AI ANXIETY, TECHNOLOGICAL EFFICACY, AND GEN Z CAREER COMMITMENT IN HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT

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Abstract. The rapid deployment of artificial intelligence (AI) and frontline service automation across the hospitality, tourism, and culinary sectors has fundamentally altered operational workflows while coinciding with an acute talent retention crisis among Generation Z (Gen Z) graduates. Grounded in Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, this study examines how AI anxiety and technological self-efficacy shape Gen Z undergraduates' long-term career commitment. A quantitative cross-sectional research design was executed, gathering primary survey data from N = 350 senior undergraduates enrolled in hospitality, tourism, and culinary management programs, of whom 89.1% possessed direct industrial automation exposure and 10.9% completed simulated lab training. The empirical model was evaluated using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS 4. Structural results revealed that the framework accounted for 43.2% of the variance in Gen Z career commitment (R2 = 0.432). Specifically, AI anxiety exhibited a statistically significant negative relationship with career commitment β= -0.312, $p < 0.001$, f2 = 0.142), supporting COR theory by illustrating how job displacement fears deplete psychological resources and induce career detachment. Conversely, technological self-efficacy demonstrated a dominant, positive direct impact on career commitment ($\beta = 0.485$, $p < 0.001$, f2 = 0.343), reinforcing SCCT by demonstrating that digital confidence acts as a vital cognitive enabler. Comparative effect size analysis (f2) confirmed that building technological self-efficacy exerts a substantially stronger predictive influence on talent retention than the psychological barrier posed by AI anxiety. Practical implications advocate that hotel operators restructure frontline operations toward hybrid human and AI collaboration, while higher education institutions must modernize curricula to foster domain-specific technological efficacy. Ultimately, securing long-term graduate retention requires equipping emerging talent with robust digital confidence rather than solely attempting to eliminate automation fears.

Keywords: *artificial intelligence anxiety, technological efficacy, Gen Z career commitment, service automation*

Introduction

Rapid frontline service automation across hospitality, tourism, and culinary operations has fundamentally transformed workflows into hybrid human–AI encounters while coinciding with an acute Generation Z (Gen Z) graduate retention crisis. Despite digital native stereotypes, undergraduates experience severe psychological friction during academic coursework and industrial internships. Pervasive displacement narratives trigger AI anxiety, a multidimensional construct marked by fears of job obsolescence, task de-skilling, and autonomy loss. Concurrently, general digital familiarity fails to yield domain-specific professional technological efficacy, defined as cognitive confidence to operate, manage, and collaborate with complex AI systems in high-volume environments. While hospitality literature extensively addresses shift

fatigue and general job satisfaction, empirical inquiry into how AI anxiety and technological efficacy jointly condition Gen Z undergraduates' career commitment remains sparse, leaving operators struggling to retain emerging talent. To bridge this gap, this study examines how AI anxiety and technological efficacy shape the long-term career commitment of Gen Z undergraduates across hospitality, tourism, and culinary management programs. Grounded in a dual theoretical framework, this research synthesizes Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent et al., 1994) and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), framing technological efficacy as an agentic cognitive resource (SCCT) and AI anxiety as a resource-depleting stressor (COR). This study addresses three integrated Research Objectives (RO1–RO3) and Research Questions (RQ1–RQ3): (1) evaluating the direct negative influence of AI anxiety on Gen Z career commitment (RO1/RQ1; H1), (2) examining the direct positive influence of technological efficacy on commitment (RO2/RQ2; H2), and (3) comparing their relative predictive weight in tech-augmented frontlines (RO3/RQ3). Specifically, H1 posits that AI anxiety has a statistically significant negative influence on Gen Z undergraduates' career commitment, whereas H2 posits that technological efficacy has a statistically significant positive influence on career commitment. This research contributes theoretically by demonstrating the incremental value of dual SCCT–COR integration in digital contexts, practically by offering hotel operators and educators strategies to implement hybrid human–AI workflows and simulation-based curricula, and societally by advancing youth graduate retention in automated service economies.

