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GENERATION Z IN FINNISH LAPLAND: EXPLORING MOTIVATION TO RETURN AS FUTURE SEASONAL WORKERS

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Abstract

Finnish Lapland has expanded its winter tourism over the years, and to meet demand, companies hire short-term staff, known as seasonal workers. Companies struggle to rehire experienced personnel for other seasons, and low retention is almost the norm in tourism. Another challenge may be emerging: Generation Z. This generation, born between 1995 and 2010, is steadily entering the tourism industry as workers and has been described as having more specific preferences than previous generations when choosing an employer. Some companies achieve steady retention among this group, yet the phenomenon of them returning as seasonal employees has not been covered in tourism studies in the context of Finnish Lapland. Previous research has highlighted challenges in seasonal work, such as low salaries and the nature of the working environment. However, little research has explored why a specific group of employees chooses to return for another season. This study aims to fill the gap by connecting findings among Generation Z seasonal workers in Finnish Lapland with existing research.

The purpose of the study is to understand better why Generation Z seasonal workers in Finnish Lapland return to the same workplace for two or more seasons. The main research question is: Which factors motivate Generation Z seasonal workers to return to the same employer in Finnish Lapland? Sub-questions to support the main question are: 1) How do autonomy, competence, and relatedness at work influence Generation Z seasonal workers' decision to return? 2) What aspects of seasonal work do Generation Z consider encouraging or discouraging in their decision to return?

The study used Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to explain factors that may contribute to returning. Research was conducted as a qualitative case study at Snowhotel Family. Data were collected through eight semi-structured interviews and analyzed using directed content analysis. Results indicate that the fulfillment of inner needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness motivated returning. Autonomy was supported through flexibility and encouragement to have fun, competence through development opportunities, and responsibility and relatedness through an open and equal atmosphere within the company. Beyond the theory, seasonal work as a lifestyle, employment certainty, proper tools, and a fair salary motivated returning. Reasons not to return included limited development opportunities, a lack of action on feedback, and concerns about work-life balance. Findings contribute to the limited research on the topic and offer managerial implications for creating workplaces that promote well-being, safety, and a sense of meaningfulness.

Keywords: generation z, motivation to return, seasonal work, Finnish Lapland, self-determination theory

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In Finnish Lapland, winter brings groups of international visitors seeking to witness the snow and the northern lights, or even to meet Santa Claus. To create these experiences and meet growing demand, workers from Finland and abroad are recruited across several hospitality industries for the peak season, which lasts roughly from November to April (Pöyhönen, 2025). Roles range from receptionists and waiters to sales staff, chefs, and everything in between. More specific destination-related opportunities are also offered, such as aurora guides, husky kennel workers, or even snow builders. The common thread across all these roles is their temporary, seasonal nature.

The variety of roles and the winter setting can give new seasonal workers a sense of adventure and an experience to look forward to. However, in recent years, media reports have highlighted cases that discourage seasonal work. These cases include exploitation, living in shared housing with multiple other workers, and issues with rest, salary, and poor working gear (Auvinen, 2025). These reports have further added to the stigma of seasonal work and tourism. Harju-Myllyaho et al. (2020, p. 60) note that tourism work in Finland is generally perceived as not valued and not accepted as ‘a proper job’. In the worst case, seasonal work can further reinforce these perceptions, with a reputation for high turnover, short-term contracts, and a risk of exploitation (Auvinen, 2025; Lundberg et al., 2009). Other issues raised include a lack of housing and irregular working hours (Harju-Myllyaho et al., 2020, pp. 64-65).

Given the challenges of seasonal work, changes in employment are understandable but come at a cost. Recruitment and training require both time and funds, while service quality is also affected by turnover: experienced personnel have greater industry expertise and are likely to deliver higher-quality services (Alverén et al., 2012; Heiskanen, 2025; McCole, 2015). In some cases, visitors may return to a destination specifically for the same personnel who were part of the previous trip (Heiskanen, 2025). Beyond service quality, constant staff

changes can damage a company's reputation (McCole, 2015) and slow down networking and communication within teams (Alverén et al., 2012). Therefore, these turnover-related challenges create both direct and indirect costs (Heiskanen, 2025; McCole, 2015).

Rantala et al. (2019, p. 35) note that the characteristics of seasonal work, especially in the Arctic regions, make workforce retention difficult because meaningful employment and opportunities for advancement are limited. This challenge is already relevant and will grow as a new generation enters the workforce. Those born roughly between 1995 and 2010 are known as Generation Z, and in 2024, every fifth employed person in Finland belonged to this group (Korpela, 2025). This generation has been described as having values specifically focused on meaningfulness and development opportunities (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Deloitte, 2015; Lahti, 2025). However, these are reported to lack seasonal work (Rantala et al., 2019, p. 35). Additionally, Generation Z has been described as different in work life compared to prior generations. For example, Marjerison et al. (2025, p. 6) add that job satisfaction alone may not be enough to predict retention among this group, as jobs must also meet their personal goals. Despite their future growth as employees, Generation Z has been scarcely studied in research on tourism and seasonal work (Goh & Lee, 2018). These considerations make it relevant to understand what can motivate this group to return, especially as seasonal employees.

The study examines the return of seasonal workers. If seasonal work is described as having a variety of challenges, why do some workers return for another season or even multiple seasons? There are exceptions to the recurring seasonal turnover, and some workers choose to return to the same companies for several seasons. Thus, this research aims to understand why Generation Z seasonal workers in Finnish Lapland choose to return to the same company for two or more seasons. This challenges the stated norm that seasonal work is associated with high turnover while providing insight into Generation Z as employees. The aim is addressed through a case study at Snowhotel Family in Finnish Lapland, a company that achieved an 86% return rate for the 2025-2026 winter season, which is higher than the Finnish hospitality sector average of approximately 70% retention in 2024 (Confederation of Finnish Industries, 2025). Researching the experiences of returning Generation Z

seasonal workers can help identify what motivates them to return and offer insights for future employee retention strategies in seasonal work.

1.2 Previous research

Studies have noted a lack of research on Generation Z as tourism employees, despite the strong emphasis on the future retirement of older employees, which will create a ‘perfect storm’ in workplaces (Goh & Lee; Goh & Okumus, 2020). The term refers to a change in age groups, which is likely to impact management practices. Both studies mentioned strategies relevant to Generation Z, such as career stability, mentorship, fair pay, and workplace fun. Lensen et al. (2025) added to studies about Generation Z and found that a pleasurable workplace would reflect values around sustainability and ethicality, but also offer open communication, autonomy, teamwork, and a sense of belonging (Lensen et al., 2025). Findings show that companies have several factors to consider when planning their management to suit Generation Z.

More specifically, regarding intention to return and Generation Z, studies conducted across different cultural contexts have led to similar findings: this generation may not be motivated solely by salary. For example, Zhou et al. (2025) studied Generation Z in the hotel industry in China and found that when workers' values aligned with the work environment, they were more likely to return. Findings suggested training, coworker support, and future prospects, which are similar to findings in other studies (e.g., Aggarwal et al., 2022; Goh & Okumus, 2020). In France, equality and development opportunities were found to be impactful in attracting Generation Z to the hotel industry (Eddial & Kirillova, 2025). In India, Khrisna and Agrawal (2025) examined whether Generation Z values intrinsic or extrinsic rewards more and found a preference for autonomy over Millennials.

Specifically in seasonal work, studies on the intention to return are scarce, but the few available consistently emphasize the importance of management and workers' well-being. For example, a bachelor's thesis by Viljanen (2025) examined what drives seasonal workers to return to the same company, and the findings suggested that a focus on workers' well-

being, including fostering a work community, future prospects, efficient management, and quality work tools, is effective. In the field of seasonality research, Heiskanen (2025) studied ski instructor retention, identifying motivating factors such as clients, salary, management, feedback, recognition, and sufficient training. Lastly, earlier research by Moreo (2007) on seasonal lodging workers used job satisfaction to predict retention, with management, pleasure from the task, and the opportunity to meet new people as key predictors. Ericsson et al. (2020) further emphasized the importance of returning seasonal workers, discussed how their prior experience can drive innovation in tourism, and challenged the idea that seasonal work is low-skilled.

When moving more precisely to seasonal work, motivation to return, and Generation Z, there are no studies. Research on seasonal work in Finnish Lapland has been focused on specific roles and topics, such as the emotional labor of elves (Veijola & Paakkonen, 2014), airport workers during Christmas (Pahkamaa & Salmenkorva, 2014), and volunteer tourism with huskies (Brennan, 2018). Lahti's (2025) master's thesis was the closest to the topic; she explored why Generation Z summer park workers returned for several seasons. However, the research was conducted in Helsinki, and the nature of the seasonal work differed from that in Finnish Lapland, as the interviewees worked in a restaurant unit.

Overall, previous research presents a gap, as no study has yet combined seasonal work, motivation to return, Generation Z, and Finnish Lapland. Zhou et al. (2025, p. 77) also reported a lack of studies on the factors that explain why Generation Z remains in the hospitality industry, particularly in the early career stages. In addition to the studies by Heiskanen (2025), Viljanen (2025), and Lahti (2025), there remains a lack of studies that include employees who have repeatedly returned to the same place in their analyses to understand the phenomenon. Viljanen (2025) expanded to the Arctic setting of Finnish Lapland, but overall research in the area remains limited, particularly regarding return among seasonal workers. Lastly, Pahkamaa & Salmenkorva (2014) included full-time workers in their sample, whereas Veijola & Paakkonen (2014) included first-year workers. Thus, there is an opportunity to extend the research to returning seasonal workers in Finnish Lapland without forgetting Generation Z.

1.3 Purpose of the research

This study focuses on understanding the experiences of returning seasonal workers and on why they may choose to return to the same employer for several winter seasons. The context to keep in mind is Generation Z seasonal workers employed in Finnish Lapland during winter. To better understand the multiple roles seasonal workers may have, a case study was conducted at Snowhotel family. Although seasonal employment around Lapland has been characterized by high turnover and short-term employment due to limited seasonality (Harju-Myllyaho et al., 2020, pp. 63-65), the case company has achieved high return rates, such as 86% for season 2025-2026 (S. Ristiluoma, personal communication, October 11, 2025). Previous studies on seasonal jobs and Lapland have focused on the nature of seasonal work across different contexts (see Brennan, 2018; Pahkamaa & Salmenkorva, 2014; Veijola & Paakkonen, 2014), but the concept of returning has not been addressed. Another consideration is the limited research conducted among Generation Z in Finnish Lapland. Taken together, this study attempts to fill the gap in the limited research on Generation Z as returning seasonal workers in Finnish Lapland. Additionally, there is an intent to share these real-life experiences to provide a better understanding for those working in management around seasonal work. With these insights, development plans could be implemented to improve the experiences of Generation Z seasonal workers and remove the stigma that seasonal work is not worth trying.

To better understand the phenomenon, certain theoretical concepts are used. The first is motivation, as the study focuses on understanding what motivates Generation Z seasonal workers to stay with the same company for more than one season. Motivation will be discussed through the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). According to the theory, strong motivation is likely when it is intrinsic and built on experiences of three inner needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When these needs are met in a work environment, employees are expected to feel motivated and well. In this study, the three needs are used as a guiding lens to determine whether their presence explains participants' motivation.

