directed significant attention to the language choices of leaders in organizations (Mayfield et al., 2015), my participants also stressed that coworkers’ language usage affects their motivation. For instance, coworker feedback was a major theme within both task and personal communication. Positive coworker feedback helped to motivate participants via validation, and negative coworker feedback was often preferred because it did not feel as detrimental to workplace identity. Additionally, the power of coworker feedback was anecdotally less than that of manager feedback, and the motivational powers of both types of feedback potentially vary depending on relational closeness with the person giving feedback. These relationships deserve empirical validation because they change the ways organizations should teach feedback practices, which stands to improve the workplace for Generation Z and their supervisors.
Second, future research should investigate workplace conflict for Generation Z to equip supervisors with the tools necessary to resolve conflict while simultaneously motivating Generation Z employees. Because my results imply that Generation Z employees want autonomy to resolve their own conflicts, supervisors must balance that preference with the potential organizational consequences of conflict to manage conflict effectively. Generation Z researchers have yet to illuminate the best practices for this precise balancing act.

Finally, my findings suggest that Generation Z is motivated by competitiveness. Future research should investigate strategies for channeling that competitive energy into productive organizational outcomes. Goals seem like a starting place. My participants felt a sense of achievement when completing small goals they set to challenge themselves, but they were drained by the time and effort required for larger goals. While goals are not exactly indicative of competition, they may provide organizations with an easy structure in which to build some competition into work for Generation Z. Research should further investigate this strategy.

In additional to altering methods and investigating the specific themes present in the results of this study, future research should attempt to address several other gaps in this generational, motivational, and organizational line of inquiry. First, as Generation Z progresses through their career life cycle, they will begin to work with the generation that follows them. These new interactions are completely unknown, but they will meaningfully impact the social environment of the workplace, just like any new generation entering the workforce (Rentz, 2015). When we get to that point in the near
future, it will be important for research to address that gap in our knowledge by demonstrating how Generation Z interacts with this new generation.

Additionally, findings on respect and listening are reminiscent of literature about immediacy, which researchers primarily use within education contexts (Andersen et al., 1979; Myers et al., 2014). Future research should extend the body of immediacy research into organizational contexts as well. Because respect and relationships are integral to motivation for Generation Z, immediacy research may help suggest strategies for supervisors to relate to Generation Z employees in order to achieve positive organizational outcomes. Furthermore, the nature of the relationship between instructors and students is similar to the relationship between supervisors and employees. In both, a person in a position of power, authority, and experience (instructor/supervisor) attempts to guide a less powerful and less knowledgeable subordinate (student/employee) toward a contextually-bound outcome (learning/work). Therefore, I suspect immediacy behaviors will have a similarly positive effect when applied to organizational contexts, though further research is necessary to validate that hypothesis.

To conclude, this study seeks to understand organizational motivation for Generation Z. The exploratory grounded theory framework provided by this study begins to show the pathways through which Generation Z makes sense of organizations and achieves motivation. Generation Z is a value-driven, relationally-invested, and hard-working group of young people shaped by the world around them and ready to offer their service to organizations. Organizations must play their part to prepare for the successful inclusion of Generation Z into a diverse, multi-generational workplace. Research should support organizations in their preparation by continuing to investigate the themes and
potential relationships suggested by this study. My hope is that this study introduces organizations and researchers to the people who will be walking through their doors—looking for jobs and their place in the world—for years to come: Generation Z.
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Appendix A

Initial Interview Protocol

Motivation, Language, and Generation Z

Directions: Prior to conducting the interview, introduce yourself and discuss the consent form with participants. If they agree and sign the form and agree to audio recording, then proceed with interview questions. If they do not, thank them for their time, and dismiss the interviewee. Each main question (denoted with numerals) must be asked, but follow-ups and probes (denoted with letters) may be omitted or other follow-ups and probes may be included at the interviewer’s discretion. Immediately following the interview, provide the agreed-upon compensation ($10) to the participant and thank them for their participation.

1. Please briefly introduce yourself and your previous work experience(s).

[The goal of question one is to get the participant talking and comfortable with interview environment]

2. How did you feel about your job? [keep this question and its sub-questions brief]
   a. Did you feel positive about the job? How often?
   b. Did you feel negative about the job? How often?
   c. What made you stay?
   d. What made you leave?
   e. What things did you like about the job?
   f. What things did you dislike about the job?

[The goal of question two is to begin to understand if participant felt motivated or demotivated by the job and prime them to talk about motivational experiences.]

3. What motivated you to do a good job, if anything?
   a. What did you care about most on the job?
   b. How did you think about payment for your work, if at all?
   c. How did you think about rewards for your work, such as gifts or awards, if at all?
   d. How did you think about how your work reflected on you, if at all?
   e. How did you think about how your quality of work made you feel, if at all?
   f. Why do you think [blank] motivated you? [Be careful with this question. Use sparingly and interpret with skepticism]
The goal of question three is to explicitly see what participants feel was motivating about the job, from people to payment to personal gratification—and maybe begin to see how it motivates.

4. How social were your previous workplaces?
   a. How often did you interact with other employees? With managers?
   b. What did you discuss with co-workers on the job? With managers?
   c. How would you describe the relationships you had with your co-workers? With your managers?

The goal of question four is to assess the communicative environment of their workplaces and prepare them for the next question.

5. How did your communication with others impact your work?
   a. How much did your boss’s feedback push you to do work better? Or worse?
   b. How much did your co-workers’ feedback push you to do work better? Or worse?
   c. How did casual conversations with managers affect your work?
   d. How did casual conversations with co-workers affect your work?
   e. How did communication contribute to your sense of belonging at your job, if at all?
   f. What types of things were most frequently discussed with you at work?
   g. What specific things did managers or co-workers used to say on the job? Off the job?
   h. How would you rate the communication you had with others at work?
   i. How necessary was communication to the success of your job?

The goal of question five is to see if communication was motivating, whose communication was motivating, what was motivating about the communication for the participant, and to gather some specific examples of words and phrases that impacted the job.

6. Demographics (unless stated during Question 1):
   a. What is your gender?
   b. What is your race and/or ethnicity?
   c. In what year were you born?

The goal of question six is to fill out generic information for later reporting and defining generalizability of results.