Hypotheses development

Theoretical integration: SCCT and COR theory

Evaluating Generation Z undergraduates' career trajectories in automated hospitality requires bridging cognitive agency with environmental stress mechanisms. Addressing the limitations of single-theory models, this study integrates Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent et al., 1994) and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989). SCCT posits that self-efficacy, and outcome expectations drive occupational persistence, but neglects exogenous environmental stressors. Conversely, COR theory explains resource protection and defensive withdrawal under environmental threats but lacks mechanisms for technological adaptation. Synthesizing both theories yields a dual-pathway framework: Technological Efficacy operates via SCCT as an intrinsic cognitive resource fostering career commitment, whereas AI Anxiety operates via COR as an extrinsic threat that depletes psychological resources.

AI anxiety and Gen Z career commitment

AI anxiety encompasses apprehension, displacement fears, and task de-skilling triggered by rapid service automation. Grounded in COR theory, Gen Z undergraduates perceive automated entry-level roles as an environmental threat that restricts foundational learning and devalues human labor. Although literature highlights context-dependent nuances, such as Li et al. (2023) demonstrating that organizational technological support mitigates turnover intentions, due to unsupported internship or academic frontlines generate friction that rapidly drains cognitive resources. To prevent burnout, students deploy defensive coping through psychological detachment, reducing long-term occupational commitment. Grounded in COR theory, this study proposes:

(H1): AI Anxiety has a statistically significant negative influence on Gen Z undergraduates' career commitment in the hospitality management sector.

Technological efficacy as a cognitive enabler

Rooted in Bandura (1977) paradigm, technological efficacy denotes a context-specific belief in one's capability to execute complex operational tasks using digital tools in hybrid service encounters. Crucially, scholarship distinguishes general Gen Z digital familiarity ("digital natives") from professional technological efficacy, such as operating intelligent property management systems or collaborating with service robotics. Applying SCCT principles, cultivating professional efficacy through simulations elevates outcome expectations, cognitively reframing AI from employment threats into performance-enhancing enablers that streamline administrative burdens. High efficacy enhances operational adaptability, internship satisfaction, and long-term occupational attachment. Therefore, this study proposes: (H2): Technological Efficacy has a statistically significant positive influence on Gen Z undergraduates' career commitment in the hospitality management sector.

Hypotheses development and conceptual framework

Synthesizing SCCT and COR theory, AI anxiety and technological efficacy serve as critical psychological predictors of Gen Z's career commitment. Heightened AI Anxiety triggers resource depletion and negative outcome expectations, suppressing sector commitment (Wu et al., 2025; Li et al., 2023; Bajrami et al., 2021). Conversely, high technological efficacy provides a cognitive resource that elevates career self-efficacy and fortifies long-term occupational commitment (Fadzil and Jamaluddin, 2025; Wang et al., 2025; Wu and Zhang, 2024). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed (*Figure 1*).

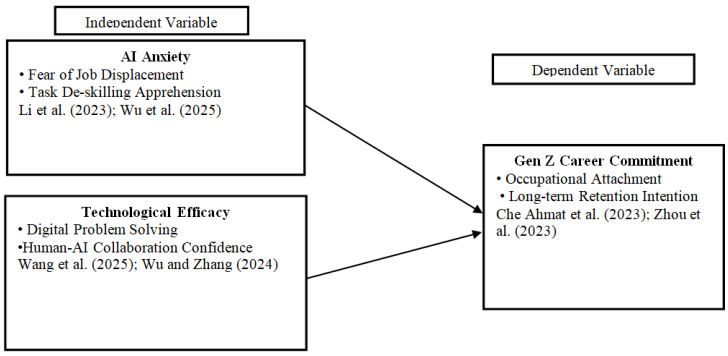


Figure 1. *Conceptual framework.*

Materials and Methods

Research design and sampling strategy

To empirically evaluate the structural relationships between AI anxiety, technological self-efficacy, and Generation Z career commitment, a quantitative, cross-sectional, deductive research design was executed. The study was conducted within the higher education sector in Malaysia, targeting senior undergraduate students enrolled in

hospitality management, tourism management, and culinary arts programs across public universities, including Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). This multi-program scope reflects the broader service education ecosystem, where students undergo standardized frontline operational training. Formal institutional ethics approval was granted by the university ethics review board prior to data collection, ensuring strict adherence to human subject research guidelines, informed consent, and data privacy protocols.