To clarify, this study focuses specifically on employee behavior, which is why retention is not used as a primary concept. This term refers to the company's HR operations and requires managerial insight, which is not the study's primary aim. However, it is relevant to remind how retention is the outcome of returning (McCole, 2015). Thus, literature with the word 'retention' has been used to gain an understanding of the main phenomena, but it is not the main concept.

Lastly, two concepts are relevant to understanding the study's context: Generation Z and seasonal work. Generation Z refers to the demographic group under study, and literature on this group's experiences and values helps explain how they may interpret seasonal employment. Seasonal work, by contrast, describes how seasonality is experienced and outlines common characteristics in the literature, such as short-term contracts, intense work hours, and a tendency toward staff turnover (Harju-Myllyaho et al., 2020, pp. 64-65). These concepts are not frameworks but provide context for explaining why Generation Z may find seasonal work appealing and return for several seasons.

Based on these theoretical concepts, the aim of the study is to understand why Generation Z seasonal workers return to the same employer for multiple seasons in Finnish Lapland. The main research question for the study is: **Which factors motivate Generation Z seasonal workers to return to the same employer in Finnish Lapland?**

Sub-questions to support the aim and the main research question are:
1) How do autonomy, competence, and relatedness at work impact Generation Z seasonal workers' decision to return?
2) What aspects of seasonal work do Generation Z consider encouraging or discouraging in their decision to return?

1.4 Methodology

This study is guided by the interpretive social sciences paradigm. Under this paradigm, the

phenomenon is understood to have multiple realities rather than a single causal relationship and is characterized by subjectivity (Jennings, 2010, p. 40). Traditionally, data is collected in real-world settings, especially to gather insider perspectives (Jennings, 2010, pp. 40-41). Accordingly, the research was conducted as a case study at Snowhotel Family, as the researcher had worked there the previous season and was working there during the research. This approach suits the study, as the aim is to collect material from Generation Z seasonal workers and, through their own experiences, understand why they return to the same company for another season.

For this research, empirical data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The material consisted of eight interviews conducted from December 2025 to February 2026. Participants were members of the defined Generation Z group, born between 1995 and 2010, and had worked two or more seasons at the case company. After data collection, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using directed content analysis. In this method, theory guides the process with set themes but does not limit the creation of new ones if the theory does not explain all the findings (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2011, p. 93). The analysis was guided by Self-Determination Theory, and additional categories outside the theory were also created. In the research process, ethical considerations were followed in accordance with the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2025). The details of the ethics and analysis are discussed in a methodological chapter.

1.5 Structure of the study

The first chapter offers an introduction to the thesis, previous research, the purpose, and the chosen methodology. The second chapter presents the theoretical background, moving from motivational studies to Self-Determination Theory. The theory is explained in sections to make it easier to understand, covering the three needs and intrinsic motivation. The limitations and applicability of the theory are discussed to justify its use in this thesis. The third chapter sets the specific context of the study, Generation Z and seasonal work. The chapter guides through the most formative events for Generation Z to understand their values before introducing employee characteristics. The chapter then explores seasonality

as a phenomenon, characteristics of seasonal work, and seasonal work in Finnish Lapland. Generation Z and seasonal work are briefly discussed together to identify potential factors that could motivate this generation for seasonal work. The fourth chapter presents the methodology, including the case company's background, the use of semi-structured interviews and directed content analysis, and ethical considerations. The analysis of results is in chapter five. Chapter six discusses the findings by evaluating the aim and research questions in relation to the prior research. The chapter summarizes the study's results and contributions. The final sections discuss the study's limitations and provide recommendations for future research.

2. MOTIVATION THROUGH SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

2.1 Motivation at work

Motivation shapes human behavior by involving internal and external factors that drive our actions toward specific aims (Nieżurawska, 2023, p. 7). In the context of workplace motivation, several theoretical models have attempted to explain it. One traditional model is Skinner's instrumentality theory, which posits that work motivation is primarily financial or driven by the avoidance of punishment (Mennes, 2023, p. 79). While money is one motivational factor in choosing seasonal work (see, e.g., Heiskanen, 2025), it does not explain why seasonal workers choose to return to one employer over another when payment options are equal. Another consideration of what drives work motivation is content theory, the most well-known example of which is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. According to this, motivation arises from the fulfillment of a sequence of needs, progressing from basic psychological needs to a deeper sense of self-fulfillment (1954, as cited in Armstrong 2006, pp. 257-258; Guo, 2023). However, the model has received criticism for not accounting for the possibility that needs may not progress in a fixed order, as priorities may differ between individuals (Armstrong, 2006, p. 258). If Generation Z were analyzed with this model, it could limit explanations that account for individual experiences.

Luckily, some models focus more on the individual, such as process theories. According to expectancy theory, motivation depends on whether an individual believes that effort will lead to the desired outcome (Vroom, 1964, as cited in Armstrong, 2006, p. 259). Equity theory, by Adams, instead considers how an individual is motivated when they experience fairness (Nieżurawska, 2023, p. 9). Lastly, Latham and Locke's goal theory examines how setting high goals improves performance (Mennes, 2023, p. 56). What these theories lack is consideration of intrinsic motivation. This means that people are motivated by experiences of meaningfulness, whether from completing the job or from finding the task itself enjoyable. In the context of seasonal work, this limitation is even more relevant, as studies have identified the intrinsic side as a key to returning, such as place attachment (McCole, 2015; Thulemark, 2017), social belonging (Heiskanen, 2025; Lundberg et al.,

2009), and personal growth (Lundberg et al., 2009). Therefore, the next section discusses how Self-Determination Theory could be used to examine the intrinsic side further.

2.2 Self-Determination Theory

In this thesis, the guiding theoretical framework is Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT was developed by Deci and Ryan in the 1970s and originally emerged from discussions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In the 1960s, cognitive theories became a focus of research, with an individual's goal as the main motivator. However, SDT instead emphasized intrinsic motivation, explaining that it is part of being human to engage in activities and pursue connectedness with others (Deci & Ryan, 2000, pp. 228-229). In their view, motivation toward a goal cannot be fully understood without considering development and well-being in the process. Details would be missed if only looking at basic psychological needs, such as those mentioned by Maslow (Deci & Ryan, 2000, pp. 228-229). In other words, SDT looks at both what needs drive a person toward the goal and how social factors impact the process, the conditions described as 'human flourishing' (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 3). Looking at prior research, SDT has been applied across a variety of disciplines, including education, healthcare, sport, and organizational behavior (Guo, 2023). In the work context, research drawing on SDT has found that environments that support employees' psychological needs lead to better engagement (Deci et al., 2017; Gagné, 2014, p. 22).

2.2.1 Three needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness

In SDT, needs are defined as 'innate psychological nutriments that are essential for ongoing psychological growth, integrity, and well-being' (Gagné, 2014, p. 111). However, the theory does not close out the basic needs required for bodily functioning and safety, such as oxygen, nutrition, water, and freedom from bodily harm (Gagné, 2014, pp. 15-16). Specifically, the theory agrees that these must be fulfilled but goes beyond them by identifying three psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. By paying attention to these three needs, it can be evaluated whether their presence explains why Generation Z seasonal

workers choose to return. The theory claims that when all three are satisfied, development toward the goal, thus motivation, is optimal and healthy. Positive impacts can include curiosity, creativity, productivity, and even compassion for others (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 5). Consequently, an environment that does not support these needs would be considered detrimental to growth and well-being, resulting in passivity, attempts to compensate for what is missing, or frustration (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 229; Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 11).

The first need within SDT is autonomy, which refers to the need to control one's own experiences and actions. Specifically, it involves a sense of voluntary action that highlights free will and the absence of conflict with one's own interests or values (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 10). In a work context, this is reflected in whether different choices are offered, whether initiative is supported, and whether employees can act in ways they personally prefer, with endorsements from those around them (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 10).

The second need is **competence**, referring to the need to be effective and to master new skills (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 11). It can be challenged by too difficult challenges, constant negative feedback, diminished effectiveness, or social comparison that gives a feeling of inadequacy in one's own work (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 11). In a work context diminishing factors can be poor structure, unclear instructions, and a lack of development opportunities to master new skills.

The third need is relatedness: how people feel socially connected through actions that enhance the feeling of being cared for by others and the sense that one's presence matters in the group (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 11). This is the most apparent need to look for in the seasonal work context, as it involves supervisors, colleagues, and even customers.

2.2.2 Intrinsic motivation

As explained earlier, the theory places greater emphasis on intrinsic motivation than on extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to behaviors performed out of genuine interest, where the primary ‘reward’ is the spontaneous feeling of enjoyment and sense of

effectance that accompany the activity itself (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 14). Extrinsic motivation, by contrast, refers to behaviors that result from external incentives, such as rewards, social approval, or the avoidance of punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 14). SDT proposes that if the environment supports the defined needs, intrinsic motivation thrives and is likely to be sustained over the long term. However, SDT does not rule out extrinsic motivation. Instead, it evaluates this using the SDT continuum shown in Figure 1 below.

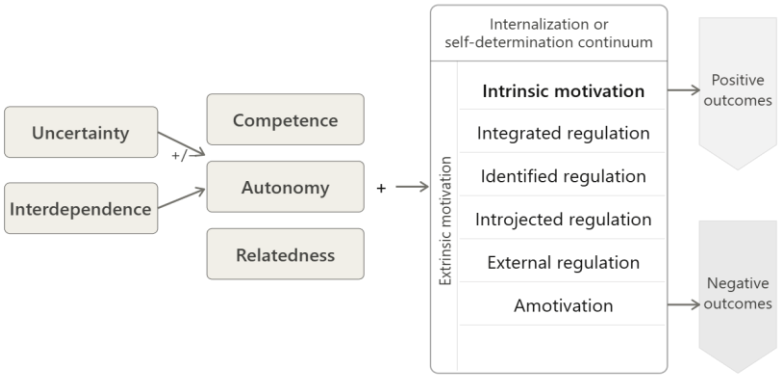

Figure 1. Self-Determination Theory summarized, adapted from Gagné et al. (2022, p. 379)

As shown in Figure 1, the theory's main function is to evaluate motivation based on the experience of autonomy and control. The most negative outcome occurs when the task does not bring any joy, this state is referred to as amotivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 16). At one end is external regulation, where behavior is driven solely by external rewards or pressures, followed by introjection, where internal pressures such as guilt or the desire for approval drive motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 14). Identification reflects a more conscious valuing of the activity, in which the behavior is seen as personally important. At the far end, integration occurs when behavior aligns with the self and values (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 15). Lastly, autonomy is the extent to which an individual acts of their own free will, rather than feeling controlled by external factors (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 14). In this study, the continuum (see Figure 1, p. 15) will be used in some parts of the analysis because reasons for returning may reflect both external incentives and internalized values. However, psychological needs serve as the primary framework for analysis.

