JOURNAL OF LEADERSHIP IN ORGANIZATIONS

The Moderating Role of Empathic Leadership in Job Crafting and Employee Engagement Among Millennial Workers Under Job Stress

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Introduction/Main Objectives: This study aims to examine the role of job stress and employee engagement of millennial workers mediated by job crafting and moderated by empathetic leadership. **Background Problems:** Leadership is one of the factors that will affect workforce management. The right leadership is seen to help reduce job stress and increase employee engagement. **Novelty:** Many studies have attempted to examine the relationship between job stress and employee engagement. Gap research, based on the inconsistency of the results of the research that has been done, is the basis for this study. The existing inconsistency makes this research add the role of job crafting and empathic leadership. **Research Methods:** This study involved 304 non-managerial workers in Surabaya City, Indonesia, who belong to the Millennial generation category. **Finding/Results**: The results obtained are that job stress has no effect on job crafting. Empathetic leadership moderates job stress and job crafting. Job crafting does not affect employee engagement. Job stress has a negative effect on employee engagement. Job crafting does not mediate the relationship between job stress and employee engagement, and empathetic leadership moderates the relationship between job stress and employee engagement. **Conclusion:** Practical implications, leaders need to determine the right leadership model according to the context of workers.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 forced every organization to face various challenges and previously unimaginable changes (Yue et al., 2022). Organizations were compelled to implement drastic changes in the workplace, which ultimately disrupted employees' work experiences (Anaya & Desiana, 2023). The pandemic affects not only challenged organizations but also every employee within them. Employees were concerned about changes related to the erosion of work-home balance, personal safety, and economic uncertainty (Kalina, 2020; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). Organizational change refers to modifications in existing work strategies and routines, which impact the entire organization (Shin et al., 2012). Changes can occur due to acquisitions, mergers, technology advancements, leadership shifts, reengineering, organizational culture modifications, and downsizing (Yue, 2021). However, the sudden changes caused by the COVID-19 outbreak left organizations unprepared and employees without a 'playbook' to navigate the changes (Kalina, 2020).

Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics indicates that millennial workers were the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to data from kompas.com, more than 1.5 million workers in the service, manufacturing, banking, and education sectors were laid off. As a percentage, millennial unemployment increased from 4.74% (before the pandemic) to 7.16% (six months after the pandemic). Educational level data show that unemployed millennials consist of 16.61% undergraduate graduates, 3.32% diploma graduates, 24.06% senior high school graduates, and 17.02% vocational school graduates. In addition, other workers faced reduced working hours or were required to work from home due to government-imposed restrictions. Working from home posed unique challenges for employees, blurring the boundaries between work and personal life, leading to work overload, increased stress (Liu & Lo, 2018), anxiety, decreased satisfaction, and lower work engagement (Anaya & Desiana, 2023).

The changes brought about by the pandemic often resulted in stress, anxiety, depression, and mental health disorders among employees (Chairudin et al., 2023; Karatepe et al., 2021; Mahmoud et al., 2021; Tsui, 2021). Stress is an interaction between individuals and their environment that is perceived as a threat to individual well-being (Vandiya & Etikariena, 2018). Stress is also a dynamic condition in which individuals respond to challenges (Gofur, 2018), and it is both a physiological and psychological reaction to the imbalance between imposed demands and an individual's ability to meet them (Donsu, 2017). Consequently, stress arises from the misalignment between individuals and their environment (Yasa & Dewi, 2019) and manifests in behaviour such as agitation, anxiety, and irritability (Chairudin et al., 2023).

In the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, stress remains a significant challenge for both employees and organizations. The stress experienced by employees often leads to job stress, which refers to workplace occurrences perceived as demands or threats, or elements within the work environment that cause discomfort to employees (Bell et al., 2012; Vandiya & Etikariena, 2018). Job stress is a psychological strain or tension that arises from an individual's response to the

organization in which they work (Vandiya & Etikariena, 2018). Work stress occurs when the demands placed on individuals exceed the resources available to them or fail to align with their personal needs and motivations (Oliveira & Najnudel, 2023).

Stress emerges when work demands are excessively high and are not proportionate to the number of employees or the time available to complete tasks (Breaugh, 2020). Furthermore, job stress can arise when employees are required to perform repetitive tasks that are monotonous and do not leverage their skills and experience (Vandiya & Etikariena, 2018). After the pandemic, the necessity to adapt to new ways of working in the "new normal" era has created additional pressure on employees, particularly those belonging to generation Y, also known as millennials.

Generation Y comprises individuals born between 1985 and 1995 (Wijayanto et al., 2022). Data indicates that 27% of millennial employees experience severe work stress-related disorders, while 34% report a decline in productivity due to work stress (Mental Health Foundation).

Occupational stress is a significant issue for workplace health, well-being, and safety (Chong et al., 2024). When not properly managed, stress negatively impacts employees' psychological, physical, and organizational health (Khairuddin & Nadzri, 2017). Furthermore, job stress will negatively impact employee engagement in work activities and contribute to turnover, absenteeism, and decreased performance (Singh & Singh, 2018; Ferdinan et al., 2023).

Employees who have engagement with the company where they work will have a sense of positive emotions, healthy physical conditions, and good psychology (Yao et al.,

2019). Workers with psychological well-being have a positive impact on engagement, whereas those without it experience negative effect on work engagement (Dixit & Upadhyay, 2021).

Excessive demands diminish workers' sense of engagement. According to research by the Executive Learning Institute (2018), many generation Y employees in Indonesia are job hoppers (Wijayanto et al., 2022). A study by Laterna (2015) found that generation Y employees have an engagement level of 28%, compared to 47% among generation X employees. Furthermore, 76.7% of generation Y employees leave within 1-2 years during their contract period (Wijayanto et al., 2022). Therefore, organizations must develop appropriate work designs to enhance generation Y's engagement.

