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Generational Boundaries and Motivation Reconstruction of Two-Factor Theory: A Case Study of New-Generation Employees at HDL

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Abstract
The applicability boundary of the traditional Two-Factor Theory in the context of new-generation employees requires further clarification. Taking HDL as a case study, this research employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, combining data from 136 questionnaire surveys and 20 semi-structured interviews to conduct an in-depth analysis of the drift mechanism of two-factor attributes against the backdrop of generational change. The findings show that motivator factors(MF) such as long-term promotion exert a significantly weaker effect among new-generation employees, and that work atmosphere—traditionally classified as a hygiene factor (HF)—suggests, based on preference and interview evidence, that it may have acquired motivator-like attributes for this cohort. These shifts are underpinned by an inferred steep time discount rate and a strong demand for psychological capital (PC), although the two boundary conditions were inferred from responses rather than directly measured in the present questionnaire. Based on these findings, this paper constructs a "dynamic differentiated" motivation model, proposes a tripartite reconstruction pathway encompassing temporal, structural, and digital dimensions, and advocates for the transformation of psychological contracts toward emotionally supportive relationships. This study refines the generational applicability boundary of Two-Factor Theory, proposes a shift from static classification to dynamic boundary management, and provides empirical evidence for optimizing motivation mechanisms in labor-intensive enterprises.

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Keywords: New-generation employees, Two-Factor Theory, Applicability boundary, Motivation reconstruction

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Significance

In recent years, the labor structure of China's catering industry has undergone notable changes, with new-generation employees represented by the post-90s and post-00s generations gradually becoming the mainstay of frontline service positions. Compared with traditional employees, new-generation employees have more diverse growth environments, educational backgrounds, and values. Beyond compensation and stability, they place greater emphasis on work enjoyment, immediate feedback (IF), sense of respect, psychological safety, and self-actualization. However, some catering enterprises still rely on standardized, homogenized traditional motivation systems that struggle to meet employees' differentiated needs, easily triggering occupational burnout, work disengagement, and turnover intention. Haidilao (HDL) has long attracted attention for its "people-oriented" management model. Its promotion pathways, benefit provisions, and honor incentives well embody the HFs and MFs in Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory. However, as the proportion of new-generation employees rises, the existing motivation model has gradually exposed problems such as rigid forms, insufficient targeting, and inadequate attention to individual differences. This paper aims to analyze the applicability boundary of Two-Factor Theory for motivating new-generation employees and explore pathways for

reconstructing motivation mechanisms, providing theoretical basis and practical reference for labor-intensive enterprises such as catering businesses to optimize employee management, enhance work enthusiasm, and reduce staff turnover.

1.2. Research Status

Two-Factor Theory distinguishes factors influencing employee attitudes into MFs and HFs. Ser and Webber [1] argue that generational differences may adjust the functional boundary between the two types of factors. Hassan *et al.* [2] found that leadership style, stress relief, and compensation rewards can promote Millennial retention through job embeddedness. Domestic research emphasizes optimizing compensation and benefits, work environment, growth recognition, and organizational culture, and maintaining psychological contracts through communication and emotional support [3,4]. Studies applying Two-Factor Theory to Chinese catering contexts have examined frontline employee motivation in chain catering enterprises such as HDL[5], and have proposed two-factor-based and generational-difference-informed incentive strategies for Z-generation employees [6-8]. Related studies have also explored the digital management optimization of HDL[9]. However, literature regarding the failure conditions of Two-Factor Theory within this specific cohort remains scant among new-generation employees. Taking HDL as a case study, this paper combines questionnaires and interviews to test its applicability boundary and propose differentiated motivation pathways.

1.3. Research Content

The research content of this study is organized as follows:

1. Theoretical foundation and boundary construction (problem identification). Combining Two-Factor Theory with the characteristics of new-generation employees, this study proposes an analytical framework for applicability boundaries. This study introduces two boundary conditions—"time discount rate" and "intensity of psychological capital (PC) demand"—transforming observa-tional phenomena into testable theoretical propositions.
2. Subsequently, current status examination and misalign-ment identification (problem manifestation). Describing HDL's standardized two-factor motivation system, and through mixed data (breadth of questionnaires + depth of interviews), identifying the structural misalignment between patterned motivation and the needs of the new generation.
3. Building on these findings, failure attribution and in-depth discussion (deep-level causation). Analyzing the mechanistic deficiencies of Two-Factor Theory among the new-generation group from three dimensions: diminishing marginal utility of MFs, connotation drift of HFs, and institutional bottlenecks.
4. Finally, motivation reconstruction and theoretical feedback (solution and refinement). Proposing a "dynamic differentiated" motivation model for the new generation, demonstrating reconstruction pathways in combination with digital platforms and psychological contract building, and feeding these back into classical theory to complete boundary refinement in the generational context.

2. Theoretical Framework and Design

2.1. Core Connotation and Evolution of Two-Factor Theory

Herzberg *et al.* [19] classified work factors into HFs and MFs. The former, including compensation, environment, and interpersonal relationships, can only reduce dissatisfaction; the latter, including achievement, recognition, and promotion, can stimulate intrinsic motivation. Subsequent research has
shown that both types of factors are influenced by cultural, industry, and individual differences [10,11], and their effects are not fixed—Two-Factor Theory has certain applicability boundaries. After entering the 21st century, with the generational turnover of the labor structure, academic exploration of boundary conditions has deepened from the macro-cultural level to the micro-temporal perspective. Generational research suggests that the motivational efficacy of the two factors varies across age groups [1], implying that it may undergo dynamic drift along the temporal dimension, providing an important theoretical opportunity for subsequent analysis of boundary shifts under generational change.