2.2.3 Limitations of SDT in research

When applying the theory to a seasonal work context later, possible limitations are considered. First, the most commonly raised criticism is the emphasis on autonomy. According to Markus and Kitayama (1996, as cited in Gagné, 2014, p. 23), autonomy is evident in individualistic cultures. It cannot be considered a universal need but rather something learned within one's culture. In research, definitional misunderstandings can explain this: some understand autonomy as independence or individualism, whereas SDT highlights volition, choice, and the endorsement of one's actions (Deci & Ryan, 2014, p. 23). Research comparing cultures, such as a study comparing India and the United States, supports the view that volition influences well-being regardless of cultural context (Miller et al., 2011, as cited in Deci & Ryan, 2014, p. 23).

The second consideration concerns extrinsic rewards. Gerhart and Fang (2015) suggest that tangible incentives are necessary in the workplace to improve performance and that free-choice intrinsic motivation is not relevant at work. The SDT authors agree that payment is necessary for work to occur and that external incentives are part of the evaluation of motivation, but they argue that extrinsic incentives tend to improve the quantity of work, not its quality (Deci et al., 2017; Mennes, 2023, p. 137). Given this, SDT needs can be relevant in explaining reasons for returning, as salary alone is unlikely to be the main reason. Lastly, SDT, as a theory, has a positive focus; this means the needs are better at explaining positive outcomes than negative ones (Van den Broeck et al., 2016, p. 1219). Since this thesis aims to examine the positive outcome of returning, the SDT focus is appropriate. For this study, SDT provides a guiding framework rather than a predictive model.

2.2.4 SDT applicability in tourism research

In selecting a theory relevant to tourism research, the following was reviewed. Regarding employees, SDT has been applied primarily in the hotel industry. Studies have examined how satisfied needs predict creativity among hotel workers (Hon, 2012) and how intrinsic

motivation improves hotel employee engagement (Grobelna & Wyszkowska-Wróbel, 2023). SDT has a strong focus on workers' well-being, which aligns with Viljanen's (2025) research findings on reasons to return, suggesting that this theory could be useful for the research aim. Additionally, Generation Z has been studied using SDT, but the focus has been on customers rather than workers. For example, Jiang et al. (2025) applied SDT to understand how to engage Generation Z in cultural heritage tourism, and their findings identified new experiences as the main motivation. Gu et al. (2026) used SDT to gain insights into sustaining participation in mountaineering sport tourism. They identified several motivational drivers, such as recognition with feedback, support, autonomy, and the experience of flow.

In a work context, Krishna and Agrawal (2025) compared intrinsic and extrinsic motivations between Millennials and Generation Z, with Generation Z standing out for the moral importance of work and greater autonomy. In the context of seasonal work, Lynch et al. (2023) applied SDT to understand staff members' intention to return to summer camps. However, SDT has been used very little in seasonal work, and Generation Z as seasonal workers has not been studied earlier in relation to SDT. Given this limitation, SDT was chosen as the framework for further insight. In addition, SDT provides a clear framework to follow with the three needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which will be used later in the analysis.

3. GENERATION Z AS SEASONAL WORKERS

3.1 Generation Z

To build an understanding of Generation Z, it is necessary first to explain what the concept of 'generation' is. Mannheim defined it as 'a group of people of the same age in a similar social location experiencing similar social events' (1952, as cited in Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021, p. 490). In research, generational cohorts can serve as a guideline, creating a framework for grouping people born at similar times and for evaluating common attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics (Mahmoud et al., 2021, p. 194). In practice, birth years have been the most common way to group generations, such as Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1981), and Generation Y (1982-1994) (Nieżurawska, 2023, pp. 13-14). Following these generations comes Generation Z, the focus of this thesis.

The year of birth for Generation Z varies across studies, but the most consistent definition places its onset in the mid-to-late 1990s (Iorgulescu, 2016; Krishna & Agrawal, 2025; Nieżurawska, 2023). In this study, Generation Z is defined as those born between 1995 and 2010 (Gu et al., 2026). This birth range serves as a practical limit for identifying the group in later data collection. As a reminder, because birth years vary across studies, generational cohorts cannot be treated as definitive facts, as they may overlap, especially when examining the end of one cohort and the start of another (Parry & Urwin, 2011). For example, 1995 may be considered the birth year of Generation Y rather than Generation Z, as evidenced by some studies (e.g., Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Krishna & Agrawal, 2025).

However, it is not only the age that one should focus on for understanding a generation. Howe and Strauss (1991, as cited in Gorenak et al., 2025) note that political, social, or economic events that typically occur during adolescence affect value development. Considering the adolescent years, Generation Z comprises currently of those aged 16 to 31 (born between 1995 and 2010), so their formative events may have occurred not long ago. The next section examines the formative events that shape Generation Z's values.

3.2.1 Formative life events

For those born between 1995 and 2010, major life events have shaped their attitudes and values. The first is the 'Digital Evolution,' as the internet took over the world and technology became an inevitable part of this generation. Some in Generation Z have never known a world without the internet, social media, and constant connectivity (Gu et al., 2026; Krishna & Agrawal, 2025). Social media has become a tool not only for communication but also for building identity, making it a defining part of this generation (Seemiller & Grace, 2019, pp. 69-70). Additionally, they are among the first to experience AI in education and to adapt to its use naturally (Deloitte, 2025).

Economic uncertainty has also been a defining feature of the formative years. The financial crisis of 2007 to 2009, better known as the Great Recession, left some with memories of laid-off parents or financial instability, including the fall of the stock market (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p. 55). More recently, rising inflation and the cost of living have affected the sense of security and impacted the choices made by this Generation (Deloitte, 2025; Koskela, 2026). Competition for available jobs has not eased the pressure either (Iorgulescu, 2016). This context helps explain why financial stability is a priority for Generation Z. However, once financial security is in place, consideration can shift to other motivational factors that explain why one company is chosen over another.

The most defining global event by far is the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic postponed or canceled events, which are usually part of becoming an adolescent, such as graduations and internships (Koskela, 2026; Watkins & Omilion-Hodges, 2025), and delayed entry into working life. With shutdowns and restrictions, many companies were closed, especially in the hospitality sector; many employees were laid off (Leung et al., 2021). With the delay, priorities shifted from work to balancing other aspects of life (Deloitte, 2025; Leung et al., 2021).

Finally, being connected has made this generation aware of its surroundings, even globally. Exposure to events such as terrorism, wars, and natural disasters has shaped values regarding

environmental and social issues (Koskela, 2026). Growing environmental awareness has even created anxiety in two-thirds of the generation, according to Deloitte (2025). As a result, social movements such as 'Fridays are for Future', 'MeToo', and 'BlackLivesMatter' have emerged (Koskela, 2026; Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021; Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p. 58). Most recently, Generation Z has been in the news, with demonstrations globally protesting corruption, inadequate income, healthcare, and education, as well as the growing income gap (Hannula, 2025). Thus, this willingness to act when conditions do not align with one's values is likely to carry over into the workplace.

3.2.2 Employee characteristics

Lensen et al. (2025) explain how Generation Z makes decisions strongly on personal values, and this is no different when it comes to choosing employment. Therefore, the values are considered in further detail to explain what an ideal employer could be. The first value discussed comes from constant connectivity to the world and an understanding of current global affairs (Nieżurawska, 2023). This first 'truly global generation' (Iorgulescu, 2016, p. 48) is referred to as valuing 'universalism' according to Sakdiyakorn et al. (2021), which means treating people fairly and equally. Krishna and Agrawal (2025) suggested that transparency in reward distribution can enhance this fairness. However, incentives alone are ineffective if there is no sense of contributing to a meaningful cause, and ethicality is lacking. In tourism specifically, the value of globality can be an attractive factor in recruitment, as it offers opportunities for cross-cultural encounters or even work travel (Goh & Lee, 2018). Ideally, companies would have a diverse labor force that reflects their company values in recruitment (Goh & Okumus, 2020).

Sustainability is also increasingly valued by this generation due to concerns about the environment (Seemiller & Grace, 2019, p. 299), and companies with environmentally friendly practices are likely to influence Generation Z's choice of employer (Deloitte, 2025). Another distinct value is for technology, which is part of daily life and is no different at work. This means expectations that employers should provide digital tools and systems at work, as they can affect efficiency (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Engström et al., 2025).

However, the preference does not mean working only online; Engström et al. (2025) noted that Generation Z favors on-site over remote work, and 83% prefer face-to-face communication according to Seemiller and Grace (2019, p. 61).

However, social presence may not reflect a direct preference for social interaction, as views on teamwork versus independent work vary across studies. Some highlight the value of teamwork, noting that there is an expectation to be friends with co-workers, as collaboration can help achieve both personal and company goals (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Engström et al., 2025). Another view is that independence is relevant as well. Gabrielova and Buchko (2021) state that this generation is more competitive and willing to work independently to achieve better results. Seemiller and Grace (2019, p. 242) add that this independence can cause conflict with previous generations, such as Millennials, who were described as having better collaboration skills. This does not mean Generation Z lacks interpersonal skills, but conflict could be explained by generational differences in preferred communication (Watkins & Omilion-Hodges, 2025). Considering both viewpoints, Barhate and Dirani (2022) offer an appropriate middle-ground response: Generation Z works well in a team when goals are met, but prefers to work independently when they are not. In practice, this means Generation Z needs flexibility in workspace, time, and work form (Deloitte, 2025; Engström et al., 2025; Nieżurawska, 2023).

The flexibility can be considered in the increased emphasis on well-being. This is taken into account when choosing employment options, not to forget the need for stability in career planning (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). Work-life balance is often cited in the context of well-being, as it is associated with higher levels of happiness and, thus, productivity (Deloitte, 2025; Nieżurawska, 2023). Therefore, practical examples are generally known, such as sufficient salary, meaningful work, and personalized benefits tailored to needs, such as health care or commuting support (Deloitte, 2025; Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). These suggestions work with other generations as well. Deloitte's (2025) report explicitly discusses Generations Y and Z together due to their similarities, but what sets Generation Z apart is their expectations. Ernst and Young (2020, as cited in Barhate &

Dirani, 2022, p. 149) mention that work-life balance is expected to be there when work is started, not something that comes through earned experience as a reward.

Further explaining the well-being focus, Generation Z differs from prior generations in its emphasis, especially on mental health (Engström et al., 2015). Admittedly, Generation Y has been discussed in similar terms, with a mental health focus that emphasizes values such as a supportive environment, clear structures, and flexibility (Baum, 2020). However, Seemiller and Grace (2019, p. 145) note that Generation Z is unhappier than previous generations. In practice at work, Generation Z may take mental health breaks more than other generations (Watkins & Omilion-Hodges, 2025). Practices identified as effective for mental health include recognition, well-planned working hours, workplace inclusivity, and fair decision-making (Deloitte, 2025; Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). In addition, clarifying tasks and limits at work can ease the mental burden, which is why managers are highlighted as supporters of improved mental health (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021, p. 496; Nieżurawska & Niemczynowicz, 2023, p. 108).