Job stress among generation Y workers is feared to further reduce engagement, ultimately harming organizations. Employee engagement is defined as employees' emotional connection to their organization, demonstrated by their energy and involvement in improving performance (Maslach, 2003). Additionally, employee engagement can be defined as an individual's sense of attachment and enthusiasm toward their work (Suharti & Suliyanto, 2012). It is associated with a positive, fulfilling mental state that relates to one's job and is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Leadership is a key factor influencing workforce management. Effective leadership can reduce job stress and enhance engagement (Shelke & Shaikh, 2023). Leadership can also be a source of stress if it drains employees' energy (Oliveira & Najnudel, 2023). There are at least several models in leadership, but not all of these

models are suitable to be applied in all situations and conditions. Workers who are part of Generation Y require special emphasis in order to be managed appropriately. The empathic leadership model is considered suitable for managing generation Y workers.

Empathy, a component of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2000), is crucial for effective leadership (Wong & Law, 2002). Leaders must manage their own emotions and those of their employees (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Empathic leadership fosters closer relationships by showing care and compassion and supporting employees (Gentry et al., 2007; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018).

Based on the Job Demand-Job Resources (JD-R) theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker et al., 2014), leadership can serve as a resource when it provides adequate support to subordinates (Dixit & Upadhyay, 2021; Schaufeli, 2015; Oliveira & Najnudel, 2023), and as a demand when the leader's attitudes and behaviours drain subordinates' energy (Harms et al., 2017; Scheuer et al., 2016). In accordance with the JD-R theory, the empathetic leadership model can assist employees in managing emotional challenges that may arise in organizational activities. Empathetic leadership is considered beneficial in reducing job stress and enhancing employee engagement, as it provides employees with the necessary resources to cope with job demands.

Job crafting is considered to have an impact on employee engagement (Demerouti et al., 2015). It is a proactive approach whereby employees adjust and modify their work both physically and psychologically to better fit their needs and aspirations (Slemp

& Vella-Brodrick, 2014). A key characteristic of job crafting is that employees take personal initiative in modifying their tasks or work environment to achieve organizational goals. Job crafting helps align work behaviour with organizational objectives and facilitates the balance between job demands and available resources (Timms et al., 2015; Tims et al., 2013; Berg et al., 2008). Job crafting is closely linked to the JD-R theory (Demerouti et al., 2001), which addresses job demands and job resources. Work tends to deplete psychological resources due to its inherent demands. However, employees skilled in job crafting can manage these demands by restructuring their tasks, ultimately increasing psychological resources and enhancing employee engagement (Singh & Singh, 2018; Demerouti et al., 2015). Consequently, employees with high levels of job crafting can help mitigate job stress and improve employee engagement.

Numerous studies have examined the relationship between job stress and employee engagement. However, the findings remain inconclusive. Further research (Vandiya & Etikarena, 2018; Anaya & Desiana, 2023) indicate no significant relationship between job stress and employee engagement. Other studies (Breaugh, 2020; Cordioli et al., 2019; Darydzaky & Desiana, 2023; Agustina et al., 2022) state a positive relationship between job stress and employee engagement. Conversely, other scholars (Breaugh, 2020; Diab & Nagar, 2019; Klein et al., 2020) argue for a negative relationship between job stress and employee engagement. These inconsistencies highlight the need for further research to clarify the relationship between job stress and employee engagement.

The inconsistency in existing research findings serves as the research gap addressed by this study. The present study incorporates job crafting and empathetic leadership as additional variables to bridge this gap. The novelty of this research lies in the integration of job crafting and empathetic leadership within the JD-R theory framework, examining their interplay with job stress and employee engagement (Yue et al., 2022; Turek, 2022; Oliveira & Najnudel, 2023; Dixit & Upadhyay, 2021; Gurbuz et al., 2024; Fisher & Costa, 2023; Singh & Singh, 2018).

Notably, no prior research has integrated job stress, empathetic leadership, job crafting, and employee engagement within a single research model. Based on the aforementioned explanation, this study aims to investigate the impact of job stress on employee engagement, with job crafting serving as a mediator and empathetic leadership as a moderator among generation Y workers in Surabaya City. This research is expected to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in human resource management. Additionally, it will provide valuable insights for organizational leaders in effectively managing their human resources.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Job Demand Job Resources*

The Job Demand-Job Resources (JD-R) theory is a framework utilized to understand the relationship between job demands and job resources in relation to employee performance and well-being. This theory was developed by Arnold B. Bakker and Evangelia Demerouti in 2007. Job demands refer to aspects of work that require additional effort and energy from employees (Mulyati et al., 2019). Conversely, job resources pertain to factors within the work environment that support employees in achieving their work objectives, obtaining job satisfaction, and meeting job demands (Anaya & Desiana, 2023).

The JD-R theory posits that work-related demands can lead to stress and burnout, which ultimately exert a negative impact on employee performance and well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Myers & Dewall, 2019). However, when employees possess adequate personal resources, these can mitigate the adverse effects of job demands and help employees cope with stress. The resources available to employees contribute to enhancing job satisfaction, motivation, and work engagement, ultimately improving their performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

2.2. *The Relationship of Job Stress to Job Crafting and The Moderating Role of Empathic Leadership*

Job stress refers to the various ways in which specific stressors in the work environment can result in psychological, behavioral, or physiological strain. Job stress is often predicted within the context of work organization, which the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) defines as "work processes or the way work is designed and performed," as well as "organizational practices, management and production methods, and human resource policies that impact work" (Sauter, 2002).