Sampling rationale and exposure reconciliation

The target population comprised senior undergraduates in their final academic years (Year 2 and Year 3) who possessed verified exposure to automated service technologies. A prospective power analysis conducted using GPower 3.1 software (Faul et al., 2009) established a minimum sample size requirement of n = 107 for a structural framework with two primary predictor constructs ($\alpha = 0.05$, statistical power = 0.95, medium effect size f2 = 0.15). To account for potential non-response bias and enhance estimation stability in structural equation modeling, a non-probability purposive sampling strategy was employed. A total of Nraw = 380 questionnaires were collected across an 8 week distribution window between October and December 2024. Data screening protocols involved inspecting response completion times, straight-lining patterns, and missing values. 30 incomplete or unengaged responses were discarded, yielding a final usable sample of N = 350 valid respondents (representing a 92.1% usable data rate). Regarding operational automation exposure, 89.1% (n = 312) of respondents satisfied the eligibility requirement through direct frontline operational exposure during industrial internships in automated hotel environments. The remaining 10.9% (n = 38) satisfied the eligibility criteria through hands-on, scenario-based simulation laboratory training utilizing advanced property management systems (PMS) and service robotics modules embedded within their academic curricula.

Instrumentation, scale adaption and content validation

Measurement scales were adapted from validated Scopus-indexed literature using a standardized 7-point Likert anchor (1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 7 = "Strongly Agree"): AI Anxiety (4 items; Li et al., 2023; Lv et al., 2022), Technological Self-Efficacy (5 items; Wang et al., 2025; Prentice et al., 2023), and Gen Z Career Commitment (5 items; Che Ahmat et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2023). Content and face validity were established through an expert panel review comprising three hospitality professors and two 5-star hotel operational directors, yielding minor contextual adjustments for automation scenarios. A pilot study (n = 40) confirmed strong internal consistency ($\alpha AIA = 0.842$, $\alpha TE = 0.865$,$\alpha CC = 0.878 > 0.70$). Complete item wording and codings appear in the Measurement Scale Appendix..

Data collection and common method bias controls

The survey was hosted digitally on Qualtrics and systematically distributed via official university student mailing lists, learning management systems (LMS), and student association channels. To mitigate Common Method Bias (CMB) inherent in self-reported, single-source survey designs, both procedural and statistical remedies were implemented (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Procedurally, total respondent anonymity was guaranteed, clear instructions emphasized that there were no correct or incorrect answers, and construct items were counterbalanced across survey sections to minimize

evaluation apprehension and pattern-seeking behaviors. Statistically, CMB was assessed using two approaches. First, Harman's single-factor test was performed; the principal factor accounted for 34.2% of the total variance, well below the conservative 50.0% threshold. Second, Kock (2015) full collinearity assessment approach was executed within SmartPLS 4. Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) generated for all latent constructs through a dummy-variable regression ranged between 1.342 and 1.865. Because all VIF values remained strictly below the 3.3 threshold, common method variance was ruled out as a threat to structural validity.

Analytical strategy and PLS-SEM justification

Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS 4, preferred over CB-SEM for its superior predictive focus, suitability for complex latent frameworks, and robustness with non-normally distributed behavioral data. Following Hair et al. (2021) two-stage procedure, outer model assessment verified indicator reliability (outer loadings ≥0.70), internal consistency (α ≥0.70, CR ≥ 0.70), convergent validity (AVE ≥ 0.50), and discriminant validity via the HTMT ratio (< 0.85; Henseler et al., 2015). Subsequently, inner model evaluation assessed path coefficients (β), t-statistics, and p-values using 5,000-resample bootstrapping, explanatory power (R2), Cohen's f2 effect sizes (0.02 = small, 0.15 = medium, 0.35 = large), and in-sample predictive relevance (Q2 > 0). Finally, out-of-sample predictive power was verified via PLSpredict (10-fold cross-validation, 10 repetitions) by comparing item-level RMSE against a linear benchmark model (Shmueli et al., 2019).

Results and Discussion

Data screening of 380 collected questionnaires yielded a final valid sample of N = 350 usable responses (92.1% effective usable data rate). The demographic profile represented a typical Generation Z undergraduate cohort, comprising predominantly female respondents (61.7%, n = 216), individuals aged 21–23 years (72.6%, n = 254), and senior undergraduates in their third year of study (68.6%, n = 240). Program specializations included Hotel Management ($50.0%, n = 175), Culinary Arts ($30.0%, n = 105), and Tourism and Service Management (20.0%, n = 70). Regarding technology exposure, 89.1% (n = 312) gained direct operational exposure to AI or automated service systems during industrial internships, while 10.9% (n = 38) acquired exposure through advanced scenario-based simulation laboratories embedded in their academic curricula.

