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Innovative Behavior: The Role of Self-Efficacy and Work Engagement of Gen Z employees

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Abstract
This study aims to analyze the influence of self-efficacy on innovative behavior mediated by work engagement among Gen Z employees. We conducted a survey using a questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. A total of 155 responses were received from Gen Z employees in the three cities in East Java. We use SmartPLS software to analyze the data using the partial least squares–based structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) approach. The research results indicate that self-efficacy has a significant impact on innovative behavior. Moreover, we found that work engagement mediates the relationship between self-efficacy and innovative behavior. By understanding the factors influencing the innovative behavior of Gen Z employees, companies can effectively apply human resource management. Acquiring, developing, and retaining Gen Z employees with high self-efficacy is crucial for increasing work engagement and subsequently enhancing innovative behavior
Keywords: innovative behavior, self-efficacy, work engagement, Gen Z.

Introduction

Organizations must consider various environmental factors. There is a high degree of uncertainty in the environment, which demands innovation (Al-Ajlouni, 2021). However, based on the Global Innovation Index 2024 released by the World Intellectual Property Organization, Indonesia ranks sixth out of ten countries in Southeast Asia (Irfan, 2024). In fact, innovation is a key element for organizations to gain a competitive advantage, which requires innovative behavior (Hamid et al., 2025). Innovative behavior is a pattern by which people can accept change, take initiative, and understand risks and opportunities (Amaral & De Muylder, 2025). Furthermore, this behavior includes generalising new ideas and implementing them as solutions (Xu et al., 2025). Additionally, this innovative behavior needs to integrate varied information, knowledge, and expertise to generate new ideas, as well as the ability to overcome problems that arise during implementation (Xu et al., 2025).

Meanwhile, in recent years, a new generation of employees has emerged in the workplace: Gen Z. Compared to previous generations, they are more tolerant of diversity, tech-savvy, desire knowledge and freedom, and are confident (Salvadorinho et al., 2024). They are people who share information on and seek inspiration from digital social media (Muhammad et al., 2023; Lyngdoh et al., 2023). The willingness to gain freedom, accept differences, and exchange information from digital media could be a driving factor for the emergence of new ideas. Therefore, these Gen Z employees may have the potential to behave innovatively.

Based on social cognitive theory, personality factors can influence people's behavior (Stremersch et al., 2021). According to this theory, self-efficacy is a crucial factor in shaping an action, both directly and indirectly (Bandura, 1999). Self-efficacy enables people to believe in their abilities, which in turn provides motivation and empowers them to utilize their cognitive resources to take action (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Therefore, self-efficacy has the potential to foster innovative behavior (Xu et al., 2025). Several studies have found that self-efficacy plays a role in shaping employees' innovative behavior, such as in the context of insurance companies (Iddris et al., 2023), education (Noerchoidah et al., 2022), IT consultants (Kamila & Nurhasanah, 2024), and the public sector (Hameli et al., 2025). However, existing studies have not yet explained the mechanism by which self-efficacy can increase innovative behavior.

Several studies have found that self-efficacy is able to increase work engagement among teachers (Musenze et al., 2020; Johnson, 2022), factory workers (Na-Nan et al., 2021), and Gen Z employees working in start-up companies (Febyana et al., 2024). Furthermore, previous studies have found that work engagement can increase innovative behavior among start-up team members (Jaya et al., 2023) and employees in various industries (Koroglu & Ozmen, 2022; Ali et al., 2022). Thus, work engagement is likely a mediator in the relationship between self-efficacy and innovative behavior. Nguyen & Petchsawang's (2024) study on Gen Z employees working in various fields in Vietnam found a positive relationship between self-efficacy and innovative behaviour, with work engagement mediating the two. Consistent with Nguyen & Petchsawang (2024), our study examines the relationship between self-efficacy, work engagement, and innovative behavior among Gen Z in three cities in East Java, with a focus on employees in marketing-related fields.

Our study contributes in three ways. First, there have been few studies that have examined the role of self-efficacy on the innovative behavior of Gen Z employees in marketing. Digital social media has become a crucial tool for disseminating information, including product details (Ismail, 2017). Therefore, workers in the field of product information dissemination are an important factor in the success of marketing. Furthermore, one key aspect of marketing, customer service, has played a significant role in enhancing customer satisfaction and organizational performance (Kim & Yeo, 2024). Second, referring to social cognitive theory, self-efficacy enables individuals to mobilise their resources, which subsequently leads to action (Wood & Bandura, 1989). In line with the thinking in this theory, there have been few studies analyzing the mechanism by which self-efficacy influences innovative behavior. Third, previous studies have not extensively investigated the role of engagement among Gen Z workers (Pandita & Kumar, 2022), including its role as a mediator in the relationship between self-efficacy and innovative behavior. Gen Z tends to want information and solutions quickly. This condition potentially makes them vulnerable to disengagement (Das & Malik, 2024). However, their engagement can influence organizational performance (Lulewicz-sas et al., 2025). Therefore, this study aims to investigate the role of work engagement as a mediator explaining the mechanism by which self-efficacy influences innovative behavior.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Self-efficacy and innovative behavior