2.2. New-Generation Needs and Theoretical Boundaries

2.2.1. Core Motivation Preferences

Raised in an era of internet ubiquity and material affluence, new-generation employees display distinct psychological traits in the workplace. According to the generational theory of Twenge [12] and Howe and Strauss [13], this group craves "IF" more than "long-term commitment," is more sensitive to"work atmosphere" than "stable security," and values "personalized recognition" more than "unified merit evaluation." Extensive empirical research [14]; Wang & Feng [15] shows that this group is more prone to turnover intention due to lack of psychological safety, monotonous work, or tense interpersonal relationships, while salary level is conversely not the primary driving factor.

2.2.2. Theoretical Construction of Applicability Boun-daries

Comparing the characteristics of new-generation employees with Two-Factor Theory reveals two types of boundary shifts: first, a decline in the efficacy of traditional MFs, and second, the transformation of some HFs into MFs [16]. These changes are primarily moderated by two factors: the level of employees' time discount rate and the strength of their PC demand. These two boundary conditions were selected over alternative candidates (e.g., digital immersion or job mobility) on the criterion of explanatory specificity: only time discount rate can directly account for the PA-attenuation anomaly (Anomaly 1, Section 3.3), and only PC demand can account for the atmosphere-preference anomaly (Anomaly 2, Section 3.3). They thus constitute the minimal set of constructs required to explain the two observed deviations, and each is examined empirically in Section 4.

2.2.3. Theoretical Model and Analytical Framework

This paper argues that the applicability of Two-Factor Theory is moderated by generational characteristics. An increase in time discount rate weakens long-term motivational efficacy [17], while enhanced PC demand promotes the transformation of HF into MFs [18]. Changes in these two dimensions interact: on the one hand, weakening the efficacy of

traditional motivator MF; and on the other hand, driving the transformation of HFs into MFs—thereby constituting the core phenomenon that this study needs to explain. The subsequent sections will examine this process empirically using the HDL case.

2.3. Research Methods

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to dissect the "motivation failure" mechanism, which involves both observable behaviors and subjective psychology. This approach was selected for three specific reasons.

First, single-method approaches have blind spots. Quantitative analysis identifies correlations well but often misses the deep psychological reasons behind statistical anomalies—such as why long-term promotions suddenly lose appeal. On the other hand, qualitative research provides rich context but can lack generalizability. Combining both methods balances these weaknesses.

Second, this design helps verify theoretical boundaries. We use Two-Factor Theory as a deductive framework for the quantitative phase to set baseline patterns. The qualitative phase then remains open to "boundary drift," allowing unexpected factors like digital immediacy to surface. This balances "theory-driven" testing with "data-driven" discovery.

Finally, the sequence ensures depth. By starting with surveys for breadth and following with interviews for depth, the analysis first identifies "what" is happening (the misalignment) and then explains "why" it is happening. This structure ensures the analysis of the boundaries is logically sound.

2.3.1. Case Selection

This paper selects HDL as a typical case based on three considerations:

1. **Institutional homogeneity:** HDL stores maintain a high degree of consistency in promotion, compensation, and honor systems, which helps control institutional variables and focus the analysis on the impact of generational differences on motivational effectiveness.
2. **Theoretical contrast significance:** As a benchmark for motivation management in the catering industry, the failure of its new-generation motivation carries greater theoretical contrast significance.
3. **Documentary accessibility:** This paper also draws on employee handbooks, training materials, store SOPs, and media reports to conduct a categorical analysis of its motivation system.

2.3.2. Specific Design of Mixed Methods

To comprehensively explain the complex mechanism of "motivation failure," this study employs Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods, divided into quantitative and qualitative phases:

1. **Quantitative analysis (questionnaire survey):** Based on Two-Factor Theory, a five-point Likert scale was designed, incorporating dimensions such as real-time feedback, choice rights, and psychological support, to compare generational differences and identify differential patterns and anomalous data in satisfaction and motivation preferences between new and senior employees;
2. **Qualitative analysis (in-depth interviews):** Based on the differential anomalies identified in the questionnaire data, interviews were conducted with new-generation employees and frontline managers, focusing on patterned motivation, declining attractiveness of long-term promotion, and the influence of work atmosphere, achieving a logical closed loop between data findings and theoretical explanation.
3. All quantitative analyses (reliability testing, KMO and Bartlett's tests, PCA, independent-samples t-tests, ANOVA, and multiple regression) were performed using JASP[20].

2.4. Data Sources and Sample Description

2.4.1. Questionnaire Survey: Quantitative Breadth

The questionnaire survey was conducted from December 2025 to February 2026 at two HDL stores (A and B) in a second-tier city. The survey targets were frontline employees who had been employed for at least one month (including servers, food runners (FR), greeters, etc.).

A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed, and 136 valid questionnaires were recovered, yielding an effective recovery rate of 90.7%. Of these, 98 samples (72.1%) were identified as new-generation employees (post-90s and post-00s), serving as the primary analytical subjects. The remaining 38 respondents (27.9%) were classified as senior employees, who are operationally defined in this study as individuals born before 1990. This classification ensures a distinct demographic boundary for the generational comparison analysis presented in the subsequent sections.