Colquitt et al. (2019) and Lait and Wallace (2002) argue that stress is a psychological response that arises due to demands exceeding an individual's capacity. Mondy and Martocchio (2016) define stress as a nonspecific bodily reaction related to any demand made on an individual. Griffin and

Moorhead (2014) explain that stress can be divided into three components: adaptation (how an individual adapts to stressful circumstances), the role of stimuli known as stressors (various factors that contribute to stress), and the excessive demands placed by stressors on individuals, leading to stress.

According to Robbins and Judge (2018), the impact of stress can be classified into three categories: physiological symptoms (immediate effects, illness, and chronic health conditions), psychological symptoms (anxiety, low emotionality, and low job satisfaction), and behavioral symptoms (low performance, high absenteeism, and high turnover rates). Furthermore, Mondy and Martocchio (2016) note that the impact of stress is not always negative; mild stress can enhance productivity and foster creative ideas, while excessive stress can have detrimental effects. Job stress can be triggered by several factors, including leadership (Clegg, 2001), low job satisfaction (Gelsema et al., 2006), unclear rules (Gray-Toff & Anderson, 1981), and low social support (Gelsema et al., 2006; Sonnentag & Frese, 2013). In this study, job stress is measured using indicators that reflect workforce tension concerning tasks and responsibilities assigned by the company, based on five dimensions: task demands, role demands, interpersonal demands, organizational structure, and organizational leadership (Robbins, 2006).

The Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) theory is a model related to energetic processes that predict health problems through burnout and motivational processes that predict employee behavior through engagement (Hakanen et al., 2008). According to the JD-R theory, job stress arises when employees deplete their psychological resources due to job demands (Dixit & Upadhyay, 2021). Excessive job demands can compromise employees' sense of security in the work environment and negatively impact their physical health (Singh & Singh, 2018). A decline in security and health may disrupt employees' capacity to engage in creative, innovative, and job-crafting activities (Mellner et al., 2022; Aktar & Pangil, 2017).

Job crafting is a process by which employees actively modify work relationships, tasks, and cognitions to create greater meaning, engagement, and job satisfaction (Petrou et al., 2012). First introduced by Amy Wrzesniewski and Jane E. Dutton in 2001, job crafting consists of three main dimensions:

a. Task crafting: Employees alter the type and scope of their tasks by changing priorities, adding new meaningful tasks, eliminating less meaningful tasks, or modifying task execution methods.

b. Relational crafting: Employees modify their interactions and relationships with colleagues, customers, or managers by expanding social networks, increasing job collaboration, or seeking support.

c. Cognitive crafting: Employees adjust their perceptions and interpretations of work by changing how they view the meaning of their tasks, exploring deep values, or shifting their focus.

Job crafting provides employees with greater control over their work, enabling them to experience enhanced meaning, satisfaction, and engagement (Tims et al., 2013; Tims et al., 2022). Organizations should strive to cultivate a work culture that supports job crafting.

Job crafting serves as an individual coping mechanism for dealing with job demands (Sartori et al., 2023). Within the JD-R theory framework, job crafting is considered a psychological resource that helps employees adapt to job demands (Petrou et al., 2012). However, when employees perceive job demands as excessively high, their ability to engage in job crafting diminishes (Bakker et al., 2012). Individuals can engage in job crafting when they feel psychologically safe and comfortable in their work environment (Tims et al., 2016). Thus, excessive job demands may erode psychological safety, thereby hindering job crafting abilities.

Based on the explanation that has been conveyed, it can be said that job stress will have a negative relationship, especially on job crafting. Individual job crafting will be affected because stress impacts behavioral, psychological, and physiological problems (Colquitt et al., 2019). Individuals who experience problems as mentioned will certainly disrupt emotional stability. Furthermore, unstable emotions will have an impact on the ability to manage work. Therefore, job stress will have a negative impact on individual job crafting.

Leadership is considered a crucial factor in mitigating the negative impact of job stress. According to the JD-R theory, leadership can serve as both a demand and a resource (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker et al., 2014). Leadership acts as a resource when it provides adequate support to subordinates (Dixit & Upadhyay, 2021; Schaufeli, 2015; Oliveira & Najnudel, 2023) and as a demand when the leader's attitude and behavior drain subordinates' energy (Harms et al., 2017; Scheuer et al., 2016).

Therefore, an appropriate leadership model is required to reduce employee stress in the workplace. One such model is empathic leadership, which emphasizes sensitivity, understanding, and empathy toward employees' needs, emotions, and perspectives (Yue et al., 2022). Empathic leaders tend to understand and respond positively to employees' emotional and psychological conditions, helping them feel valued, heard, and socially connected (Dutton & Workman, 2012; Dutton et al., 2014).

Based on the discussion above, empathic leadership is considered capable of mitigating the negative effects of job stress and fostering positive outcomes. Leaders who demonstrate empathy are expected to alleviate work-related stress and enable employees to manage their tasks effectively. Previous studies have indicated a positive relationship between leadership and job crafting (Asfar et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2017). Furthermore, research by Ghitulescu (2006) suggests that leadership significantly influences job crafting.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. Job stress negatively affects job crafting.

H2. Empathic leadership moderates the relationship between job stress and job crafting.

2.3. *The Relationship of The Job Crafting to Employee Engagement and Moderating Role of Job Crafting*

Job crafting is related to changes initiated by individuals or employees themselves to align jobs with personal preferences, desires, and motives (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). However, it

should be noted that job crafting is essentially about changing certain aspects of the work environment, not redesigning the individual's job as a whole (Fisher & Costa, 2023). Therefore, crafting will make individuals consider their own self-interest, the broader task, and the strategic context of the organization (Junker et al., 2023).

JD-R theory states that there are demands and resources that will affect individual behavior (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). JD-R theory has two processes that will cause work strain or trigger motivation. The first process will cause fatigue and health problems. The second process, resources have an influence on motivation that leads to work engagement and high performance (Darydzaky & Destiana, 2023). One of the psychological resources is job crafting, which based on previous studies has an influence on positive feelings and attitudes (Ko, 2011), work engagement (Demerouti et al., 2015), social connectedness (Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2015), well-being and performance (Leana et al., 2009), and career success (Akkermans & Tims, 2017).