The concept of self-efficacy was proposed by Bandura (1989) in the framework of *social cognitive theory* (SCT). Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's belief in their ability to organize, make decisions, and control their actions in specific situations to achieve desired goals. According to Bandura's (1997), self-efficacy serves as a key cognitive mechanism influencing individuals' behavioral choices, effort levels, persistence in the face of obstacles, and emotional regulation. Thus, self-efficacy is not merely a reflection of actual skills, but rather an individual's belief in their ability to use those skills in real-life situations. Individuals

with high self-efficacy tend to be more optimistic, take risks more readily, and persevere in the face of obstacles. This characteristic is highly aligned with the prerequisites for innovative behaviour, which essentially demand the exploration of new ideas, the courage to face resistance, and persistence in implementing ideas (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010).

Previous research has identified several factors that predict innovative behavior. Individuals with high levels of self-efficacy tend to be more involved in their jobs and overcome challenges independently. Self-efficacy influences an individual's decision to persist with a task despite difficulties. Gen Z can adapt to change, solve complex problems, and achieve innovation (Kwon & Kim, 2020). Several studies support a positive relationship between self-efficacy and innovative behavior. Research conducted in Uganda by Namono et al. (2022) on university teaching staff revealed that creative self-efficacy (CSE) has a significant influence on innovative work behaviour as a multistage process, indicating that CSE affects creativity, which in turn affects this behavior. Similarly, a study by Sofiyan et al. (2022) conducted on Indonesian teachers revealed that organisational culture and self-efficacy positively predict innovative work behavior. In their findings, self-efficacy is found to influence the promotion of teachers' innovative behavior. Thus, self-efficacy is not only a direct predictor but also a psychological prerequisite that strengthens the entire innovation process, from exploring opportunities to implementing new ideas within the organization.

H1: *Self-efficacy has a positive effect on innovative behaviour.*

Work engagement as a mediator

Referring to social cognitive theory, self-efficacy can create motivation, such as engagement, and lead to action (Ouweneel et al., 2013). Engagement is seen as the result of a combination of job resources, such as organisational support, feedback, and development opportunities, and personal resources, including self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience (Bakker & Demerouti, 2016). These resources impact psychological energy, which then increases engagement. Engagement is positioned as a psychological driver that bridges both internal and external resources with positive work behaviour. Self-efficacy, as a personal resource, provides self-confidence, which ultimately boosts engagement and then drives innovative behavior.

Several previous studies have examined the mediating role of work engagement. According to a study conducted by Nguyen & Petchsawang (2024), work engagement positively mediates the influence of self-efficacy on employees' innovative behaviour. This research reinforces previous findings by Ali et al. (2022), which stated that work engagement serves as a motivational mechanism for innovative behaviour. Employee innovation is enhanced by job-related satisfaction, which includes work engagement. If Generation Z can apply relevant skills in their work, they will be highly motivated and care about the company's intrinsic values. Innovative behaviour is also known to be motivated by work engagement (Ali et al., 2022). Thus, self-efficacy will be an important factor in increasing Generation Z's engagement in the workplace.

H2: *Work engagement mediates the relationship between self-efficacy and innovative behavior.*

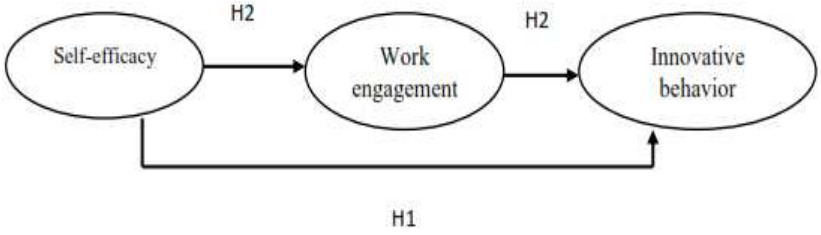

Figure 1. Research Model

Research Method

The respondents in this study were Gen Z employees working in marketing (e.g. public relation, content creator, and design graphic) in service companies in three cities in East Java. Since there are few studies on innovation conducted in the service industry context (Namono et al., 2022), our study is situated in this sector. Based on convenience sampling, we distributed questionnaires using Google Forms for one month in 2025. A total of 155 responses were collected and can be used in the analysis. The number of responses has met the minimum sample size based on a 5:1 ratio calculation, which is 5 data points for each item (Memon et al., 2020). There are 21 items used as measures of the variables in our study. Our respondents were predominantly female (57.4%), aged 20–< 25 years (62.6%), had been working for 1–≤ 5 years (58.7%), and held a bachelor's degree (54.8%).