2.4.2. In-Depth Interviews: Qualitative Depth

Interviews were conducted concurrently, with a total of 20 interviewees, including 15 new-generation frontline employees (coded Emp1–Emp15) and 5 frontline managers (Mgr1–Mgr5). Interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasting 20 to 30 minutes. To ensure precise correspondence between qualitative data and the theoretical framework, this paper coded the interview content and aligned core quotations with boundary conditions (see Table 1).

Table 1: Interview Coding and Data Application

Category	Code	Question No.
Employees	Servers: Emp1–Emp5	FEQ1–FEQ16
	FRs: Emp6–Emp10	
	Greeters: Emp11–Emp15	
Manager	Duty Managers: Mgr1–Mgr5	FMQ1–FMQ12

2.4.3. Sample Representativeness

The sample of this study is limited to two stores in a specific region and does not cover all of China, so there are certain limitations to the generalizability of the conclusions. However, due to HDL's high degree of institutional isomorphism, with motivation rules at all stores consistent with headquarters, the sample data can still reflect common problems under the standardized system. Future research can

be extended to stores in different cities and operating environments to test the robustness of the conclusions.

2.5. Reliability Testing and Data-Suitability Check

To ensure the quality of the questionnaire data, this paper conducted reliability tests and a data-suitability check (see Table 2); construct validity is supported by the theory-derived item design and triangulation with the interview evidence.

In terms of reliability: the overall Cronbach's α coefficient of the scale was 0.821, and the α coefficients for the HF, MF, and NGPDs were 0.786, 0.805, and 0.701, respectively—all at or above the critical value of 0.7—indicating acceptable to good internal consistency of the scale.

In terms of data suitability: the overall KMO value was 0.816 (>0.7), and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (χ^2 = 645.52, p <.001), confirming that the data were appropriate for factor analysis. Dimension-level KMO values were 0.839 for HFs, 0.821 for MFs, and 0.758 for new-generation motivation preferences, all exceeding the 0.7 threshold. Principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted on the 18 items. Five components with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted, accounting for a cumulative variance of 59.28% (Component 1: 25.75%, Component 2: 12.40%, Component 3: 9.16%, Component 4: 6.37%, Component 5: 5.60%). The factor structure showed acceptable data suitability, although the empirically extracted components did not perfectly correspond to the three theoretical dimensions. A plausible explanation is that several items are conceptually cross-loading (e.g., atmosphere-related items touch on both hygiene attributes and preference expressions), and that the pooled sample mixes two generations whose factor structures may differ. This issue is revisited in the limitations (6.3).

Table 2: Reliability Test Results and Data-Suitability Check

Category	Dimension	Criterion	Result & Conclusion
Reliability	Overall Scale α	> 0.7	α = 0.821; good internal consistency
	HF α Coefficient	> 0.7	α = 0.786; acceptable internal consistency
	MF α Coefficient	> 0.7	α = 0.805; good internal consistency
	NGP α Coefficient	> 0.7	α = 0.701; acceptable internal consistency
Data Suitability	KMO Value & Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	KMO > 0.7; p < 0.05	KMO = 0.816; Bartlett's test significant (χ^2 = 645.52, p <.001); suitable for factor analysis. PCA extracted five components (eigenvalues > 1; cumulative variance = 59.28%); the factor structure showed acceptable data suitability, although the empirically extracted components did not perfectly correspond to the theoretical dimensions (see Section 6.3)

Note. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's α based on 136 valid responses. Items Q12 and Q19 each had one missing value, resulting in N = 135 for the corresponding item-level analyses. Data suitability was examined via KMO and Bartlett's tests; PCA was conducted on the 18 items, and five components were extracted (cumulative variance = 59.28%), serving as a suitability check only rather than a construct-validity test; the empirically extracted components did not perfectly correspond to the three theoretical dimensions (see Section 6.3). Welch-corrected degrees of freedom for between-group tests are reported rounded down to the nearest integer (see Table 3-A).

3. Analysis of HDL's Motivation Mechanism

3.1. Institutional Isomorphism: The Standardized Two-Factor System

HDL stores maintain strong consistency in institutional design and service processes, forming a replicable two-factor motivation model. Its MFs mainly include transparent promotion pathways, employee honor selection, skills competitions, and service commendations, aimed at satisfying employees' needs for achievement and recognition; HFs encompass salary and benefits, accommodation conditions, humanized scheduling, and diversified communi-cation channels, to reduce employee dissatisfaction. Since stores nationwide generally follow unified headquarters standards, if motivational effectiveness declines, the cause is more likely to be a mismatch between the standardized system and the differentiated needs of new-generation employees, rather than inadequate implementation at individual stores.

3.2. Operational Effectiveness: Relative Advantages of Traditional Mechanisms

Overall, HDL employees have a relatively high recognition of management. Most employees acknowledge the positive correlation between effort and reward, and many frontline employees have grown into store managers through clear pathways. Compared with peers, HDL has long maintained a low turnover rate and stable service quality. This system has a significant motivational effect on senior employees with long tenure and clear career goals. They generally believe that as long as they work diligently, promotion is only a matter of time. However, differentiation has emerged within the new-generation group. Although some new-generation employees acknowledge the compensation and benefits, they exhibit instability in work enthusiasm and proactive willingness. Traditional advantages are not equally effective across all generations.