Employees who have handicrafts are seen to have a positive impact on employee engagement. Employee engagement can be understood as a sense of attachment and enthusiasm for work (Suharti & Suliyanto, 2012). In addition, employee engagement can be understood as a positive mental state, satisfying, and related to a job that has the characteristics of vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Workers who have engagement appear to have a purpose, are involved, committed, enthusiastic, focused, and full of energy at work so that they have good work attitude and behavior components. This engagement

can affect the workforce in several ways, including performance for the organization (Wijaya & Soeharto, 2021). A workforce with superior performance is considered insufficient in facing competition, so companies need a workforce that has engagement with their work (Bakker, 2011).

The aspects of engagement according to Schaufeli et al (2002), are:

a. Vigor is a high level of energy (strength) and mental resilience at work. Workers who have this aspect will persist when facing difficult situations related to their work.

b. Dedication is related to meaning, feeling, inspiration, enthusiasm, challenge, and pride. Workers who have this aspect will appear in the way they work which is full of enthusiasm, and responsibility.

c. Absorption is the level of depth of the workforce at work, where the workforce feels that they really enjoy their work.

In accordance with the JD-R theory, job crafting as one of the psychological resources, will help workers to increase employee engagement (Singh & Singh, 2018; Demerouti et al., 2015). Workers who have the ability to create work mean that they already have a fit with the workplace environment (Tims et al., 2016), so they strive to do more (job crafting) in order to achieve work goals.

Employee engagement with the workplace is something that every organization expects. Employees who feel attached to their workplace will strive to show higher performance. This is because employees have passion (related to increasing energy levels and mental resilience in the work environment),

dedication (related to involvement, enthusiasm, and challenge in work), and absorption (related to full concentration and preoccupation with work) (Bhardwaj & Kalia, 2021). A study conducted by Zainol et al (2016) in the Malaysian hospitality industry, stated that good and effective employee engagement will contribute to morale, increased commitment, and motivation, which in turn can improve employee performance. Based on the explanation that has been conveyed, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. Job crafting has a positive effect on employee engagement

2.4. *The Relationship of The Job Stress to Employee Engagement, The Moderating Role of Job Crafting and Empathic Leadership*

Job stress is essentially a reaction that arises within individuals as a response to work demands (Singh & Singh, 2018). According to the Job Demand-Job Resources (JD-R) theory, job demands experienced by individuals deplete their mental and physical resources, ultimately leading to health problems, fatigue, and undesirable performance outcomes (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014; Chong et al., 2024). Job demands and individual resources in the work environment are related to physical, psychological, social, and organizational aspects (Chong et al., 2024).

Internal resources are crucial for workers or individuals, particularly to fulfill psychological needs, promote individual growth and development, achieve work-related goals, and reduce the psychological and physiological costs caused by job demands (Bakker & de Vries, 2021).

Therefore, it can be concluded that job stress is experienced by workers who face high job demands (such as role conflict, workload, job insecurity, hostile work environments, and time pressure) coupled with minimal resources. Conversely, workers who possess work resources (e.g., social support, positive feedback, and autonomy) tend to be more engaged at work and less likely to experience burnout and job stress (Schaufeli, 2017).

Based on the JD-R theory as explained, job stress is predicted to affect employee engagement. Job stress reduces job satisfaction, and physical and psychological health, ultimately decreasing engagement (Moura et al., 2014; Simon & Amarakoon, 2015). Employee engagement refers to the extent to which workers have a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral connection with their organization or workplace (Chairunisa et al., 2023). Workers with high engagement actively identify with organizational goals and values and exhibit strong motivation to enhance their work performance (Olsen et al., 2023). Furthermore, employee engagement is reflected in positive social relationships at work and a desire for growth and development (Shelke & Shaikh, 2023). Thus, based on the aforementioned explanation, engagement is closely related to the intrinsic and emotional values of each worker (Velnampy & Aravinthan, 2013).

An individual's emotional adequacy for work is the key to employee engagement (Kahn, 1990; Simon & Amarakoon, 2015; Li et al., 2018). Consequently, stress, which is synonymous with negative emotional influences, will diminish employee engagement. High levels of job stress experienced by workers will ultimately lead

to lower employee engagement (Moura et al., 2014; Mellner et al., 2022; Li et al., 2018).

Based on the aforementioned explanation, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4. Job stress negatively affects employee engagement.

The negative effects of job stress on employee engagement can be mitigated through employees' job crafting efforts. As previously explained, stress is a psychological response that depends on an individual's personal appraisal of situations perceived as threats (Bliese et al., 2017). Since stress is based on personal assessments, it can be managed effectively when individuals possess positive self-management capabilities. When individuals are able to provide a positive evaluation of challenging situations, stress can be alleviated.

Job crafting allows individuals to reduce various factors that may cause psychological distress—for example, enhancing the quality of interactions with others that bring positive effects or minimizing interactions with colleagues that may lead to psychological discomfort (Fisher & Costa, 2023). An individual's ability to exert control over their work environment and adapt to changing circumstances helps them cope with workplace stress (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Therefore, job stress will not necessarily have a detrimental effect on employee engagement if individuals engage in job crafting. Based on the aforementioned explanation, the proposed hypothesis is:

H5. Job crafting mediates the relationship between job stress and employee engagement.