In this study, three research variables are examined: innovative behavior, self-efficacy, and work engagement. Innovative behavior is measured using five items from Nguyen & Petchsawang (2024) (e.g., I look for new ways to do my job). We use nine items from Nguyen & Petchsawang (2024) to measure self-efficacy (e.g., When I face a problem, I can usually find several solutions). This study employs seven items from Nguyen & Petchsawang (2024) to measure work engagement (e.g., In doing my work, I feel enthusiastic). Respondents were asked to respond on a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree-strongly agree).

Data analysis was conducted using the partial least squares-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) approach with SmartPLS version 4.0. In PLS-SEM, there are two stages of analysis. First, test the measurement model, including convergent validity tests based on outer loading values and average variance extracted (AVE), discriminant validity tests using the cross-loading approach, and reliability tests referring to the composite reliability (CR) value. Second, test the structural model, which aims to examine the relationships between the variables in our research model.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the results of convergent validity and reliability testing. Several items must be dropped, namely se2, se6, se9, and we7, to meet the criteria for validity and reliability. All outer loadings have values greater than 0.6, and the AVE is greater than 0.5. Thus, the criteria for convergent validity have been met (Hair et al., 2019). The CR value for all variables is greater than 0.8, indicating reliability (Hair et al., 2019). Figure 2 depicts the results of evaluating the measurement model using algorithm analysis.

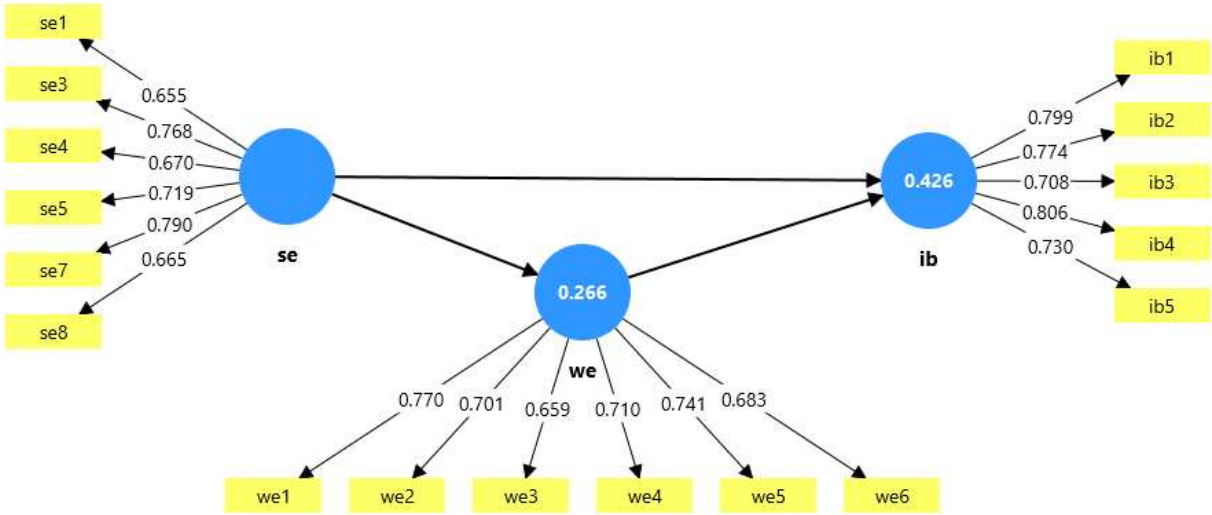

Figure 2. The Result of Measurement Model Test

Table 1. Convergent Validity and Reliability

Variable	Item	Outer loading	AVE	CR
Self-Efficacy (SE)	se1. I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough.	0.655	0.508	0.861
	se3. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.	0.768		
	se4. Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations.	0.670		
	se5. I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.	0.719		
	se7. When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions.	0.790		
	se8. If I am in a bind, I can usually think of something to do.	0.665		
Innovation Bahavior (IWB)	ib1. I create new ideas for improvements.	0.799	0.584	0.875
	ib2. I search out new way to do my job.	0.774		
	ib3. I generate original solutions for problems.	0.708		
	ib4. I transform innovative ideas into my work.	0.806		
	ib5. I evaluate the utility of innovative ideas.	0.730		
Work Engagement (WE)	we1. At my work, I feel bursting with energy.	0.770	0.506	0.860
	we2. My work inspires me.	0.701		
	we3. When I wake up in the morning, I feel like going to work.	0.659		
	we4. I feel happy when I am working intensely.	0.710		
	we5. I am proud of the work that I do.	0.741		
	we6. I am immersed in my work.	0.683		