Measurement model assessment

Following Hair et al. (2021), the reflective measurement model was evaluated for indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Indicator reliability was established as all item outer loadings ranged between 0.801 and 0.865, exceeding the 0.70 benchmark. Internal consistency reliability was confirmed, with Cronbach's alpha (α = 0.864–0.895) and Composite Reliability (CR = 0.907–0.922) values comfortably surpassing the 0.70 threshold across all constructs. Convergent validity was demonstrated as Average Variance Extracted (AVE = 0.680–0.710) exceeded the required 0.50 baseline. Discriminant validity was

evaluated using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) criterion (Henseler et al., 2015). All construct pairings remained below the conservative 0.85 threshold: HTMT (AIA,TE) = 0.342, HTMT (AIA,CC) = 0.412, and HTMT (TE,CC) = 0.586. These results confirm distinct empirical boundary separation among the latent constructs. *Table 1* summarizes the reflective measurement model metrics.

Table 1. *Measurement model evaluation summary.*

Construct	Indicator	OLR	α	CR	AVE
AI Anxiety (AIA)	4	0.812−0.865	0.864	0.907	0.71
Technological Self-Efficacy (TE)	5	0.801−0.842	0.882	0.914	0.68
Gen Z Career Commitment (CC)	5	0.815−0.856	0.895	0.922	0.704

Note: OLR=Outer Loadings Range; α= Cronbach Alpha; CR=Composite Reliability; AVE=Average Variance Extracted.

Structural model assessment

Prior to hypotheses testing, lateral collinearity was evaluated. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for the predictor constructs ranged from 1.342 to 1.485, remaining well below the conservative 3.0 threshold (Hair et al., 2021) and ruling out collinearity bias. Hypothesized structural paths were evaluated using a non-parametric bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples. *Table 2* presents the structural path coefficients, t-statistics, p-values, 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals, effect sizes (f2), and hypothesis decisions.The structural model accounted for 43.2% of the variance in Generation Z Career Commitment (R2 = 0.432, R2adj = 0.429). In social science and behavioral intention research, an R2 value exceeding 0.26 represents substantial explanatory power (Hair et al., 2021; Cohen, 1988). Model predictive relevance was established via blindfolding, yielding a construct Q2 value of 0.286 (Q2 > 0). Furthermore, the PLSpredict procedure (10-fold cross-validation, 10 repetitions) demonstrated that all key indicator RMSE values produced by the PLS-SEM model were lower than those produced by the linear regression benchmark (LM), confirming strong out-of-sample predictive capability (Shmueli et al., 2019).

Table 2. *Structural model assessment and hypotheses testing.*

Hypothesis / Path	β	t-statistic	p-value	95% CI	f2	Decishgjhc ion
H1: AIA → CC	−0.312	6.421	<0.001	[−0.407,−0.218]	0.142 (Medium)	Supported
H2: TE → CC	0.485	9.873	<0.001	[0.387,0.581]	0.343 (Large)	Supported

Note: β=Direct Path; 95%CI=95% Confidence Interval; f2=Effect Size.

The depleting impact of AI anxiety (H1)

Hypothesis 1 confirmed a statistically significant negative relationship between AI anxiety and Gen Z career commitment (β= -0.312, t = 6.421, p < 0.001, f2 = 0.142). Grounded in Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), this finding illustrates that psychological apprehension regarding job displacement, task de-skilling, and operational autonomy loss operates as an acute environmental stressor. When hospitality undergraduates encounter poorly integrated frontline automation during industrial internships or laboratory simulations without adequate psychological support, technology friction drains cognitive and emotional resources. To prevent burnout and protect remaining psychological energy, students deploy defensive coping strategies, manifesting as career detachment, reduced occupational enthusiasm, and a heightened intent to exit the sector post-graduation. This finding aligns with empirical observations

by Bajrami et al. (2021) and Che Ahmat et al. (2023), confirming that unmitigated technological strain directly erodes early-career tenure commitment.