Workplace stress is a common experience among employees and can arise due to issues in relationships with colleagues or supervisors (Oliveira & Najnudel, 2023). According to the Job Demand-Job Resources (JD-R) theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), leadership is a key factor influencing stress levels. When leadership provides the necessary support to subordinates, stress can be mitigated (Schaufeli, 2015). Conversely, when leadership exhibits attitudes and behaviors that drain employees' energy (Harms et al., 2017; Scheuer et al., 2016), employees are more likely to experience stress. Workplace stress is known to have a negative impact on employee engagement. Therefore, based on the JD-R framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Oliveira & Najnudel, 2023), empathetic leadership is expected to moderate the relationship between job stress and employee engagement.

Empathetic leadership is a leadership model that emphasizes a leadership style in which leaders demonstrate sensitivity, understanding, and empathy toward the needs, emotions, and perspectives of their team members (Yue et al., 2022). Empathetic leaders tend to understand and respond positively to the emotional and psychological states of employees, helping them feel valued, heard, and socially connected (Dutton & Workman, 2012). Empathetic leaders possess several key characteristics, including (Riggio, 2017):

a. Openness and active listening: Leaders exhibit genuine interest and openness to employees' concerns, aspirations, and challenges. They listen attentively, provide their full attention, and show

sincere interest in employees' experiences and perspectives.

b. Respect and understanding: Leaders strive to deeply understand employees' feelings, needs, and perspectives. They acknowledge employees' contributions and achievements and provide constructive and supportive feedback.

c. Providing support: Leaders offer emotional and psychological support, helping employees navigate challenges and providing encouragement within a supportive and safe work environment.

d. Collaboration and participation: Leaders encourage teamwork and active participation in decision-making processes. They facilitate open discussions, foster participatory decision-making, and ensure employee involvement in planning and task execution.

e. Empathetic leadership is considered to have a positive impact on human resource management within organizations. Leaders who cultivate an empathetic work climate foster collaboration, build strong relationships, and enhance employee well-being, which in turn contributes to improved engagement and performance.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, the proposed hypothesis is:

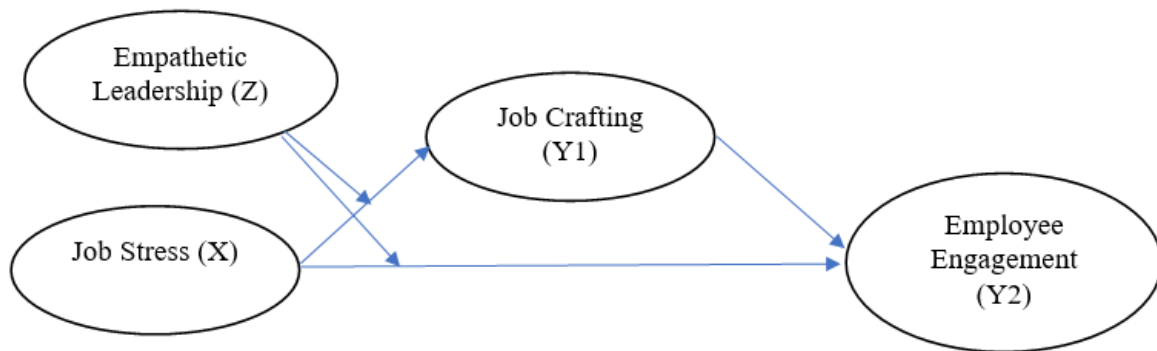H6. Empathetic leadership moderates the relationship between job stress and employee engagement.

Figure 1. Research Framework

3.   Method, Data, and Analysis

This study involved 304 non-managerial employees in Surabaya City, Indonesia, who belong to the Millennial generation. Using Cochran's formula for sample size calculation (with an unknown population size), the minimum required sample was determined to be 97, indicating that the sample size of 304 is sufficient to represent the population in this study (Sugiyono, 2018; Arikunto, 2004; Silalahi, 2009).

Data were collected through a questionnaire distributed to respondents for completion and return to the researchers. The questionnaire was administered online, and prior to distribution, measures were taken to ensure that respondents met the specified research criteria (Kerlinger et al., 2000). The data collection period spanned three months, from September to November 2023. To maintain the original meaning of the questionnaire items, the questionnaire was translated from English to Bahasa Indonesia and then back-translated to English (Brislin, 1980). A purposive sampling technique was employed in this study to facilitate data collection in accordance with the research criteria (Creswell, 2014; Friday & Leah, 2024; Riadi, 2013; Saunders et al., 2016).

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was utilized as the analytical technique, as it aligns with the research objectives by enabling the examination and modification of complex theoretical models through the assessment of relationships between variables and the evaluation of model fit (Kang & Ahn, 2021). Procedural measures were implemented to minimize common method bias (Podsakoff, 2012), including assurances of respondent anonymity and data confidentiality. The data were analyzed using structural equation modeling with the AMOS software.

This study employed a research instrument using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Job stress was measured using a three-item scale (e.g., "Feeling emotionally drained from my work") adapted from Maslach et al. (1997), with a Cronbach's α value of 0.89. Empathetic leadership was assessed using a three-item scale (e.g., "shows willingness to listen, understand, and empathize with my feelings") developed by Mayfield & Mayfield (2018), with a Cronbach's α value of 0.97.