3.3. Boundary Manifestation: Conflict Between Patterning and Demand

As shown in Table 3, independent-samples t-tests were conducted to examine generational differences in the evaluation of each motivation dimension. Student's t-test was used when the homogeneity of variance assumption was satisfied, whereas Welch's correction was applied when the assumption was violated. The results reveal significant deviations between the theoretical expectations of the Two-Factor Theory and the actual data regarding new-generation employees, alongside several non-significant differences that are themselves informative. Two anomalies warrant particular attention:

Anomaly 1: Failure of long-term promotion. The new generation's rating of the promotion pathway (M = 3.04, SD = 0.90) was significantly lower than that of senior employees (M = 3.95, SD = 0.90), t(134) = −5.29, p <.001, Cohen's d = −1.01, a difference of 0.91 points. The overall motivator dimension showed the same pattern (M = 3.30, SD = 0.60 vs.

M = 3.78, SD = 0.60, t(134) = −4.19, p <.001, d = −0.80). Under the classical framework, the most motivating factor has thus substantively failed among this group rather than merely weakened. The attributive mechanism behind this failure is examined in Section 4.1.

Anomaly 2: Work atmosphere as a core driving force. "Interpersonal relationships and atmosphere," originally a HF, was rated higher by the new generation (M = 4.04, SD = 0.86) than by senior employees (M = 3.79, SD = 0.74), although this difference did not reach statistical significance, t(134) = 1.59, p =.115. The significant generational contrast lies in the relative valuation of atmosphere: on the preference item "atmosphere is more important than salary," new-generation employees scored markedly higher than senior employees (M = 3.96, SD = 0.74 vs. M = 3.39, SD = 0.82, t(134) = 3.85, p <.001, d = 0.74). Whether this preference signals an attribute shift is cross-validated with interview data in Section 4.2. Overall, the results of all hypothesis tests, including the regression analyses reported in Section 4, are synthesized in Table 5

Table 3: Comparison of Satisfaction Scores Across Generational Employees (1–5 Scale)

Dimension	New-G M (SD)	Senior M (SD)	Mean Difference	t	p	Cohen's d
Q4–Q9	3.72 (0.61)	3.81 (0.48)	−0.08	−0.75	.457	−0.14
Q7	4.04 (0.86)	3.79 (0.74)	+0.25	1.59	.115	0.30
Q10–Q14	3.30 (0.60)	3.78 (0.60)	−0.48	−4.19	<.001	−0.80
Q10	3.04 (0.90)	3.95 (0.90)	−0.91	−5.29	<.001	−1.01
Q12	3.30 (0.74)	3.68 (0.63)	−0.38	−2.78	.006	−0.54
Q16	3.96 (0.74)	3.39 (0.82)	+0.57	3.85	<.001	0.74
Q15–Q21	3.82 (0.44)	3.43 (0.51)	+0.39	4.37	<.001	0.84

Note. N = 98 (new-generation) vs. N = 38 (senior). Means (SDs) are on a five-point scale. Q4–Q9 = HF dimension; Q10–Q14 = MF dimension; Q15–Q21 = NGP dimension. Q6: df = 96; Q12, reflecting Welch's correction for unequal variances. Item-level statistics and full abbreviation definitions are reported in Table 3-A.

Table 4: Independent-Samples t-Tests of Generational Differences across All Scale Items

Item	New-G M (SD)	Senior M (SD)	Mean Diff.	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Q4	3.67 (0.73)	3.95 (0.73)	−0.27	−1.96	134	.052	−0.38
Q5	3.70 (0.81)	3.82 (0.77)	−0.12	−0.73	134	.467	−0.14
Q6	3.64 (0.91)	3.84 (0.64)	−0.20	−1.44	96	.153	−0.24
Q7 IR&CA	4.04 (0.86)	3.79 (0.74)	+0.25	1.59	134	.115	0.30
Q8	3.85 (0.84)	3.82 (0.69)	+0.03	0.20	134	.840	0.04
Q9	3.44 (0.94)	3.63 (1.00)	−0.19	−1.05	134	.294	−0.20
Q10, PA	3.04 (0.90)	3.95 (0.90)	−0.91	−5.29	134	<.001	−1.01
Q11	3.29 (0.85)	3.74 (0.76)	−0.45	−2.86	134	.005	−0.55
Q12 T & CWF	3.30 (0.74)	3.68 (0.63)	−0.38	−2.78	133	.006	−0.54
Q13	3.50 (0.78)	3.76 (1.00)	−0.26	−1.63	134	.105	−0.31
Q14	3.40 (0.78)	3.82 (0.77)	−0.42	−2.81	134	.006	−0.54
Q15	3.99 (0.82)	3.53 (0.83)	+0.46	2.95	134	.004	0.56
Q16 AOS	3.96 (0.74)	3.39 (0.82)	+0.57	3.85	134	<.001	0.74
Q17	3.76 (0.90)	3.32 (0.77)	+0.44	2.66	134	.009	0.51
Q18	3.94 (0.88)	3.47 (0.76)	+0.47	2.86	134	.005	0.55
Q19	3.59 (0.72)	3.37 (0.79)	+0.22	1.55	133	.123	0.30
Q20	3.68 (0.77)	3.42 (0.72)	+0.26	1.82	134	.071	0.35
Q21	3.80 (0.79)	3.53 (0.89)	+0.27	1.73	134	.086	0.33