Note: The following items are not used in hypothesis testing: se2 (i.e., It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals), se6 (i.e., I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities), se9 (i.e., No matter what comes my way, I'm usually able to handle it.), and we7 (i.e., I get carried away when I am working). All items refer to the original items in Nguyen & Petchsawang (2024), except for ib2, which we slightly modified: "I search out new working methods, techniques, or instruments (original item)." The questionnaire in our research uses Indonesian (All items have been translated into Indonesian - taking into account words/terms understood by respondents).

Identification of criterion fulfillment for discriminant validity is done by analyzing the cross-loading values of each variable. Discriminant validity is met if the loading value of an item with its construct is higher than the loading value of that item with other constructs (Raza et al., 2020). The results of the discriminant validity test are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity

Item	SE	IB	WE
se1	0.655	0.422	0.380
se3	0.768	0.385	0.438
se4	0.670	0.358	0.330

Item	SE	IB	WE
se5	0.719	0.454	0.321
se7	0.790	0.441	0.326
se8	0.665	0.406	0.397
ib1	0.476	0.799	0.496
ib2	0.370	0.774	0.471
ib3	0.420	0.708	0.352
ib4	0.511	0.806	0.416
ib5	0.426	0.730	0.383
we1	0.460	0.361	0.770
we2	0.242	0.243	0.701
we3	0.318	0.396	0.659
we4	0.301	0.314	0.710
we5	0.381	0.441	0.741
we6	0.418	0.522	0.683

Figure 3 depicts the results of testing the structural model using bootstrapping analysis. Table 3 shows the results of the structural model testing. The data analysis results show that self-efficacy is able to increase innovative behavior (β= 0.397, p < 0.01). These findings support the first hypothesis. Confirming the second hypothesis, this study found that self-efficacy enhances innovative behavior, mediated by work engagement (β= 0.182, p < 0.01).

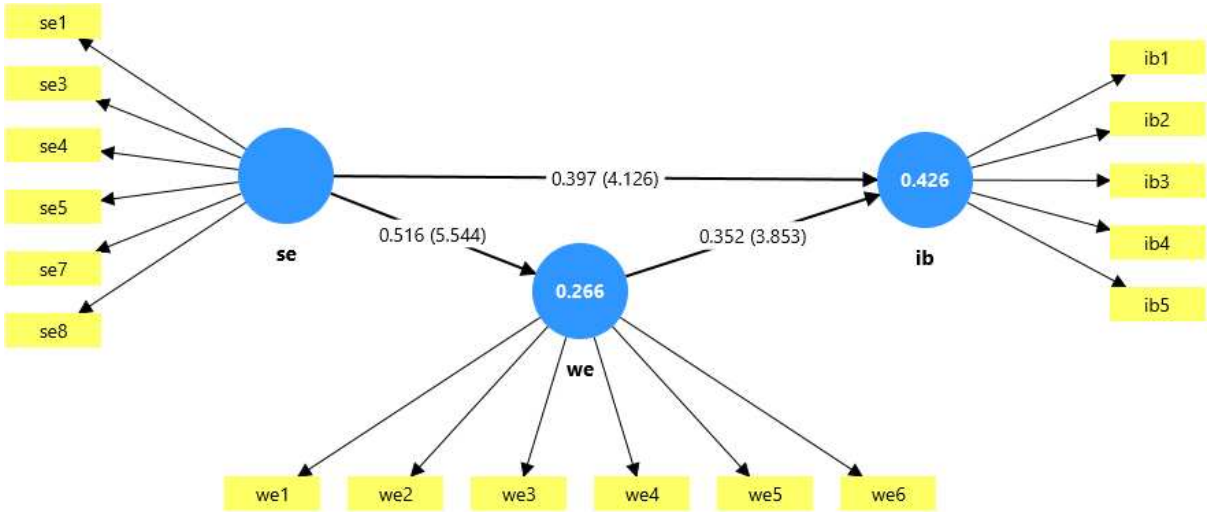

Figure 1. The Result of Structural Model Test

Table 3. Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	Beta	T value	p values	Support to Hypothesis
H1	SE → IB	0.397	4.126	0.000	Supported
H2	SE → WE → IB	0.182	3.018	0.003	Supported

Further analysis was conducted using the variance accounted for (VAF) approach to determine the type of mediation (Abdullahi et al., 2024) of work engagement. Table 4 shows the results of VAF calculations to determine the type of mediating variable. The data analysis results indicate that self-efficacy can directly improve innovative behavior, but it can also do so through the mediation of work engagement. The VAF calculation result is 31.4%, indicating partial mediation (Abdullahi et al., 2024). This result is consistent with the finding that work engagement plays a partial mediating role.