Job crafting was measured using a three-item scale (e.g., "I try to develop myself professionally") based on the scale by Tims et al. (2012), with a Cronbach's α value of 0.93. Employee engagement was assessed using a three-item scale (e.g., "I absolutely dedicate myself to my work") developed by Rich et al. (2010), with a Cronbach's α value of 0.82.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Descriptive Data

Description	Total	Percentage
Gender		
a. Male	150	49.3
b. Female	154	50.7
Age		
a. 20-25 years	90	29.6
b. 26-30 years	119	39.1
c. 31-35 years	75	24.7
d. 36-40 years	20	6.6
Company		
a. State Owned	107	35.2
b. Private	197	64.8
length of service		
a. < 1 years	37	12.2
b. 1-2 years	87	28.6
c. 3-4 years	105	34.5
d. 5-6 years	40	13.2
e. > 6 years	35	11.5
Workplace Location		
a. West Surabaya	58	19.1
b. Center Surabaya	57	18.8
c. South Surabaya	64	21.1
d. East Surabaya	84	27.6
e. North Surabaya	41	13.5
Latest education		
a. High School	38	12.5
b. Diploma	57	18.8
c. Undergraduate	171	56.3
d. Postgraduate	38	12.5

Source: Data processed (2023)

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents, showing that the majority are female (50.7%), aged between 26-30 years (39.1%), employed in private companies (64.8%), with a work tenure of 3-4 years (34.5%), located in East Surabaya (27.6%), and last education Undergraduate (56.3%). `

A variable is considered reliable when it meets the Construct Reliability (CR) threshold of >0.7 and the Variance Extracted (VE) threshold of >0.5 (Ghozali & Fuad, 2005: 331-322).

Based on the data analysis results, the CR and VE values for each variable are as follows: job stress (CR: 0.77; VE: 0.53), job crafting (CR: 0.77; VE: 0.52), employee engagement (CR: 0.85; VE: 0.66), and empathetic leadership (CR: 0.85; VE: 0.65).

The obtained scores indicate that all variables are reliable, as each variable meets the reliability criteria with CR values exceeding 0.7 and VE values surpassing 0.5.

Tabel 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Factor	Scale Items	Standard Loadings	Standards Error	Construct Reliability	Estimates
JS	JS1	0.80	0.06	14.57	0.95
	JS2	0.82	0.06	14.77	0.95
	JS3	0.82	Ref*	Ref*	1.00
JC	JC1	0.56	0.13	5.92	0.79
	JC2	0.59	0.15	5.96	0.92
	JC3	0.65	Ref*	Ref*	1.00
EE	EE1	0.85	Ref*	Ref*	1.00
	EE2	0.81	0.04	17.05	0.83
	EE3	0.83	0.05	17.61	0.97
EL	EL1	0.82	0.05	15.68	0.89
	EL2	0.89	0.06	17.13	1.09
	EL3	0.78	Ref*	Ref*	1.00

* Ref: reference

Source: Data processed (2023)

Table 2 presents the results of the validity test. Indicators are considered to have good validity if the factor loading value exceeds 1.96 and the standardized factor loading value is greater than 0.7 (Yamin & Kurniawan, 2009:36). However, standardized factor loading values in the range of 0.30-0.50 can still be considered acceptable and should not be eliminated (Wijanto, 2008). Based on the aforementioned criteria, all indicators in Table 2 are deemed valid.

The goodness-of-fit index of the research model is considered acceptable if it meets the following criteria: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) < 0.08, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) ≥ 0.90, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) ≥ 0.90, Normed Fit Index (NFI) ≥ 0.90, and Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) ≥ 0.90 (Hair et al., 2010).

The results of the data analysis for the goodness-of-fit indices are as follows: RMSEA: 0.066, CFI: 0.96, TLI: 0.95, NFI: 0.94, and GFI: 0.94. These values indicate that the research model is a good fit, as all indices meet or exceed the established cutoff criteria.
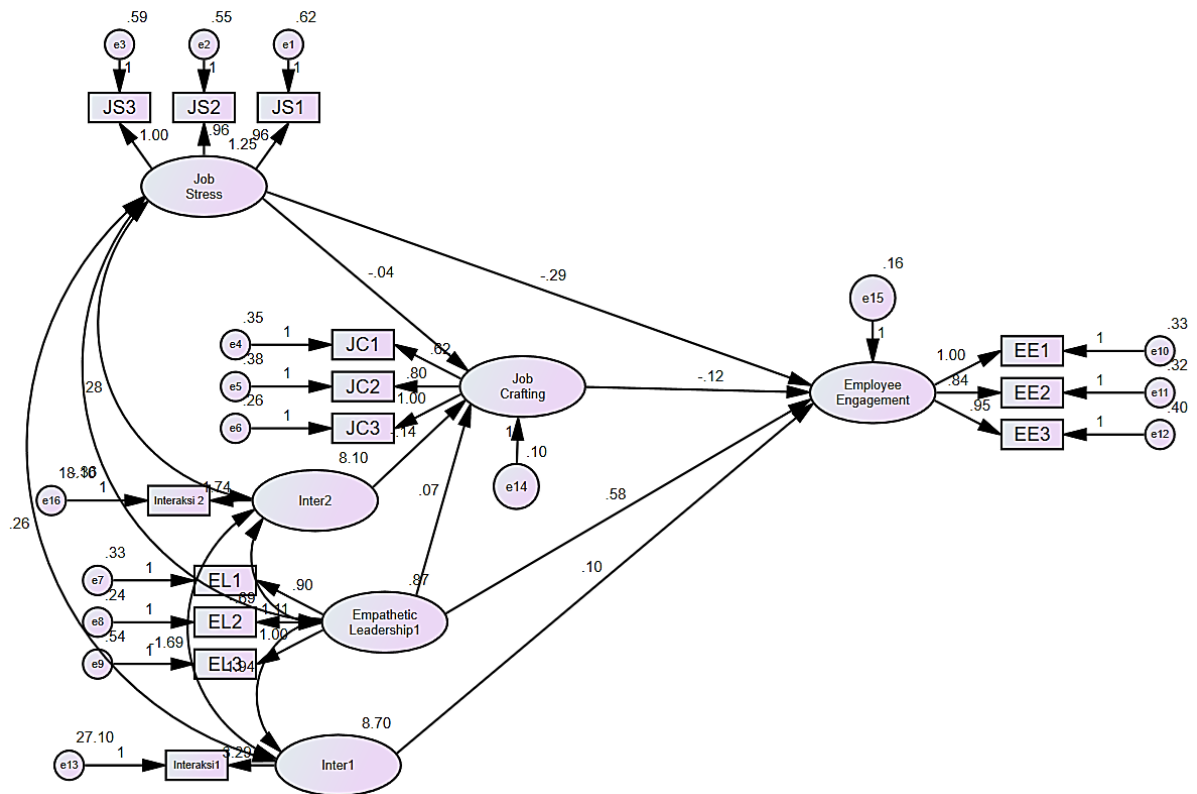
Figure 2. Amos Data Processing Results