Managers play a highly influential role for Generation Z. Managers are often viewed as overseers of daily tasks, and this monitoring is not preferred by Generation Z (Deloitte, 2025). Rather, there is a need for mentorship that prioritizes skill development to support career progression. Key skills Generation Z seeks to develop include soft skills, time management, and industry-specific knowledge (Deloitte, 2025). Feedback is seen as essential to development (Nieżurawska, 2023), and hierarchical structures are ineffective because Generation Z wants to be involved (Engtröm et al., 2025). However, Seemiller and Grace (2019, pp. 84-85) explain that a clear chain of command is still respected, but only if a superior is willing to listen to and consider feedback. A trusting relationship with managers reduces resistance to authority (Iorgulescu, 2016). As a suggestion, mentorship programs could be an effective retention strategy for Generation Z (Barhate & Dirani, 2022).

Another distinguishing value of Generation Z is a preference for having fun at work, as they see their job as more than a routine. This sets them apart from the Baby Boomers'

philosophy, “live to work” (Seifert et al., 2023, p. 402). This value requires employers to be flexible to enable it (Nieżurawska, 2023, p. 12). Goh and Okumus (2020) noted that Generation Z views the hospitality field as fun. Therefore, if fulfilled, this preference can explain retention. Ways to create fun at work include designing activities that foster engagement and motivation (Ahmad et al., 2025), such as gamification (Goh & Okumus, 2020).

However, this generation has lived through periods of instability (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). This highlights the value of security, which is most often achieved through financial means (Deloitte, 2025; Iorgulescu, 2016). Some studies suggest that experiences of sudden changes in the world have resulted in a pragmatic and cautious mindset (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). However, another consideration is that security is pursued alongside growing competencies, such as a sense of achievement (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021) and a strong desire to learn more (Deloitte, 2025; Iorgulescu, 2016; Krishna & Agrawal, 2025).

In general, work should have purpose and meaning, as without meaning, the focus shifts to financial benefits, and fulfillment is sought outside of work (Deloitte, 2025; Engström et al., 2025). In terms of meaningfulness, Generation Z is motivated by challenges and opportunities to innovate and make a change (Engström et al., 2025; Krishna & Agrawal, 2025; Nieżurawska, 2023). Thus, development and growth are constant needs, and their absence can affect decisions about whether to return (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Iorgulescu, 2016).

Interestingly, the value for money is a matter of opinion. According to Waworuntu (2022, as cited in Krisha & Agrawal, 2025), job security and financial stability are more important than having a purpose, given previous experiences of economic trouble. Mahmoud et al. (2021) explained that money has value when work tasks are unpleasant and noted that Generation Z is more likely to experience this than other generations. Other studies place importance on factors other than money. Engström et al. (2025) mention meaningfulness as

a better motivator, and Goh and Lee (2018) discussed job satisfaction and career progress over salary in the hospitality context. To remind, this generation values learning over salary according to Barhate and Dirani (2022).

Perhaps the most useful summary of Generation Z values in the workplace is the 'trifecta' of money, meaning, and well-being (Deloitte, 2025). These seem ideal for any generation, but Generation Z expects them to be guaranteed in work life, which can be perceived as demanding by other generations (Salmela, 2025). In practice, promotions may be expected sooner than before and learned skills should be applicable quickly (Goh & Lee, 2018; Krishna & Agrawal, 2025). When this does not happen, job hopping is a common outcome. A Deloitte report found that 31% of Generation Z plan to change employers within the next two years; this is seen as a strategy to reach the 'trifecta' while improving opportunities to learn and develop (Deloitte, 2025). However, staying in a job can also be a strategy. Seemiller and Grace (2019, p. 242) note that Generation Z labels itself as loyal to the company. This raises the question of whether the decision to return to the same employer is a matter of loyalty, given that the needs have been met. The next section considers, in more detail, the working environment in seasonal destinations, the seasonal workers who work in them, and the possible motivational factors.

3.3 Seasonality in tourism and seasonal workers

In defining seasonality, one approach is to examine the uneven distribution of visitors over a chosen time period, typically quarters or months (Honkanen, 2017, p. 115). The high periods are known as peaks, and there are usually one or two within a year (Butler & Mayo, 1997, as cited in Honkanen, 2017, p. 116). Peaks arise from two causes, including an imbalance in tourism. Natural seasonality occurs when climatic conditions affect the desire to travel, such as snowy conditions in Lapland during winter and warm weather in southern Europe (Honkanen, 2017, p. 116). Institutional seasonality, by contrast, is shaped by human decisions and social practices, such as the fixed dates of summer break and public holidays, which define the peak (Honkanen, 2017, p. 116). This can be experienced through increased recruitment during holiday periods (Arasli & Arici, 2019). In Finnish Lapland, the peak

results from a combination of factors: in December, snow is usually present, and many people also have Christmas holidays at the same time.

During the peak season, companies are unlikely to hire permanent staff and instead hire seasonal workers, defined as ‘a worker who worked one part of the year for a particular employer’ who works either the summer or winter operation period at the destination (Lee & Moreo, 2007, p. 149). Given the limited season, short-term contracts are understandable, but they also make it easier to lay off people as needed. As a result, high turnover has been described as the norm in seasonal destinations, posing a challenge for recruitment (Arasli & Arici, 2019; Goh & Lee, 2018). Overall, employment in seasonal destinations is not considered sustainable without adequate income and stability (Baum, 1999).

Seasonal workers differ from full-time staff in key ways that affect management planning. They may change employers more quickly if dissatisfied, or at least once the season has ended (McCole, 2015). This challenges recruitment, as employment changes can occur on short notice. Another consideration is the stigma associated with low-skilled work (Rantala et al., 2019), though this does not apply to all cases. For example, Heiskanen (2025) studied professional ski instructors who possessed specific skills required for their seasonal work. In Arasli and Arici's (2019) study, 59% of participants held a higher education degree while working at a hotel front desk. This suggests that seasonal employees may be overqualified for the roles but accept them when employment opportunities are limited (Arasli & Arici, 2019).

However, some workers may find seasonal work attractive because of its limited duration. Walker et al. (2020) discussed the motivations for seasonal work and identified two categories: voluntary seasonal workers and involuntary seasonal workers. For voluntary seasonal work, some may find the seasonal environment motivating, as it offers opportunities to meet new people (Lundberg et al., 2009; Thulemark, 2017). Seasonality can also be a lifestyle choice. Heiskanen (2025) discussed how ski instructors are professionals by trade, and seasonal conditions offer opportunities to practice their skills. Involuntary

seasonal work, by contrast, occurs when full-time work would be preferable but is unavailable (Walker et al., 2020). For example, seasonal employees have been described as non-local (McCole, 2015), possibly due to higher salaries abroad, which creates the need to migrate. In these cases, seasonal work provides financial support until more permanent jobs are available or the local economy does not support enough.

Seasonal work has been widely discussed, especially among younger workers. Harju-Myllyaho et al. (2020, p. 65) reported that in 2019, 30% of tourism workers were under 26 years old. This may reflect that seasonal jobs offer an opportunity to gain work experience when full-time positions are limited or require prior experience (Arasli & Arici, 2019). However, seasonal work has most often been an option for students to earn income during school holidays (Lee & Moreo, 2007). Seasonal work can also be attractive because it offers the possibility of travel, especially when farther from home (Rantala et al., 2019). Yet seasonal work is not always the most attractive option for young workers, as it is short-term and may be seen as a 'stepping stone' on the way to permanent positions (Harju-Myllyaho et al., 2020, p. 65).

Additionally, the nature of seasonal work can be challenging. There is insecurity because employment periods are usually short-term, and work schedules may change on short notice (Brennan, 2018; Honkanen, 2017; McCole, 2015). Because these positions are low-skilled, they can feel easy to replace, adding pressure to perform well, while those who want to develop their skills may not feel a sense of achievement as easily (Alverén et al., 2012; Lundberg et al., 2009; Rantala et al., 2019). With the pressure to deliver the best customer experience, days can be long, with constant customer contact, and there may be little personal time to recover (Heiskanen, 2025). Another stressful factor on top of this can be responsibility for customer safety, depending on the role (Valkonen, 2009).

The most frequently cited challenge is salary, which has been described as low and has led to turnover (Alverén et al., 2012; Heiskanen, 2025; Lundberg et al., 2009). However, the decision to leave is usually in combination with other factors, such as a lack of challenges

and development (Dickson & Huyton, 2008, as cited in Heiskanen, 2025), especially in organizations with old-fashioned ways, which may be seen to slow development due to a lack of innovation (Heiskanen, 2025). Management can further fail by ignoring workers' needs and maintaining poor communication (Arasli & Arici, 2019). Across studies, the lack of social connections was the most likely reason to consider leaving, as without a sense of community within the workplace, there was no motivation to return (see e.g. Alverén et al., 2012; Heiskanen, 2025; McCole, 2015; Lundberg et al., 2009; Thulemark, 2017). Thus, reasons not to return for another season include several considerations and are unlikely to be explained by a single issue.

Research has offered some basic insights into what may drive retention. For example, the role of supervisor support has been studied in relation to seasonal employees' engagement and the likelihood of returning (Arasli & Arici, 2019; Walker et al., 2020). Support for short-term seasonal workers was highlighted, as clarification of their role could ease stress and improve performance (Arasli & Arici, 2019). Another consideration is that job satisfaction is more effective than supervisor support in predicting the intention to return (Alverén et al., 2012; McCole, 2015). Job satisfaction builds on several elements: the work environment, organizational culture, and social surroundings (McCole, 2015). The work environment encompasses both social and physical conditions, such as open communication with other members and the quality of the tools and premises used in work (Lee & Moreo, 2007). The work environment can be improved by providing shared housing, which is common in seasonal areas due to limited accommodation (McCole, 2015; Thulemark, 2017). Organizational culture, instead, consists of management, especially supervisors, who can offer opportunities for development through responsibility and feedback, thereby improving the work environment and increasing motivation to return (Arasli & Arici, 2019; Lundberg et al., 2009).

However, the strongest indicator of return has been described as the atmosphere created by social surroundings, referred to as 'sense of community' (McCole, 2015), 'seasonal family' (Heiskanen, 2025), or 'the social bubble' (Thulemark, 2017). The issue is that work-related

issues can undermine this social effect (Heiskanen, 2025). To conclude, efficient organizations consider the overall experience of their seasonal workers and create an atmosphere that encourages them to return for another season.

3.4 Seasonal work in Finnish Lapland and Generation Z

The literature on seasonal work in Finnish Lapland identifies specific roles, but the studies highlight characteristics that can be applied more broadly to understand seasonal work in the area, as well as the potential challenges and opportunities for Generation Z seasonal workers. One evident characteristic is the presence of snow due to our Arctic location, and some seasonal roles are even built around it, such as snow and ice construction in companies specializing in snow hotels and ice restaurants (Rantala et al., 2019). For workers arriving from areas without this element, it can be both new and challenging. Brennan (2018) described in his study how seasonal workers on a husky farm enjoyed the sense of adventure while enduring cold temperatures, especially during outdoor work. However, other challenges beyond difficult weather conditions included long days and stress (Brennan, 2018), which are also present in other seasonal roles.

Roles that involve active interaction with tourists are especially stressful in seasonal work. For example, Valkonen (2009) studied safari guides, whose work involves leading groups, either alone or in teams, and includes customer service, experience creation, time spent outdoors, and operating technical equipment, such as snowmobiles. Despite being described as low-income, these positions require skill management, commitment, and flexibility (Valkonen, 2009). Rantala et al. (2019) noted additional pressure when working specifically as a Northern Lights guide, due to late working hours, challenging driving conditions, and the mental burden of keeping up spirits when there is no guarantee of the lights.