Note. N = 98 (new-generation) vs. N = 38 (senior); Q12 and Q19 each had one missing value (N = 135, df = 133). H = HF; M = MF; P = NGP. Degrees of freedom reflect Welch's correction for unequal variances (Q6: df = 96; Q12 and Q19: df = 133); non-integer Welch df values are rounded down to the nearest integer for presentation. *** p <.001, ** p <.01, * p <.05. Data are based on the questionnaire survey reported in Section 2.4. Q4 Salary Level (H); Q5 Accommodation Conditions (H); Q6 Scheduling and Rest (H); Q7 Interpersonal Relationships and Collaboration Atmosphere (IR&CA, H); Q8 Leadership Management and Communication (H); Q9 Feedback Channels (H); Q10 Promotion Attractiveness (PA, M); Q11 Recognition and Appreciation (M); Q12 Timely and Clear Work Feedback (T & CWF, M); Q13 Sense of Achievement (M); Q14 Honor Rewards (M); Q15 Short-Cycle Incentive (SCI, P); Q16 Atmosphere-over-Salary Preference (AOS, P); Q17 Perceived Standardization of the Incentive Scheme (P); Q18 Reward Choice Preference (P); Q19 Perceived Insufficient Overtime Incentive (P); Q20 Psychological Support Preference (P); Q21 Participatory Motivation Preference (P).

Summary of current status: New-generation employees widely describe the motivation scheme as "patterned" and desire reward methods with choice rights, yet the current system lacks channels to respond. Notably, one store once spontaneously piloted a micro-incentive program of "daily smile check-in for small prizes," which was later halted due to conflicts with headquarters standardization.

4. Discussion: Causes of Theory Failure and Mechanism Deficiencies

4.1. MF Attenuation: The Contradiction Between Long-Term Promotion and High Time Discount Rate

The promotion pathway has clear rules—why does it fail among the new generation? The problem lies in the fact that the same tool produces radically different psychological reactions across different groups. Interview excerpts cited in this and the following subsection are drawn from the coding index in Table 4. Herzberg classified promotion as a MF, with the implicit premise that employees have sufficient "time patience." The new generation, however, is accustomed to "minute-level feedback," a pattern that is consistent with—though not directly measured as—a higher time discount rate relative to their predecessors. The quantitative results are consistent with this account: new-generation employees rated PA and the overall motivator dimension significantly lower than senior employees (Table 3), while their preference items on SCIs and reward choice (Q15, Q18) were rated significantly higher by this cohort. As interviewee Emp05

vividly expressed: “I know that doing well can lead to becoming a store manager, but I probably can’t wait that long.” This sense of urgency is further emphasized by Emp09, who noted: “I’d rather know if there’s real-time feedback for doing well this week.” When the incentive redemption cycle exceeds psychological expectations, the perceived expected return from each additional unit of effort declines exponentially. It is not that they do not want promotion, but that the waiting cost has become too high. This explains why a promotion system that appears reasonable on paper struggles to ignite the work enthusiasm of the new generation

Table 5: Interview Information and Key Coding Index (Excerpt)

Code	Position	Tenure	Generation	Key Statement Excerpt	Boundary Condition
Emp 05	Server	8 months	Post-00s	"I know that doing well can lead to becoming a store manager, but I probably can't wait that long"	Time discount rate
Emp 09	FR	4 months	Post-95s	"I'd rather know if there's real-time feedback for doing well this week"	Time discount rate
Emp 02	Greeter	1 year 2 months	Post-00s	"I can tolerate a slightly lower salary, but if relationships among colleagues are unpleasant or it's oppressive every day, I can't stay a single day"	PC demand
Emp 07	Server	6 months	Post-95s	"The rules are fair, but what does that have to do with me? I help new colleagues get familiar with the environment, but this doesn't count toward scores"	Institutional bottleneck
Mgr 02	Manager	3 years	Post-90s	"It's not that new-generation employees don't work hard; it's that when they do, they want to be seen immediately"	PC demand
Emp 12	Greeter	1 year 6 months	Post-00s	“It’s comfortable working here”	PC demand

Note. Employee interviews (Emp1–Emp15) had tenures of 4 months to 2 years; short-tenure interviewees (e.g., Emp05, 8 months) reflect the high early-turnover profile of frontline positions and should be interpreted as capturing early-stage motivational experience rather than settled attitudes. Manager interviews (Mgr1–Mgr5, tenures 1–3 years) were used to triangulate employee accounts; boundary-condition assignments reflect convergent coding across both sources.

4.2. HF Drift: Demand Shift from Material Security to PC

Before interpreting the drift, one supporting pattern deserves note: new-generation employees’ absolute satisfaction with classic hygiene items did not decline—interpersonal relationships and collaboration (Q7) were rated slightly, though not significantly, higher by the new generation than by senior employees (4.04 vs. 3.79, $p = .115$). The generational contrast therefore lies not in whether HFs still work, but in their relative weight: hygiene conditions remain a satisfied baseline, while the cohort’s preference structure has shifted toward atmosphere relative to material conditions. The drift documented below is thus a demand-hierarchy shift, not a failure of hygiene factors.

The questionnaire data show that new-generation employees’ satisfaction with interpersonal relationships and work atmosphere did not differ significantly from that of senior employees (Table 3); what distinguishes the cohort is the weight they attach to atmosphere relative to material conditions. Their preference for “AOS” was significantly stronger than that of senior employees (Table 3), and this preference showed a significant positive predictive relationship with their atmosphere satisfaction in the regression analysis (standardized $\beta = .251$, $p = .006$, $R^2 = .077$, controlling for generation and tenure). Together with the interview accounts below, this pattern suggests a boundary shift: for this group, respect, support, and a relaxed atmosphere may have acquired motivator-like attributes. The underlying interpretation is that as material deprivation weakens, demand appears to shift from basic security toward PC—being respected, a sense of belonging, and emotional support [4]. Taken together with the regression evidence, this pattern suggests—but does not establish—that atmosphere may have acquired motivator-like attributes for this cohort: it appears to do more than merely eliminate dissatisfaction and may plausibly contribute to work engagement and retention.