Table 3 presents the results of the hypothesis testing through data analysis. Based on the results, the following conclusions can be drawn:

Job stress does not have a significant effect on job crafting, as indicated by the P-value (0.289 > 0.05) and CR value (-1.061 < -1.96). Therefore, H1 is not supported. Empathetic leadership plays a moderating role in the relationship between job stress and job crafting, as evidenced by the P-value (0.000 < 0.05) and CR value (-7.910 > -1.96), thus H2 is accepted.

Tabel 3. Hypotesis Test

Hypothesis	Estimates	Standard Error	Construct Reliability	P Value
H1. JS → JC	-0.039	0.036	-1.061	0.289
H2. EL x JS → JC	-0.138	0.018	-7.910	***
H3. JC → EE	-0.117	0.087	-1.347	0.178
H4. JS → EE	-0.292	0.050	-5.798	***
H5. JS → JC → EE		0.005	0.843	0.322
H6. EL x JS → EE	0.102	0.028	3.658	***

Source: Data processed (2023)

Job crafting does not significantly influence employee engagement, with a P-value (0.178 > 0.05) and CR value (-1.347 < -1.96), meaning that H3 is not accepted. Job stress has a significant effect on employee engagement, as indicated by the P-value (0.000 < 0.05) and CR value (-5.798 > -1.96), H4 is Accepted.

Job crafting does not serve as a mediating variable in the relationship between job stress and employee engagement, as shown by the P-value (0.322 > 0.05) and CR value (0.843 < 1.96), thus H5 is not accepted. However, empathetic leadership acts as a mediator in the relationship between job stress and employee engagement, with a P-value (0.000 < 0.05) and CR value (3.658 > 1.96), H6 is accepted.

The data analysis results indicate that job stress does not influence job crafting. This suggests that other factors may have a stronger influence on job crafting. Fundamentally, job crafting refers to an individual's ability to make adjustments to job tasks to enhance efficiency while maintaining personal comfort (Fisher & Costa, 2023).

The second finding related to the moderating role of empathetic leadership confirms the presence of moderation between job stress and job crafting. However, the effect observed is not positive but negative. This suggests that leadership does not always yield positive outcomes but can also exert negative influences. A study by Ferdinan and Lindawati (2021) found that leadership negatively affects innovative work behavior. Similarly, research by Dennerlein and Kirkman (2022) highlighted the potential dark side of leadership, which can negatively impact employees.

In the context of this study, it can be inferred that job stress does not directly influence job crafting. However, when moderated by empathetic leadership, the effect becomes negative.
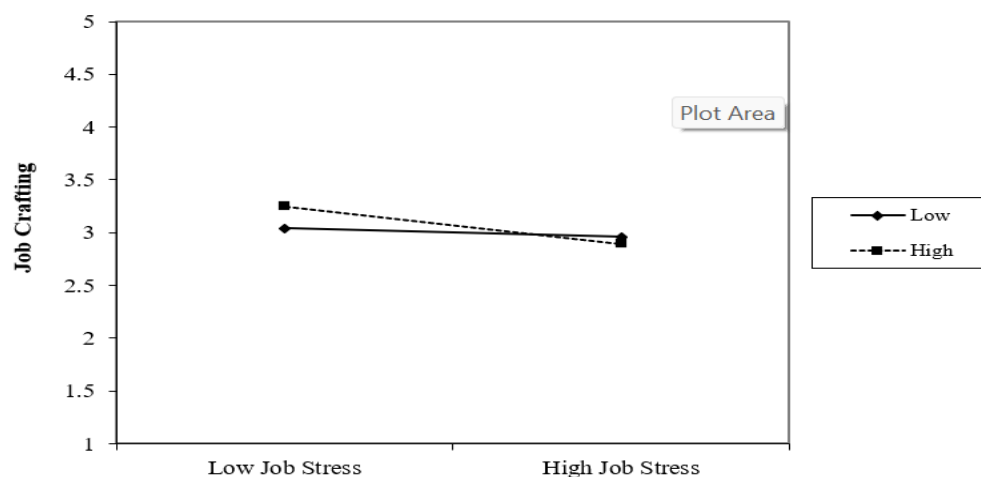

Figure 3. Empathetic leadership moderates the relationship between job stress and job crafting

Figure 3 illustrates the moderating effect of empathetic leadership. When job stress is low and empathetic leadership is high, the moderating effect is positive.

This indicates that empathetic leadership positively influences job crafting only when the level of job stress experienced by employees is relatively low. Conversely, when job stress is high, high empathetic leadership exerts a negative effect on job crafting. It appears that empathetic leadership does not assist employees in reducing stress or enhancing job crafting. Leaders' empathy may inadvertently suppress employees' motivation to engage in task crafting, relational crafting, and cognitive crafting.