The mental side of seasonal work is a common factor across different roles. It has been studied further through the lens of emotional labor, which involves maintaining a professional customer-service persona, even when one's own feelings would be the opposite

(Veijola & Paakkonen, 2014). Veijola and Paakkonen (2014) explicitly studied the role of an elf, which is most practiced in the Arctic Circle area around Rovaniemi, where Santa Claus Village and Santa Park are located. However, in general, seasonal workers play a role in upholding the holiday spirit in busy and sometimes stressful environments (Pahkamaa & Salmenkorva, 2014). The study described how a lack of a common language with tourists can make it challenging to maintain the role (Veijola & Paakkonen, 2014). In addition, there are cultural differences that workers need to adjust to. For example, participants in the study by Pahkamaa and Salmenkorva (2014) described how Russian tourists expect service in their own language, whereas British tourists were happy to be kept up to date with possible changes. Seasonal workers need to adapt constantly, but ways to overcome these challenges include positive feedback, meaningful customer interactions, and moments of success (Veijola & Paakkonen, 2014).

Emphasis on training could improve the working experience, but studies have identified challenges. Veijola and Paakkonen (2014) described how a lack of communication during training left elves uncertain about their roles. Similarly, in some roles, such as guides, training may be brief because companies may expect prior experience (Rantala & Valkonen, 2011). This adds pressure to quickly adapt new skills. In addition, people with limited experience may be tasked with training others, or workers may be left alone to lead safaris without guidance (Brennan, 2018). In these cases, seasonal workers struggle to build competence due to a lack of support. Beyond training, the peak season can add to the pressure. Christmas time can be demanding both physically and mentally, as days can be long, rest is limited, and flexibility is expected (Brennan, 2018; Pahkamaa & Salmenkorva, 2014).

Seasonal work can be stressful and intense, but the most cited reason some workers may not return is working conditions, often described as ’precarious working conditions’, in which workers are in vulnerable positions (Brennan, 2017). Recently, cases in Finnish Lapland have illustrated this in practice. For example, a seasonal worker described sharing a house with 25 other workers while paying overpriced rent (Auvinen, 2025). Housing is limited in

Finnish Lapland, prompting shared accommodations as a solution, but implementation varies across companies, and some workers may struggle with shared rooms or living with people with different habits (Auvinen, 2025; Brennan, 2018; Savusalo, 2026). As a result, the stress does not end when the shift does. Other issues mentioned by the Finnish Service Union PAM include violations of working hours, salary issues, and unsafe vehicles used to perform the jobs (Auvinen, 2025). In the most unfortunate outcome, a guide died during a snowmobile safari tour in Rovaniemi. Seasonal workers reported that the employer had not paid attention to safety and that they were sleep-deprived, working 10- to 16-hour days (Pöyhönen, 2024). This extreme case is rare, but it underscores the stigma of seasonal work as risky and not worth pursuing further.

However, some companies are responding to the challenges, which may encourage people to return. These actions are concrete and address safety, housing, and recognition. For example, safety trainings have now been conducted in English as well, whereas previously they were only in Finnish (Pöyhönen, 2025). This helps include non-Finnish speakers in knowledge sharing. New accommodations have also been built to address the lack of proper housing (Savusalo, 2026). Some companies recognize the intensity of the work and offer bonuses, such as a company-sponsored trip abroad at the end of the season (Kuivas, 2024).

Despite the lack of studies on Generation Z seasonal workers in Finnish Lapland, the reviewed literature highlights connections between what Finnish Lapland can offer and what Generation Z values. First, the challenges are discussed. For example, cases reported in the media are opposite to Generation Z's values of equality and fair treatment (Goh & Lee, 2018; Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). Another challenge is inflexible work schedules due to high demand, and tasks may become repetitive over time, such as taking guests out by car as a guide. This is contrary to studies reporting a preference for flexibility, varied tasks, and development opportunities (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). Generation Z workers were reported to value mentorship and support (Deloitte, 2025), yet studies in Finnish Lapland found instances of a lack thereof, creating uncertainty (see Veijola & Paakkonen, 2014; Brennan, 2018). Thus, seasonal work in Finnish Lapland can be at odds

with Generation Z's values and expectations in some cases. If companies do not offer a variety of tasks, time to rest and recover, and clear instructions, the likelihood of remaining a seasonal worker may be low.

However, opportunities could also be recognized. First, the Arctic location is unique yet international, meaning cross-cultural encounters are likely and align with Generation Z's interest in globalism and diversity (Goh & Lee, 2018). The available roles offer opportunities to learn new skills and develop through challenges, all of which are considered valuable for Generation Z (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Iorgulescu, 2016; Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). Additionally, roles are usually on-site and mention teamwork, which Engström et al. (2025) highlight as preferable for Generation Z. In the best cases, there can be opportunities for achievement (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021) and meaningfulness (Engström et al., 2025). For example, the elves described moments of success from meaningful customer encounters, such as helping to arrange a proposal in an ice gallery (Veijola & Paakkonen, 2014), and Brennan (2018) mentioned a 'sense of adventure' in the jobs when the Northern Lights appeared during husky tours, offering a once-in-a-lifetime moment. With these considerations, Finnish Lapland can be an ideal destination for Generation Z, as long as the challenges are addressed and there are opportunities to learn something new in an international environment and grow as a person.

4. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Together with the theoretical framework and the study's aim, the study is guided by a paradigm. A paradigm is ‘a basic set of beliefs that guides action, whether of the everyday garden variety or action taken in connection with a disciplined inquiry’ (Guba, 1990, p. 19, as cited in Jennings, 2010, p. 20). In this study, the guiding paradigm is the interpretive social sciences paradigm, in which a phenomenon is understood to have multiple realities rather than a single causal relationship (Jennings, 2010, p. 40). This paradigm suits the aim of understanding why Generation Z seasonal workers return, as it remains open to several explanations throughout the study. Different workers may return for different reasons, and this paradigm helps account for those differences. In addition, the research questions (see Appendix 1, pp. 76-77, and Appendix 2, pp. 78-79) were designed as semi-structured to allow open responses. In the process, knowledge is subjectively co-created between the researcher and the subject (Jennings, 2010, pp. 40-41). Additionally, the researcher usually collects empirical material in a real-world setting to understand the insider perspective (Jennings, 2010, pp. 40-41). Both suit the study, as participants can describe their individual experiences of choosing to return. In addition, the researcher has prior experience at the case company, providing an insider perspective.

Given the chosen paradigm, the study was conducted as a qualitative study. Qualitative research in the social sciences uses methods to collect data on activities, events, occurrences, and behaviors to understand actions, problems, and processes within their social settings (Phillimore & Goodson, 2004, p. 22). Personal experiences cannot be fully captured by quantitative measures, which focus on numerical data from a wider population and on testing hypotheses (Jennings, 2010, p. 42; Phillimore & Goodson, 2004, p. 22). Because this study aims to understand individual experiences from the employee perspective, a qualitative approach is more appropriate than a quantitative one. Additionally, previous research has explored the topic quantitatively through surveys (see, e.g., Aggarwal et al., 2022; Alverén et al., 2022; Krishna & Agrawal, 2025; Lundberg et al., 2009; Marjerison et al., 2025). While the findings discussed ways to increase job satisfaction, such as responsibility, feedback, autonomy, wages, and social factors, they did not provide

subjective explanations. For example, the findings do not describe in detail how individuals experience these factors or define what they mean to them. Therefore, this qualitative study can provide new insight by describing these missing subjective experiences.

4.1 Empirical setting: Snowhotel Family

In Finnish Lapland, there are a variety of companies suitable for an empirical case study. However, convenient access was provided by Snowhotel Family, as the researcher of the thesis had worked there the previous season. As background, the company, established in 2008 by the owners, Heidi and Ville Haavikko, in Rovaniemi, is a family business. The company began with a snow hotel in Lehtojärvi, better known as Arctic Snowhotel & Glass Igloos. This location offers experiences with snow and ice, such as spending the night in either glass igloos or snow rooms (Snowhotel Family, 2026a). During the daytime, the area is open to visitors, who can see the rooms and the snow art inside. It also offers dining at an ice restaurant, a Log restaurant, and a Kota restaurant. The company has also expanded to Santa Claus Village, with Snowman World, a snow-themed amusement park offering dining options similar to those at Lehtojärvi's. However, it is especially popular among families, featuring ice slides, a skating rink, a labyrinth, and an ice disco with snowman mascots (Snowhotel Family, 2026a). The area also includes a separate indoor café, Café Ensilumi. The newest expansion is Piparina, previously known as the Santamus restaurant. The area consists of gingerbread houses that visitors can rent for a day or dine in (Snowhotel Family, 2026a).

Employment grows from about 70 permanent staff to about 260 during winter, including both Finnish and international recruitment (Snowhotel Family, 2026b). The season begins in September with the opening of the glass igloos, while the snow hotel and Snowman World are built in November and both open around December. The season's end is considered to be in late March, as the premises begin to melt, and visitor numbers decrease. Piparina is a new experiment to extend the season; it is closed from April to June and then reopens.

Seasonal roles vary and include receptionists, sales staff, chefs, waitresses, guides, cleaning

personnel, front desk staff, and even more fun titles, such as ‘Fun Crew’, who take care of the Snowman World premises. Even with workers spread across the premises, there are shared values officially stated in the company’s strategy: honesty, professional pride, respect, and having fun at work (Snowhotel Family, 2026b). The goal was to be the most attractive employer and partner in Lapland's tourism industry, and this was achieved in 2025, as the company ranked third overall among Finnish mid-sized companies in the Great Place to Work survey (Tynkkynen, 2025). It was noted that a tourism company reaching top positions in this ranking is rare, highlighting the achievement as something out of the ordinary: tourism can be a good place to work, and social sustainability is possible. With the company's ambitious goals and the recognition received, there was interest in conducting further analysis to understand how experiences are shaped across several seasonal roles.

4.2 Data collection: Semi-structured interviews

At the beginning of the study, a request was sent to the company's representative for permission to conduct the study. The request was accepted, and the study took shape as a case study. A case study is ‘an empirical inquiry investigating a temporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context’ (Yin, 2009, as cited in Jennings, 2010, p. 185). As a methodology, participant observation was considered to gather this real-life context. The researcher also worked at Snowman World in a seasonal role during the study period. However, it was not included as a method because the researcher had worked at the company the previous season, which provided prior knowledge of the context.

In this study, empirical data were collected through semi-structured interviews. According to Dexter's general definition of an interview (in Jennings, 2010, p. 171), interviews are conversations with a purpose. Oakley (in Jennings, 2010, p. 171) also emphasized the rules to follow and the importance of building trust without the influence of hierarchies. In semi-structured interviews, prompts guided by a topic direct the conversation while allowing flexibility (Jennings, 2010, pp. 174-175). In this study, the prompts were designed around the central topics of seasonal work and motivation, guided by SDT (see Appendix 1, pp. 76-77 and Appendix 2, pp. 78-79). This flexibility can help build trust during interviews and

encourage honest viewpoints compared with the structured interview model. It should be noted that although Generation Z is the group of interest in the study, the questions did not use this term precisely to avoid bias and to prevent leading participants away from their lived experience.