A rigorous test of this HF→MF drift would require outcome variables such as engagement or turnover intention, which were not measured in the present study (see Section 6.3). Although HDL has established psychological counseling rooms, it still treats them as auxiliary measures rather than incorporating them into the core motivation system.

4.3. Institutional Bottlenecks: Assessment Deficits and Digital Lag

While the conflict between institutional isomorphism and individual needs has been established, the practical bottleneck lies specifically in the limitations of the current assessment infrastructure. The qualitative data reveals three systemic deficits that hinder the implementation of differentiated motivation:

(1) The assessment mechanism lacks granularity. The current system uses a “one-size-fits-all” standard that fails to capture the multidimensional contributions of new-generation employees (e.g., peer support, atmosphere creation). As interviewee Emp07 noted, “The rules are fair, but what does that have to do with me? I help new colleagues get familiar with the environment, but this doesn’t count toward scores.” This indicates that the assessment criteria are too rigid to validate diverse behavioral inputs.

(2) There is a significant lag in digital tool integration. The reliance on manual or periodic evaluation creates a “feedback vacuum,” making the promised “timely recognition” operationally impossible. Without real-time data tracking, managers cannot deliver the IF that new-generation employees demand, rendering the motivation system ineffective despite its theoretical validity. The questionnaire data are consistent with this claim: ratings of feedback channels (Q9) were uniformly low across both groups (new-generation $M = 3.44$, senior $M = 3.63$; $t(134) = -1.05$, $p = .294$), indicating that the feedback vacuum is a system-level

deficit rather than a generational complaint−yet it is the new generation's higher demand for immediacy (Q18, d = 0.55) that converts this deficit into a motivational failure.

(3) The evaluation process is subject to opacity and subjective bias. The lack of quantifiable metrics reduces trust in the system. Employees perceive the connection between their effort and the reward as tenuous, which further erodes their psychological safety regarding organizational fairness.

Overall, the results of all hypothesis tests, including the regression analyses reported in Section 4, are synthesized in Table 6.

Table 6: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Research Relationship	Statistic	p	Result	Note
H1	MFs: NGP< Senior	t = -4.19, d = -0.80	<.001		
H1a	PA: New < Senior	t = -5.29, d = -1.01	<.001	Supported	Q10
H1b	Recognition: New < Senior	t = -2.86, d = -0.55	.005	Supported	Q11
H1c	Timely/Clear Feedback: New < Senior	t = -2.78, d = -0.54	.006	Supported	Q12
H1d	Honor Rewards: New < Senior	t = -2.81, d = -0.54	.006	Supported	Q14
H2	NGP: New > Senior	t = 4.37, d = 0.84	<.001	Supported	
H2a	AOS: New > Senior	t = 3.85, d = 0.74	<.001	Supported	Q16
H2b	SCI: New > Senior	t = 2.95, d = 0.56	.004	Supported	Q15
H2c	Perceived Standardization: New > Senior	t = 2.66, d = 0.51	.009	Supported	Q17
H2d	Reward Choice: New > Senior	t = 2.86, d = 0.55	.005	Supported	Q18
H3	NGP -> MFs	β = 0.379	<.001	Supported	G&T
H4	NGP-> HFs	β = 0.452	<.001	Supported	G&T
H5	Short-cycle pref -> PA	β = 0.074	.363	Not Supported	G&T
H6	Atmosphere pref -> Interpersonal Atmosphere	β = 0.251	.006	Supported	G&T

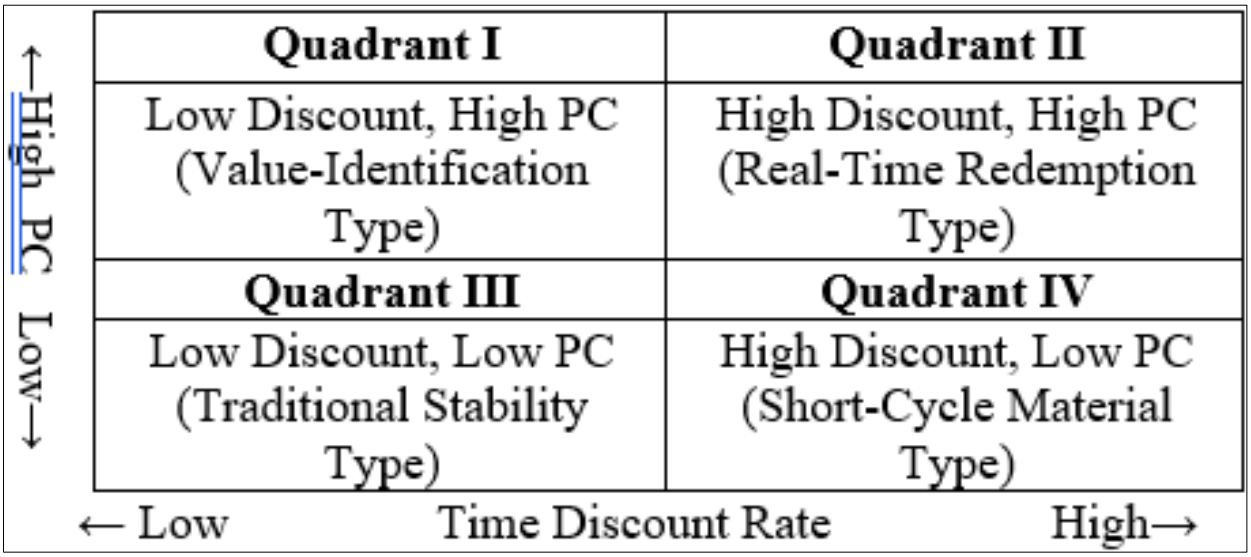
Note. H = HF; M = MF; P = NGP. For t-tests, df = 134 except where Welch's correction was applied (Q6: df = 96; Q12 and Q19: df = 133). For regression models, β = standardized coefficient; all models controlled for generation and tenure (G&T). H5 was not supported (p =.363), indicating that short-cycle preference does not significantly predict PA after controlling for generation. The implications of this null result are discussed in Section 5.1. *** p <.001, ** p <.01, * p <.05.