Studies conducted by Anjum and Zhao (2022), as well as Ferdinan et al. (2023), distinguish between two types of stress—eustress and distress—each with different implications. Eustress has a positive impact as it enables individuals to perceive challenges as opportunities for further development (Anjum & Zhao, 2022). In contrast, distress has a negative effect, as it stems from an individual's inability to cope with challenges (Ferdinan et al., 2023; Anjum & Zhao, 2022).
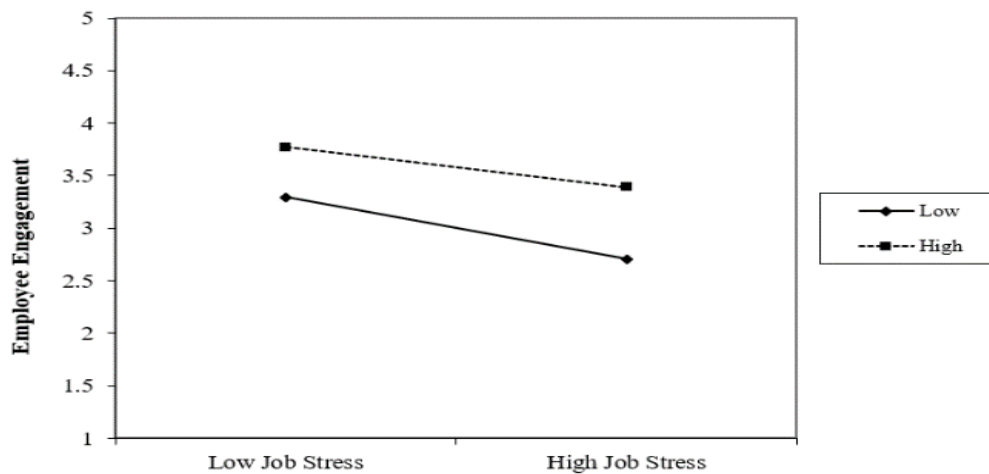

Figure 4. Empathetic leadership moderates the relationship between job stress and employee engagement

Millennial workers are a group characterized by their tendency to be creative and innovative. As such, they often perceive challenges as opportunities for further development. However, it is not uncommon for them to encounter difficulties in identifying new opportunities when facing challenges. In such situations, empathetic leadership may inadvertently "lull" their enthusiasm to engage in job crafting. Therefore, leadership can have both positive and negative effects.

The third data analysis result indicates that job crafting does not influence employee engagement. For millennial workers, other factors appear to have a greater impact on engagement than job crafting. Millennials tend to view job crafting as an opportunity for self-development. Self-development occurs through various challenges; therefore, when individuals do not encounter challenges, their development process stagnates. When employees do not feel challenged at work, they may seek challenges

in other workplaces (Junker et al., 2023). Consequently, job crafting does not always have a positive impact on employee engagement.

The fourth data analysis result reveals that job stress negatively affects employee engagement. As previously explained, stress has two potential impacts. However, continuous stress inevitably has detrimental effects on employees (Ferdinan et al., 2023). High job demands can present challenges, but they can also diminish employee engagement (Breaugh, 2020). Prolonged exposure to stress may lead employees to disengage from their work (Subiantoro & Lataruva, 2022), and stressed employees are more likely to consider leaving their organization (Moshoeu & Geldenhuys, 2019).

The fifth data analysis result suggests that job crafting does not mediate the relationship between job stress and employee engagement. For millennial workers, job crafting is primarily a means to achieve comfort rather than a strategy to enhance engagement (Junker et al., 2023). Thus, job crafting is not primarily a coping mechanism for job stress or a way to boost engagement but rather an effort toward self-improvement and personal growth (Feenstra-Verschure et al., 2023).

The sixth data analysis result indicates that empathetic leadership serves as a mediator between job stress and employee engagement. Stress experienced by employees can decrease, and engagement can increase when leaders demonstrate empathy. Empathetic leaders show concern, support, and closeness to employees (Yue et al., 2022). Such leaders reduce employees' stress levels and foster greater engagement

by making employees feel valued and connected to the organization.

Figure 4 provides an important insight regarding empathetic leadership. While empathetic leadership positively influences employee stress and engagement, it is most effective when stress levels are low. When stress levels are high, the impact of empathetic leadership on engagement is less significant. However, empathetic leadership at higher levels still has a greater impact compared to lower levels of empathetic leadership. In accordance with the JD-R theory, leadership can act as both a job demand and a resource (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker et al., 2014). The findings of this study confirm that empathetic leadership can mitigate the negative effects of job stress on employee engagement. Thus, when employees face high job demands, leaders must demonstrate empathy to maintain employee engagement.

This research contributes valuable insights to the JD-R theory by enhancing the understanding of various factors influencing individual responses to external stimuli. Among these factors, leadership and the perception of external stimuli play a crucial role (Harms et al., 2017).

5. Conclusion and Suggestion

The practical contribution of this research, particularly in the field of human resource management within companies, highlights the critical importance of leaders possessing empathetic communication skills. Millennial workers require support from their leaders in the form of psychological resources to effectively cope with job stress. When leaders demonstrate empathy toward employees, their ability to engage in job crafting improves, and employee

engagement is maintained. By fostering such an empathetic leadership approach, organizations can reduce employee turnover and job stress, ultimately leading to significant savings in HR management costs.

This study, however, has several limitations. It does not comprehensively explore the underlying factors contributing to the positive and negative effects of leadership. Future research should aim to investigate these factors more thoroughly to provide a deeper understanding of leadership's influence on employees.

A more comprehensive understanding of leadership dynamics could offer valuable insights for organizational leaders in addressing workforce challenges. Additionally, this study has not delved deeply into the role of job crafting in enhancing employee performance. Future research could develop a more comprehensive model to examine the relationship between job crafting and performance outcomes.

Another limitation of this study is its reliance on cross-sectional data, which captures results within a specific period and may not reflect long-term trends. Future research could benefit from adopting a longitudinal approach to gain a more extensive understanding of the studied phenomena over time may not reflect long-term trends. Future research could benefit from adopting a longitudinal approach to gain a more extensive understanding of the studied phenomena over time.

Lastly, the research is constrained by its focus on a limited sample of millennial workers within the city of Surabaya, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should consider broader samples across different regions and generational groups to enhance the external validity of the results.

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