Table 4. Mediation Type

Indirect effect (SE → WE) *(WE→ IB)	Total effect SE → IB	VAF	Mediation type
(0.516)*(0.352)=0.182	0.579	0.182/0.579= 0.314	Partial

Our study shows that Gen Z employees with high self-efficacy are increasingly demonstrating high work engagement. Self-efficacy enables employees to possess a stock of resources that allows them to understand and overcome various demands in their jobs (Musenze et al., 2020). They are also more confident in their job performance, develop new skills, and manage various challenges, leading to greater joy and higher work engagement (Musenze et al., 2020). Furthermore, when employees have high work engagement, they are more focused and enthusiastic about completing their work. It is possible for them to understand their tasks better and come up with new ideas as solutions to emerging work problems. The positive feelings they have can be a driving force for applying new knowledge and experiences (Nguyen & Petchsawang, 2024).

The findings of our study support the social cognitive theory, which suggests that self-efficacy, as a personality trait, is important for increasing positive work behavior. Consistent with Xu et al. (2025) we found that self-efficacy can lead to increased innovative behavior. The data analysis results in this study support several previous studies, including those by Musenze et al. (2020), Johnson (2022), Na-Nan et al. (2021), and Febyana et al. (2024), which have found that self-efficacy can increase work engagement. Furthermore, our study results support the findings of Nguyen & Petchsawang (2024), which suggest that work engagement mediates the influence of self-efficacy on innovative behavior. Innovative behavior emerges when Gen Z employees can think critically and simplify problems based on their own abilities. Thus, the results of our study reinforce the importance of self-efficacy in enabling Gen Z employees to meet the high demands of product marketing. With confidence in their abilities, they will be more enthusiastic and put in their full effort to generate and apply new ideas.

Conclusion

This study aims to investigate the impact of self-efficacy on innovative behavior, as posited in the first hypothesis. Additionally, we tested the mediating role of work engagement in the relationship between self-efficacy and innovative behavior, as we proposed in the second hypothesis. The test results showed support for both hypotheses. These results support the social cognitive theory that self-efficacy is a crucial driver of individuals' efforts to invest their resources in their work, which in turn promotes positive work behavior. Referring to our study object, this finding suggests that Gen Z employees with high self-efficacy are likely to experience an increase in their work engagement. They will become more enthusiastic and focused in their work. This work engagement ultimately enables them to engage in innovative behavior. They will be able to generate new ideas to solve problems and complete their work.

Based on the results of this study, self-efficacy is a personality characteristic that should be present in Gen Z employees, particularly those working in product marketing. Therefore, companies need to improve the performance of their applicant recruitment and selection systems to attract applicants with high self-confidence. Because Gen Z tends to find solutions quickly (Das & Malik, 2024), it is also advisable for companies to hire applicants with adequate competencies who can obtain the necessary information to complete their work. Thus, the competencies they possess can become a strong resource for enhancing their self-efficacy. Especially in the context of product marketing, the number of social media users is increasing, prompting companies to manage their presence on these platforms to drive increased sales of their products (Hosain & Mamun, 2023). Gen Z employees need to have the competence to manage the company's social media platforms and even make them more engaging.

Additionally, managers need to provide continuous training accompanied by feedback that supports performance improvement. Especially these Gen Z individuals want to increase their knowledge (Salvadorinho et al., 2024) and receive support from their supervisors (Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023). As self-efficacy increases, the work engagement of Gen Z employees will also increase, allowing them to behave innovatively.

Our study has limitations, namely, our research sample consists only of Gen Z employees in three cities in East Java who work in marketing-related fields. Further studies should consider testing the research model on different samples, such as older generations like Gen X and Y, to determine if their innovative behavior is also driven by self-efficacy. Additionally, our study only considered self-efficacy and work engagement as antecedents of work-innovative behavior. Future research needs to consider situational factors that may interact with self-efficacy, such as supervisor and organizational support, as well as workplace spirituality.

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