The target group consisted of Generation Z and was limited to those born between 1995 and 2010. A returnee was defined as someone who had worked for two or more seasons at the company. The ideal number of interviews was set at 8 to 10, a common recommendation for qualitative interviews to reach saturation (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2011, p. 99). At the beginning, contact with participants was arranged through the company's representative. It was agreed that a post could be made in the company's WhatsApp group dedicated to free time. Before the post was published, it was reviewed with the representative, and further clarification was added. The emphasis was that participation was voluntary and that the time spent was not counted as paid hours. The post was written in both English and Finnish to allow participation from all nationalities. In the end, two participants reached out through the post.

To reach the target number, the most efficient approach was to use the researchers' presence at the company and ask around at appropriate times. The best times were during coffee breaks, with no more than one person present to ensure confidentiality. This practice required sensitivity and awareness of the working environment, as the recruiting process could not affect the company's operations in a way that would violate ethical research practices (Jennings, 2010, p. 101). Using this method, five participants were recruited. The final participant was recruited through snowball sampling, in which one participant suggested another potential interviewee (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2011, p. 99).

The interviewing process ran from December 19, 2025, to January 28, 2026. Before the main interviews, a test interview was conducted to evaluate the planned structure, prompts, and language comprehension. The test participant was not from the company to avoid a duplicate interview, but was a returning seasonal worker from Generation Z. During the test interview, it became clear that the language needed to be simplified to improve the flow of

conversation, and some theory-related terms were removed. The test interview also allowed for practicing with a recorder in advance.

In the actual interviews, one was conducted via video call, and the rest were face-to-face, with one held in a booked room at the University of Lapland and the rest at the researcher's home. This was considered a suitable option to provide a calm place for recording and to ease access to the interviews, as many lived nearby. The interviews were expected to last around 30 minutes, but the average was 60 minutes, with the longest at 100 minutes. The longer duration could have resulted from a comfortable atmosphere during the interviews, encouraging participants to share more and take their time. All interviews were recorded with permission, using two separate devices: a phone and a recorder. This was in case of poor voice quality or malfunction, which could have led to the loss of valuable data.

At the end, all participants turned out to be Finnish, so the transcription was done in Finnish using Microsoft Word. The quality of the recordings was good, but Microsoft Word could not recognize all words, especially those derived from dialects. A common mistake in the system was translating ‘mie’ (I) as ‘meidän’ (ours). Therefore, all transcripts were proofread while listening to the recording to confirm that the words had not lost their meaning. In total, around 200 pages were transcribed. The length was increased by the decision to keep filler words, such as ‘umm’, ‘like’, and ‘that’, to remind the researcher of which moments took longer to think through and to avoid losing meaning due to a lack of context. As Hirschauer (2006) notes, the meaning of silence can disappear, and even recordings differ from the actual interview moment. This decision helped interpret the meaning later in the analysis.

The following table (see Table 1, p. 37) summarizes the participants' details. Most were in their third season, but most experienced ones were in their fifth. Half of the participants were in Fun Crew, a role in Snowman World where workers oversee tickets and safety on the premises. Some also did snow building or had supervisory responsibilities. Other participants had more commonly known roles, such as waitress, restaurant supervisor, chef, guide, and ticket sales. The brackets indicate tasks participants performed at the company, but were not their main roles. This helps explain how seasonal roles offer multiple work

tasks even with a limited seasonal duration. A section on student status was added, as this was reported by half of the participants and offered interesting insights into the suitability of seasonal work. Origin details were also interesting, as six were originally from Finnish Lapland, while two had come from Southern Finland for the season.

Table 1. Interview information

Person	Season	Work tasks	Student	Origin
P1	4	Snow building, Fun Crew, Superior role	Yes	Lapland
P2	2	Snow building, Fun Crew, (kitchen helper, waitress)	No	Lapland
P3	3	Fun Crew, (Ticket sales)	Yes	Lapland
P4	3	Restaurant Supervisor, waitress	No	South Finland
P5	3	Chef, (Superior role)	No	South Finland
P6	5	Fun Crew, Snow building, Superior role, (Guide, Waitress)	No	Lapland
P7	5	Ticket sales, (guide, cafe helper, waitress)	Yes	Lapland
P8	5	Guide, coordinator, (ticket sales)	Yes	Lapland

4.3 Analysis method: Directed content analysis

To make the most efficient use of the collected data, the analysis method was chosen with the thesis and its aim in mind. One methodology in qualitative research that is particularly relevant is content analysis. In content analysis, large amounts of data, such as text, are compressed into fewer categories and can be systematically analyzed to identify patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The categories, also known as codes, can be recurring words, themes, or concepts related to the study's topic (Jennings, 2010, p. 208). Because the data had been collected earlier through interviews and were now transcribed, content analysis was chosen as a suitable method.

In content analysis, there are three common approaches: conventional, directed, and

summative. Initially, conventional content analysis was considered, as it is recommended when existing literature on a topic is limited (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279). However, as the review progressed, there were more papers than initially expected. Summative content analysis was also considered, as it focuses on specific words and their usage (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1283). After reviewing the data, the approach could have been problematic because all the interviews were in Finnish, a language rich in conjugations, making it more difficult to count and analyze than English.

In the end, directed content analysis was chosen because SDT already provided a clear guiding framework for the coding process. Kyngas and Vanhanen (1999, as cited in Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1286) mention that, with directed content analysis, existing theory is used to develop initial codes before even beginning to analyze the data. Additionally, the leading questions for the semi-structured interview were already based on this theory. As mentioned by Weber (1990, as cited in Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277), the analytical approach depends on the researcher's theoretical and substantive interests and on the problem being studied. Given the researcher's interest in utilizing the SDT and the aim of understanding the motivation of seasonal workers of Generation Z, directed content analysis was chosen as a suitable method.

In the analysis, the main research question was first reviewed: “Which factors motivate Generation Z seasonal workers to return to the same employer in Finnish Lapland?” This led the researcher to look for motivation in the material more generally. For the first guiding question: “How do autonomy, competence, and relatedness at work impact Generation Z seasonal workers' decision to return?”, SDT provided the three needs as codes to look for: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Simplifying these in practice, the ability to act with one's own will, moments of learning, and the experience of social connectedness. Considering the second guiding question, “What aspects of seasonal work do Generation Z consider encouraging or discouraging in their decision to return?”, SDT’s focus on the three needs limited the ability to answer this, because not all motivational factors in seasonal work could be explained by these needs alone. In such situations, directed content analysis allows the creation of new codes when the theory cannot explain findings relevant to the aim (Hsieh

& Shannon, 2005, p. 1286). This aspect of directed content analysis led to the creation of additional themes alongside the SDT themes: seasonal work as a lifestyle, the impact of high and low seasons, material factors, employment certainty, and the natural environment.

In practice, the analysis proceeded as follows. First, all transcribed interviews were printed, and relevant parts were highlighted in a different color. Software was considered, but on-screen reading lacked sensitivity to the material. During transcript revision, it became clear that leaving all words in, without summarizing or editing, was necessary to help recall the interviews. Once the transcripts had been reviewed, the process of summarizing began. To see the wider picture, the highlighted quotes were cut from paper and attached to the wall with stickers. Color-coding made it easier to summarize all the interviews. In the beginning, there were sections on autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as these were the most straightforward ones from SDT. As the analysis progressed, the questions were revised, and new sections were added, resulting in additional codes mentioned in the earlier paragraph.

4.4 Research ethics

Ethical considerations are important in all research, and this thesis follows the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK (TENK, 2025). In ethical research, the study should not cause harm to anyone, be pleasant to participate in, and leave the research setting neutral (Jennings, 2010, p. 97; TENK, 2025). The first ethical consideration concerns permissions, as participation should be voluntary (Jennings, 2010, p. 99; TENK, 2025). As a first practical step, the company was contacted for permission before proceeding, and a letter of consent was sent to the representative for confirmation. A similar form of consent was used for interviewees before the interviews took place (see Appendix 3, p. 80, and Appendix 4, p. 81). In the forms, the right to withdraw at any time, how the data will be used and by whom, and the right to confidentiality were important to highlight (Jennings, 2010, pp. 98, 109; TENK, 2025). The letter of consent was created using the recommended layout provided by the University of Lapland.

Because the number of employees in the defined Generation Z group was limited, this raised

the question of how to ensure that participants could not be identified from their responses. Given confidentiality concerns, the researcher could match names to respondents, meaning the researcher was personally aware of which participant had stated what (Jennings, 2010, p. 109). In public, the details were anonymized, such as ‘P1’. As the research progressed, it was considered whether company roles should be hidden or the specifics of age and gender disclosed. It was considered relevant to retain roles to highlight the variety of tasks in seasonal work, but specific age and gender were not shared, as they were not relevant to the analysis and could have made participants identifiable. Some quotations included sensitive information, which is why some quotes were left without an identification mark.

In addition, no harm can be caused to anyone during the process, meaning the researcher cannot disturb the environment's natural settings (Jennings, 2010, p. 101). In this study, this meant not interrupting the normal workflow, even if there was an ideal moment to request an interview, because doing so could affect the company’s results, other colleagues, and the visitor's experience. Power position was also considered. Even if not in a managerial position, contact, such as an email from the company to all employees inviting them to take part in research, may be quicker but can create pressure to participate involuntarily (Jennings, 2010, p. 115). This was confirmed as a concern with the contact person, and to avoid it, the researcher created a post in a WhatsApp group meant for free time only, and the content was checked with the contact person before posting. In addition, all collected material was stored on the researcher's computer, protected by a password, and kept anonymized. Lastly, ethical research considers the right to authorship (TENK, 2025). Following this, the researcher has paid attention to citing the original authors to give credit for their knowledge contributions. It is acknowledged that the AI tool Grammarly has been used in this thesis to review the language, and Figure 1 was edited with the AI tool Claude to a simplified format and includes a reference to the original work.

5. ANALYSIS

The analysis is divided into sections based on the needs identified by SDT theory and examines how they are experienced among Generation Z seasonal workers. It also includes an additional section on themes beyond the SDT needs. The first section focuses on autonomy, examining whether free will is present and whether there is a sense of control in seasonal jobs. The second section addresses competence, focusing on learning experiences. The third section examines relatedness and considers the role of social presence in motivating return. Finally, the fourth section discusses other themes that were considered to impact motivation but could not be explained by the SDT framework.

5.1 Autonomy in seasonal work

During the interviews, it became clear that participants experienced autonomy differently, as their roles as seasonal workers varied (see Table 1, p. 37). For example, P6 at the front desk described the job as mostly selling tickets, while those in Fun Crew pushed people down the slides, checked tickets, and maintained the premises by walking around. The guide (P8) had a set time limit for guiding people at the hotel. The chef (P5) prepared portions daily, and the restaurant supervisor (P4) handled orders. The tasks were very different, but similarities began to occur among participants once they worked during the peak. The peak meant December, and all participants noted that tasks became ‘routine’ at that time to serve visitors more efficiently. Routine meant controlled, repeated actions, consistent with other studies describing common characteristics of seasonal jobs (see, e.g., Honkanen, 2017, p. 166; Rantala et al., 2019).