5. Pathways for Reconstructing the Motivation Mechanism

5.1. System Design: Constructing a Dynamic Differentiated Motivation Model

Addressing the conflict between standardized systems and personalized needs, this paper proposes adding a "dynamic adjustment layer" that, while maintaining the stability of core systems such as promotion, introduces three types of differentiated mechanisms: short-cycle micro-incentives, flexible honor channels, and role-based motivation configuration. Based on time discount rate and PC demand−two analytical constructs that were inferred from preference and interview evidence rather than directly measured (see Section 6.3)−a conceptual "two-factor dynamic transformation matrix" is proposed to achieve classified employee management (see Figure 1). The two axes of the matrix are analytic dimensions, not measured variables; the placement of the new-generation segment reflects preference and interview evidence, and operationalizing the two constructs with validated scales is a necessary precondition for applying the matrix in management practice. Among them, new-generation employees primarily belong to the high-discount, high-psychological-capital type, requiring a combination of IF and emotional support to enhance motivational effectiveness. SCI amounts are split from the existing bonus pool; role-based allowances are tied to the headquarters' mentoring system; weekly selections and annual merit evaluations are connected through a points system, forming complementarity between behavior and performance.

It should be noted that H5 was not supported (β = 0.074, p =.363), suggesting that short-cycle preference itself does not directly predict promotion attractiveness. Importantly, this null result does not weaken the reconstruction logic−it strengthens it. If short-cycle incentives cannot restore the attractiveness of promotion, the failure documented in Section 4.1 cannot be attributed to the form of the reward; rather, it corroborates the interpretation that the long redemption cycle itself (i.e., the waiting cost) is the binding constraint. Accordingly, the role of SCIs is explicitly repositioned: they are carriers of immediate feedback (IF), not substitutes for promotion. Their expected contribution is to decouple recognition from the promotion cycle so that effort‑reward linkage is restored on a short time scale, while promotion pathways remain the long-term structural channel. On this basis, SCIs are positioned as a pilot-testable supplement (see Section 6.3) rather than an empirically validated substitute. It should be emphasized that the dynamic differentiated model and its modules are proposed as managerial pathways rather than empirically validated practices; although their design is grounded in the quantitative and qualitative findings reported above, their effectiveness in actual store operations requires pilot testing and remains to be established (see Section 6.3).



Note. Figure 1 is a conceptual/analytical framework rather than an empirically validated classification. Because time discount rate and PC demand were not directly measured with dedicated scales in the present questionnaire (see Section 6.3), the High/Low boundaries of the two axes are analytic, and the placement of the new-generation segment reflects the preference and interview evidence. Operationalizing the two constructs is a necessary precondition for applying the matrix in management practice. Operationalizing the two axes with validated scales (e.g., Consideration of Future Consequences for time discount rate; established PC instruments for PC demand) and empirically validating the four-quadrant classification constitute future work (Section 6.3).

Fig 1: Two-Factor Dynamic Transformation Matrix

Table 6: Compatibility of Dynamic Differentiated Motivation Modules

New Motivation Mechanism	Integration with Existing System	Potential Conflict Points	Mitigation Plan
SCI Nodes	Annual Merit Evaluation System	Conflict in selection frequency, diluting annual authority	Weekly focus on "behavior," annual focus on "performance"; weekly points converted and included in annual total score
Flexible Honor Channels	Fixed Honor Awards	Self-selected rewards leading to fragmentation of the honor system	Establish an "honor function table," with function table items consistent with headquarters award categories
Role-Based Motivation Configuration	Mentoring System SOP	Mentorship dividend adjustments breaking unified commission rules	Fine-tune authority only "during the mentoring period," with magnitude controlled at 1%–2%, requiring store manager approval
Digital Points Platform	Existing WeChat Feedback Platform	Parallel operation of old and new systems causing management redundancy	Embed points functionality into existing Enterprise WeChat as a module upgrade

5.2. Technological Empowerment: Precision Motivation Based on Digital Platforms

Addressing the conflict between store-level micro-incentives and headquarters standardization, digital platforms do not weaken standardization but rather achieve personalized motivation on the basis of unified rules[9]. Through the approach of "standardized rules, flexible content," the platform separates motivational elements: on the one hand, recording service behaviors and awarding points-based rewards, and on the other hand, supporting employees to redeem personalized benefits such as scheduling priority and flexible entitlements. Meanwhile, transparency is enhanced through public scoring and promotion progress, reducing assessment subjectivity and achieving a balance between standard control and individual needs.