The enabler role of technological efficacy (H2)

Hypothesis 2 established a strong, positive direct relationship between technological self-efficacy and Gen Z career commitment ($\beta = 0.485$, $t = 9.873$, $p < 0.001$, $f2 = 0.343$). Reaffirming Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1994), domain-specific digital confidence serves as a critical cognitive resource. Undergraduates who feel confident in commanding AI platforms, operating intelligent PMS, and collaborating with service robotics exhibit elevated career self-efficacy and positive career mobility expectations. High technological self-efficacy reframes automation from an employment threat into a productivity-enhancing enabler that streamlines administrative burdens and reduces physical workload fatigue. Consequently, digital self-efficacy transforms tech-augmented frontlines into dynamic, prestigious, and attractive career pathways. This outcome echoes recent findings by Wang et al. (2025) and Wu and Zhang (2024), demonstrating that professional digital mastery fortifies occupational identity.

Comparative predictive strength (Answering RQ3)

To address Research Question 3 and substantiate whether the impact of technological self-efficacy differs significantly from that of AI anxiety, a formal bootstrapped path coefficient difference test was executed in SmartPLS 4. The absolute path difference was statistically significant ($\Delta\beta = \beta T - \beta AIA = 0.485 - 0.312 = 0.173$, $tdiff = 3.142$, $pdiff = 0.002 < 0.05$). This statistical difference is further confirmed by the non-overlapping 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals between AI anxiety ([-0.407, -0.218]) and technological self-efficacy ([0.387, 0.581]). Comparative effect size analysis (f2) reinforces this hierarchy: technological self-efficacy exerts a large direct effect ($f2 = 0.343$), whereas AI anxiety demonstrates a medium effect ($f2 = 0.142$). This statistical comparison yields a pivotal theoretical insight. While mitigating AI anxiety removes a psychological barrier (acting as a defensive necessity under COR theory), building domain-specific technological self-efficacy acts as the primary catalyst (serving as a proactive agentic driver under SCCT) for securing Gen Z talent retention. In tech-augmented service environments, proactive cognitive empowerment plays a substantially greater role in shaping career persistence than the passive reduction of workplace anxiety.

Conclusion

Grounded in a dual synthesis of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, this study examined how AI anxiety and technological self-efficacy condition Generation Z undergraduates' long-term career commitment across hospitality, tourism, and culinary programs ($N = 350$), demonstrating substantial explanatory power ($R2 = 0.432$, $R2adj = 0.429$). Addressing RO1/RQ1 and RO2/RQ2, PLS-SEM bootstrapping confirmed that AI anxiety exhibits a statistically significant negative direct relationship with career commitment ($\beta = -0.312$, $p < 0.001$, $f2 = 0.142$), operating as a resource-depleting stressor under COR theory, whereas technological self-efficacy demonstrates a dominant, positive direct association

($\beta = 0.485$, $p < 0.001$, $f2 = 0.343$), acting as a vital cognitive enabler under SCCT. Answering RO3/RQ3, a formal bootstrapped path coefficient difference test ($\Delta\beta = 0.173$, $t = 3.142$, $p = 0.002$) proved that proactive cognitive self-efficacy exerts a significantly stronger predictive weight on graduate retention than the psychological barrier posed by AI anxiety. Theoretically, this dual-pathway model advances service management literature by capturing the simultaneous interplay of proactive cognitive agency (SCCT) and reactive stress-depletion mechanisms (COR) in automated workplaces. Practically, to mitigate displacement fears, hotel operators must establish transparent technology integration roadmaps and restructure frontline roles into hybrid human AI collaboration models, while higher education institutions must modernize curricula by embedding scenario based AI simulations to convert general Gen Z digital familiarity into domain-specific operational confidence. Societally, cultivating digital self-efficacy protects youth graduate employability, minimizes early-career attrition, and aligns service sector automation with human dignity in emerging digital economies. Finally, while bounded by a cross-sectional design and a Malaysian public university sampling frame, future research should employ longitudinal tracking, perform multigroup analyses (PLS-MGA) comparing industrial internship versus simulation laboratory contexts, and test moderating organizational support factors to further optimize graduate talent retention in tech-augmented service ecosystems.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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