Repeated simple tasks, combined with long days, were described as demanding, especially during the high season: “how many times the same thing must be said before head explodes” (P7), “we tour around the premises, but after 10-11 hours you feel it…” (P1). The repetition can be described as ‘factory-like’ and is said to affect motivation, as there is value in deeper interaction with the customers (Heiskanen, 2025, p. 287).

However, the participants did not describe this feeling of routine negatively in their overall experience, but rather with understanding. For example:

> …sure, tasks can be tiring. I (sometimes) add salmon or elk orders to the computer 300 times (a day). But there's moments when you learn and develop. But all jobs have these tiring parts. (P4)
>
> … (In Fun Crew) there are small things I can do (when pushing customers down the slide), like: do I push with my feet, hands, or both (with the toboggan). But it is something with a routine. Certainly, it needs to be done safely, but overall, no problem for me. (P3)

Looking back at the SDT continuum (see Figure 1, p. 15), the attitude could be explained as the stage of integration, because it makes sense to oneself that some tasks cannot be performed in a variety of ways. Therefore, routine tasks do not negatively affect the sense of autonomy and motivation when they are clearly understood as part of the job.

One participant explained that controlled tasks could even ease the feeling of stress, as they had received clear instructions on how to interact with customers and had set limits to follow:

> Sometimes I like to tell customers my hands are tied, that I can't do anything. So, it's not freedom, but I don't need to take responsibility, and customers won't fight back then. When they know you can't do anything…it's like safety (for me). (P7)

In this case, role limitations could even create a sense of safety and stability. Previous studies identify these as important factors among Generation Z (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021), and seasonal studies also recommend clear instructions to build confidence in daily tasks through structure (Arasli & Arici, 2019; Nieżurawska, 2023, p. 13). This participant (P7) emphasized the clarity of the role, especially its limits, as an encouraging factor in choosing to return, as it made them feel prepared for different customer encounters. The finding provides insight into the experience of integration in autonomy (see Figure 1, p. 15), as control over tasks is based on free will and one's own values, which, for this participant, is safety.

However, the peak with heavier control does not last the full season, and participants also described making their own choices. For example, tasks can be the same, but with different premises (Piparina, Snowman World, and the Arctic Snowhotel). There could be an option

to change the working location occasionally, which kept the work pleasant: “I’d be exhausted if I were in one place as I need change” (P5). Apart from changing premises, days could also be different by choosing own work tasks according to own preferences: “I can affect a lot how my days will be. I can say that I like ice sculpting, so can I go do it? So then I get ice sculpting” (P8). The response shows freedom in work, and it was further explained that there was no strong supervision, which encouraged independent action: “It’s self-imposed, not that anyone runs after you and gives tasks of the day. You know what you gotta do” (P2). The quote supports earlier studies indicating that a lack of micro-management can foster a sense of productivity among Generation Z (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). Here is another example:

> I believe I make independent decisions, that I can go and help the customer as I have time, and then go to the kitchen to carry (some) items as I have time, but also vice versa, I can decide I don’t have time, and now I’ll have my lunch break. (P8)

In this case, the participant could choose their tasks freely, which made them especially relaxed at work. As background, some had worked at other companies with strong control and hierarchy, and experiencing the difference led them to favor a workplace where they have options for flexibility. Findings are similar to other studies (see, e.g., Deloitte, 2025; Ekström et al., 2025) but also demonstrate the fulfillment of SDT's autonomy in practice, as participants have options to choose from.

With freedom as a clear factor in motivation, it was considered how the company’s open value of ‘have fun’ could impact this attitude. Those working in Fun Crew especially highlighted that they have fun even with routine tasks. For example, P6 explained that there are moments when certain information may need to be shared with several customers in a day, but a change in wording or even the use of humor is encouraged, depending on the situation. In addition to creating fun moments with customers, fun could be experienced with colleagues as well:

> (In the kitchen, there are) hundreds of plates when servings are done, (then we put) music on full volume and all do the dishes together…and those are the fun moments, where good stuff happens and tend to live later on. (P4)

In this case, encouragement, especially to have fun, fosters a strong sense of empowerment, which contributes to better motivation through job satisfaction (Arasli & Arali, 2019;

Alverén et al., 2012)

Although the participants appreciated the freedom and flexibility, they agreed it is not a one-way deal. Regarding working schedules, all the interviewees said it was usually possible to get days off, and all emphasized the manager's role in making this happen. Some mentioned this as unusual: “such flexibility is not something to take for granted, especially in big companies” (P5). The quote shows that flexibility on the employer’s side is uncommon. With the possibility to alter schedules, the employees felt motivated to work when needed: “Flexibility is two-way, when the company needs help, employees adjust. And when employees need days off, employers adjust” (P4*).* For example, one person had a child, and, with flexibility, they could spend time with their family, which increased their willingness to work harder because they felt appreciated as a worker. Additionally, it was also acknowledged that some days cannot be free. P7 explained that Christmas Day and New Year's are most often sold out, and that workers are needed on those days. Reasons why working during the holidays was not an issue included that it was discussed clearly before employment began or that the holidays were not considered personally important.

Experience from prior seasons also made it clear that autonomy is not automatic but comes through experience: “as an old worker, you may have more freedom than new, as you know how stuff is done” (P1). A worker was even acknowledged by their manager for having acquired more autonomy: “In the first season development meeting, the superior said: ‘You’ve grown so much, you don’t call me every 2 hours anymore” (P5). The quote illustrates how autonomy is encouraged, along with reduced reliance on a supervisor, a pattern supported by Arasli and Arici (2019, p. 74), as experienced personnel have less supervision. It was explicitly mentioned that the possibility of greater freedom across seasons motivated a return: “it is the ability to make decisions with freedom (which motivates me)” (P5). Freedom is important because it creates a feeling of being trusted and an increased sense of pride in one's own work, as it is then based more on one's own actions. As Hon (2012) points out, having control over one's own decision-making is a key to autonomy and creativity.

Coincidentally, freedom is conditional on performing the job as expected. For example, there was an incident in which freedom was taken away due to a misunderstanding about the correct way to perform a task. The person in the case felt controlled in that situation because they could not perform their job as they had before. This control diminished motivation, which prior research has identified as an outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 10).

5.2 Developing competences in seasonal work

Competence as a need was present in all interviews, highlighting a strong desire to develop. However, it came across as a process in which everyone had to experience their first season before further competence could be built. The first season was described as intensive, especially at the beginning, when everything is new: "It was foggy…but you learned a lot" (P5). What created this feeling in the beginning was from the actualization of how busy seasonal work can be: "It just became realistic, that you work a lot—life is just work in that stage, even when you knew tourism and seasonal work is a lot of work…" (P1). The beginning was a stage all workers go through, but all adjusted and returned for another season. The reason behind this may be that, in the end, the main tasks are simple to practice:

> Learning has changed with each season as new workstations have been added. But now that we have the same ones and some new ones, there's always a way to learn more; the basics remain the same and can be learned quickly. (P1)

In this case, the participant described how the company has developed and offers opportunities to learn more, but they feel confident because the basic characteristics of seasonal jobs remain the same. This feeling of confidence for another season was also mentioned as a reason to return:

> I know I can do the job, and I don't need to be nervous, (for me) it's a routine, or like only a few things could shock (me) or make (me) nervous. So I can be with a certain mindset. (P7)

Safety is also evident in the last quote, as the participant does not need to experience negative emotions because they have confidence in their skills.

Another characteristic that stood out was multitasking. Even if the basics are simple, the

roles required handling multiple tasks. As seen in the earlier summary of participants (see Table 1, p. 37), all had experienced several different roles during their seasons and consequently summarized their work experience accordingly: “No day is the same.” The quote means that seasonal work is unpredictable and teaches multitasking based on the situation. For example, participants from the Fun Crew described in detail how they do basic tasks, such as pushing people down the slides, checking tickets, maintaining snow areas, and fixing snow structures, but may also work as a mascot or, at times, go to other stations, such as helping around the restaurants or taking care of ER incidents. For some of the participants, this possibility of having different days made them especially motivated and was a requirement for work:

> If all days were the same, I couldn’t work there. I require a changing work environment, which also challenges me—For example, I like to have sudden situations, which force me to find solutions (on the spot). (P6)

Another reason changing work environments were seen as motivating was that the tasks taught about priorities in seasonal work: “(At work) you learn what’s most efficient and important—to see differently, not just as a straightforward way but a wider picture (to create the best solutions)” (P5). The quote shows that experiencing several seasons creates a deeper understanding of the practices and enables the participant to think critically. In addition, it shows the need for competence in practice, as there is a need to be effective in one's own work (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 11).

In feeling effective, the most distinct factor driving their motivation was through the experiences of responsibility, which helped to build further competence:

> No matter what I do (in my career), I want to be high up (in the role), I want to develop and learn—why I’d come back again and again is to experience more responsibility. (P3)
>
> …what grows (my) motivation is the possibility to learn and develop—new responsibilities and challenges (drive me forward). (P4)

The quotes strongly support the study of Lundberg et al. (2009), which suggests that offering responsibility can create development and, consequently, motivation to return.

Ericsson et al. (2020) mentioned how responsibility tends to increase with more seasons, and the participants described this in practice and mentioned that it was especially evident

during the second season, when they had returned for the first time:

> In the second season, there was a flu wave. There were no managers (available for the role), so the task came to me a bit by automation. Maybe because of my own role in taking the initiative. (P1)
> (In the second season) I kind of took extra responsibility whenever I could, so I was...well, maybe not a supervisor, but a person who was asked questions and was trusted, taught others—you could sense after that season structure wasn't there (and I filled in). (P6)

In the experiences, it was evident that the seasonal environment is sudden, and flu waves affect management, as does staff turnover. However, both described this as an opportunity to take initiative and responsibility.

Responsibility alone does not motivate; it also needs to be recognized. For example, P6 noted the additional responsibilities during a feedback session with the manager and, as a result, received the official manager role. These feedback sessions at the end of the season, held with managers, were described as opportunities to receive encouragement for their work. As discussed earlier, supervisor support can encourage continued growth in competency (Arasli & Arici, 2019; Deloitte, 2025). In this case, the combination of responsibility and development encouraged a return for another season, as the role had developed and offered recognition of the responsibility. Together, responsibility and development serve as an opportunity and support the intention to return (Lundberg et al., 2009).

A further explanation of why responsibility is important as a motivator is that new tasks give a feeling of importance: "—when something happens suddenly (in Fun Crew), it is nice to be able to act, then you feel important" (P1). Coincidentally, diminished responsibility can create confusion when it is taken away. For example, one participant handled ticket sales alone in the first season and managed the entire area independently. Then they moved to the Fun Crew, where work was organized as a team: "During my first year, I got so much responsibility, it surprised me, but it was nice. Then I moved to another position, and my responsibility was gone" (P3). One explanation for the feeling of disappointment is that responsibility can be important for developing the competencies required in the future.