5.3. Psychological Contract: Transformation from Economic Exchange to Emotional Support

Motivation reconstruction requires not only institutional and digital tools but also the reshaping of psychological contracts. Enterprises should involve new-generation employees in formulating motivation rules, points redemption, and selection criteria, enhancing their sense of choice and being respected. Meanwhile, psychological counseling, team stress relief, and emotional communication should be integrated into daily management, shifting psychological support from remedial aftercare to normalized care, and promoting the transformation of labor relations from purely economic exchange to one that also encompasses emotional support.

5.4. Theoretical Feedback: Effectiveness of Reconstruction Pathways

The three pathways above precisely respond to the triple deficiencies of motivation attenuation, connotation drift, and emotional absence, and are mutually supportive: without digitalization, SCIs are difficult to implement; without psychological contracts, digital tools easily degenerate into cold-blooded assessment; without a dynamic model, psychological contracts lack institutional carriers. These theoretical reflections are offered as propositions for future validation rather than as conclusions already established by the present data.

Comparing the reconstruction pathways with traditional theory yields two points of theoretical feedback:

1. From static classification to dynamic adjustment. Traditional theory tends toward static classification, while the model in this paper emphasizes the dynamic drift of factor attributes with generational and contextual changes.
2. From "whether a factor exists" to "how it is presented." Traditional theory focuses on the presence or absence of factors, while the model in this paper concerns the rhythm and form in which factors are presented so that they can be effectively received by the new generation.

Rather than negating Herzberg, this work offers a refined supplement in the context of generational change.

6. Conclusions and Prospects

6.1. Conclusions

The applicability boundary of Two-Factor Theory exhibits a clear generational drift. The quantitative comparison (Table 3) shows that the promotion pathway—a classic motivator—scored 3.04 among new-generation employees versus 3.95 among senior employees ($t(134) = -5.29$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.01$), and the overall motivator dimension showed a comparably large gap ($t(134) = -4.19$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.80$), indicating that long-term motivators attenuate sharply in this cohort, a pattern consistent with the interpretation of a higher time discount rate. The overall NGPD showed the reverse pattern ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.44$ vs. $M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.51$, $t(134) = 4.37$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.84$), confirming that this cohort's motivation preferences diverge significantly from those of senior employees. Conversely, "interpersonal relationships and atmosphere"—a classic HF—was rated somewhat higher by the new generation (4.04 vs. 3.79), although the difference was not statistically significant ($p = .115$); what differed significantly was the new generation's relative preference for AOS (3.96 vs. 3.39, $t(134) = 3.85$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.74$), and the interview data suggest that this factor may have acquired motivator-like attributes for this cohort. These findings address the core research question: relying solely on the traditional static two-factor configuration is insufficient to drive new-generation employees; motivation effectiveness may be restored by shortening incentive cycles and upgrading HFs toward PC support.

Standardized motivation systems struggle to meet the differentiated needs of new-generation employees. The "dynamic differentiated" model proposes a match between institutions and employees' psychological needs through SCIs, flexible development pathways, transparent assessment, and participatory management, which may help enhance motivational effectiveness and organizational stability.

6.2. Theoretical and Managerial Implications

This study proposes the applicability boundary and dynamic differentiated model of Two-Factor Theory, incorporating digital tools and psychological contracts. In management practice, enterprises should avoid institutional isomorphism, establish short-cycle micro-incentives, improve the real-time nature and fairness of feedback, and integrate psychological support into core institutions.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study focuses on two HDL stores in a second-tier city, which may not fully capture how regional economic development levels and regional labor-market conditions influence employees' motivation evaluations. The cross-sectional design also makes it difficult to distinguish between age effects and cohort effects; moreover, because generational status overlaps with tenure in this sample, the observed differences cannot be fully separated from tenure effects—work tenure was itself significantly related to promotion satisfaction in the ANOVA ($F(3, 132) = 4.225$, $p = .007$)—and position or store-level management differences may also contribute to the findings. The two boundary conditions, time discount rate and PC demand, were not directly measured with dedicated scales in the present questionnaire; they were interpreted through preference items and interview evidence, so the corresponding causal claims should be read as theoretical interpretation rather than direct measurement. Future research should operationalize these two constructs (e.g., with adapted Consideration of Future Consequences and PC Questionnaire scales) and re-examine the boundary conditions with measured scores. Furthermore, although PCA was conducted and five components were extracted, the empirically derived factor structure did not perfectly correspond to the three theoretical dimensions, which limits the fine-grained examination of the scale's underlying factor structure. Additionally, the proposed digital motivation platform and the dynamic differentiated model remain conceptual designs and have not yet been empirically tested in actual store operations. Future research should expand the case scope to include stores in first-tier and third-tier cities for cross-regional comparison, conduct longitudinal tracking to observe generational changes over time, and implement quasi-experiments or field pilots to verify the effectiveness of the reconstruction pathways. Furthermore, the present study dichotomized the sample into new-generation (born 1990 or later) versus senior employees, which masks heterogeneity within the new generation itself. Given that the post-90s and post-00s may differ in digital immersion and career expectations, future analyses should disaggregate the new-generation sample into post-90s (1990–1995) and post-95s subgroups and conduct sensitivity analyses to test whether the documented drift (PA attenuation, AOS preference) holds across these sub-cohorts or intensifies among younger employees. Introducing cross-cultural comparisons could further enhance the reliability and applicability of the conclusions.

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