Another quote suggests similar:

> (I want) more responsibility, that I'm trusted and can be given challenging tasks. I've liked the opportunities to develop—it's like aiming for an upward career, not just being a summer or seasonal worker. (P8)

Additionally, the quote suggests that seasonal work can be a 'stepping stone' on the way to permanent positions (Harju-Myllyaho et al., 2020, p. 65). On the other hand, career development has been identified as a normal expectation among Generation Z (Barhate & Dirani, 2022). Nevertheless, this shows that seasonal work can be motivating, offering the opportunity to develop competence through responsibility before taking full-time positions.

Among the participants, there were practical examples of how their competencies had developed through seasonal work. For example, many mentioned the usefulness of the international encounters:

> (There were Swedish customers in line) I thought for a long time, do I dare? Then I began in Swedish, and they were amazed. I got scared they didn't understand, but they did, and we had the rest of the sales in Swedish. (P3)
>
> I've met and chatted personally with about 1000 people just because of my work. When you think about how many countries and cultures they (customers and workers) come from, well, I've traveled around the world a few times, then. (P6)

As an explanation, studies support cross-cultural encounters as preferable for Generation Z (Goh & Lee, 2018). Here, the quotes show how these encounters improve language skills and cultural understanding.

Other practical skills brought up were managing people, which meant both customers and colleagues:

> I've grown so much through this job. (I have learned) how to talk with customers and what's seasonal work (in practice)—it is one of my first jobs (I have ever had). (P8)
>
> I've grown so much through this job…like it's been 3 years and in that time, I've grown so much, so many skills to working as a supervisor—when I came here I was straight out of school as a waitress… I received so much responsibility and learned how to act with staff and customers, how to motivate staff, and how to organize the job to make it pleasant, also for us waiters, how all works…(I built) identity working as a superior. (P4)

Both participants mentioned the seasonal job as their first job. The experiences demonstrate a valuable learning journey, with participants experiencing a sense of achievement, self-

actualization, and personal development, as suggested by prior studies, and are particularly valuable for Generation Z (Krisha & Agrawal, 2025; Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021).

However, a personal limit could be seen in building competence. As an example, P5 did not act as a supervisor this season and preferred this change:

> This season I don't have responsibility apart from the basics a chef has to do, and it's nice, a bit of change, I get to use my own head and think of other stuff (as well). (P5)

The participant's response suggests that responsibility can also take time away from one's own preferences. Another participant also brought up the idea of a break from responsibility and explained how improved structure within company practices had enabled that break:

> Now it's better (compared to other seasons). Sure, during the first seasons it was nice, with everything being new and having responsibility, but (now) it's nice (not to have responsibility) … not having to know everything.

The quotes offer an interesting consideration of how there can be a limit to pleasurable learning:

> If I take too much (responsibility), I may not be as effective in what I do currently. Therefore, the opportunity to learn new skills may not be tempting (to me) on all occasions. (P6)

Thus, responsibility can extend to the point that it sometimes takes time away from the main task and diminishes one's sense of effectiveness. As a result, responsibility no longer serves as a motivator.

Overall, it is a balancing act of how much responsibility each participant prefers to have. But the primary reason given for returning was the opportunity to keep learning, which strongly aligns with prior studies (Deloitte, 2025; Iorgulescu, 2016; Krishna & Agrawal, 2025). For example, P5 explained that they had returned solely because they knew new premises were coming and saw it as an opportunity to continue learning and to experience something new. One participant also brought up their trust for future learning as the company had developed each season: "I feel it's this company, if any, that can come up with something (new)—the owners get ideas and then start doing them" (P2). Participants had seen this development in practice over the past few seasons, which gave them comfort that there was still a way to keep learning.

However, as a reason not to return, the limit was mentioned. How to keep growing once the basics have been learned? Among the examples, this quote best expressed the shared thought among the participants:

> There should be something new (for the next season), which would challenge you to go beyond the comfort zone—nothing is wrong, but it just becomes a routine. (P1)

Even if the company had developed in the past, there were questions about whether this development would continue next season and whether it would continue to offer opportunities for learning.

5.3 Relatedness, connecting with others

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that relationships strongly influenced the decision to return. The analysis supports SDT's claim that people are motivated by the need to connect with others (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 11). Each participant explicitly mentioned 'people' as the general term and gave similar responses: "It's the only reason I return" (P6). By 'people,' they meant colleagues, managers, owners, and customers.

Regarding colleagues, participants explained that spending time together during the season created a bond:

> We all have had the same things with the job, the same things that bother (us all), and we all know we work long hours, but we also know you're not alone. (P1)

By referring to not being alone, the participant meant that workers experience the season together and share an understanding of the struggles, such as long days. With an emphasis on the time spent together, there was a clear outcome:

> They're not just colleagues anymore; there's true friendship. So much time (spent) together, you learn to know them and recognize if they have bad days or need rest. (P1)

Through those experiences of long days, friendships began to form. A similar finding was reported in a study by Thulemark (2017), which explained that it is the social side of shared experiences that affects group formation and the intention to return.

A specific factor that highlighted the social side was shared housing. Some participants had experienced this during their season and explained how living with other workers added its

own side to seasonal work:

> All come home tired (from work), then release the worst experiences of the day, which helps to move on. I don't think this type of experience can happen anywhere other than in seasonal work. (P4)

The experience shows how housing is a way to share the day's incidents with others who understand the feelings in detail, having worked there as well. Prior studies have discussed the connection between living together and stronger social formations (Lundberg et al., 2009; Thulemark, 2017).

Coincidentally, the downside mentioned by Thulemark (2017) came across among the participants, as spending too much time together can be too intense: "when you work a lot together, even your best friend may annoy you (occasionally)" (P1), "—when I lived with colleagues, it was too much, which is why I'm not there (this season). But it was a good experience" (P5). Together, these quotes show that not having a break from the social side can be a burden as well.

Because colleagues were clearly valued among participants, the discussion then turned to their feelings about staff turnover, a topic that is a distinct part of seasonal work and is discussed across studies (see e.g., Alverén et al., 2012; Arasli & Arici, 2019; McCole, 2015). Reactions varied: "not sure do I want to go on due to change of people" (P1), "If those I work with the most didn't return, it would create uncertainty" (P6). In defining uncertainty, participants described fear of conflict with new people and stress about whether the familiar environment would change. It was considered safer to know the other people and how to work with them efficiently. Another consideration of turnover was that it is part of seasonality: "it's a pity, and you wonder how next season is… but it's nice to get different people" (P7). Together, the quotes imply that staff turnover in seasonal work is not ideal, but it is not the main reason not to return. Rather, it creates uncertainty about the upcoming season, as workers are unsure who the new colleagues will be.

Additionally, those from Southern Finland considered that the change in personnel does not matter. This was because they experienced people in Lapland with common characteristics,

which made work easier across the seasons:

> People are more real, honest, and helpful—People in Lapland are warmer than in the South, not sure if it's winter, to be helping strangers… maybe not a cultural difference, but area-wise, having different people. (P4)
>
> When I talked about my experience in Southern Finland after the first season, some questioned whether it is a good company if even the owners are friendly. I was thinking, isn't it good to have friendly people? (P5)

For these participants, the sense of caring was different and motivated them to return. It remained unclear whether Finnish Lapland or the company created this sensation, but participants described it as precisely the atmosphere, which was said to ease the change of people, as there is trust that all feel and can work together easily. McCole (2015) referred to this experience as a sense of community. As Thulemark (2017, p. 9) notes, it could be the limited time in seasonal work that creates this sense of openness, but it could also be the location in isolated areas.

Another finding regarding colleagues was that the feeling of caring extended not only to one's close colleagues but also to everyone in the company. The participants described this as "a sense of atmosphere," and it was explained as follows:

> People are warm and nice—it's nice when you go to another place (in the company), it doesn't matter if it's a guide, a receptionist, or what they do. We can talk about anything, it's amazing! (P5)
>
> With guides, we get along well, always asking how you are and listening to others. The same is also present with other work groups; we are always helping each other. (P8)

This atmosphere seems to be characterized by openness to talking with anyone and by taking care of each other equally, even if they are new or from other departments.

This brings in the other group that affects relatedness: the managers. Their effect was noticeable in creating connections to the workplace and affecting intention to return, which aligns with findings from Arasli and Arici (2019). One consideration was that time is also spent with superiors, as all are working equally, regardless of the named roles. Those who had worked in superior roles mentioned that they encourage openness within their teams:

> Imagine someone is shyer; it's a heavy feeling if (subordinate) sees the superior as superior only, and they need to be careful what they say, it creates pressure. All should be able to speak freely. (P1)

The quote implies that creating an open atmosphere and a lack of hierarchy is a deliberate choice. To create this equal atmosphere, managers explained that they were deliberate about whom they spent time with: “I spend time with other departments—this way there’s no accidental favoritism” (P4). This action is consistent with Heiskanen (2025, p. 286), who found that favoritism created feelings of inequality and led people to leave the company. The positive outcome of avoiding favoritism was clear among the participants: “Superior is close to me, I can talk about anything and always get help” (P8), “...(superior) comes to ask how I am if my nose is dripping even a tiny bit” (P3), “(superior) called me to check if I’m ok and needed someone to talk with” (P2). It is evident that the participants feel they have a superior they can trust who takes care of their well-being during the season.

One experience highlighted the impact a manager can have and conflicted with the study by Walker et al. (2020), which suggested that full-time jobs are generally preferred over seasonal work. In this case, a participant did the opposite, rejecting a full-time position in favor of a seasonal job: “It would have been a bigger salary, but I said no as managers are what they are” (P2). By referring to managers, the participant meant there were known issues in leadership. Instead of taking that position at another company, he returned for another season despite a lower salary and a limited employment period. As an explanation, Generation Z can value job satisfaction over money (Goh & Lee, 2018). In addition, previous research on seasonal work has shown that wages rarely motivate as much as the fulfillment of inner needs (Lundberg et al., 2009). These quotes further explain their experience in seasonal work and open the meaning of possible inner needs:

> I was hired for this job, and I’m doing it; at the same time, I feel good that they appreciate me. In many places, I could do the same for the same salary, but without appreciation, I don’t think I could work for 6 months… (P2)
> I believe I’m listened to if I note something or if something is bad. I feel I’m heard and there's no need to wonder if I can say my opinion, but in practice, all can be discussed. (P1)

In this case, the inner need comes across as appreciation and openness. The experiences suggest that management's attitude toward workers can affect the intention to return, consistent with prior studies (see Alverén et al., 2012; Heiskanen, 2025).

Further to the impact of management, in all the interviews, an often-mentioned group in the research came up: the owners. Words such as ‘warm’, ‘caring’, and ‘core of the company’ were used to describe them as people who remember workers’ names and check on their well-being. Unlike prior research, owners were described as a regular part of operations, and some participants emphasized the openness they showed. In practice, this meant the opportunity to reach out to them if necessary. For example, one participant had an incident at work and needed help, and the owner came to help:

> I asked whether someone could help me, then the owner came and said, " Let’s have a look and fix it. He had a look, and he said, ‘Oh well, it happened, can’t fix it, but let’s not do it again’. (P6)

The participant described this reaction as very unusual and added that there are places where mistakes can lead to being fired or other punishments. Consequently, some did not consider a change in colleagues impactful, but if the owners left, that caused a moment of pause: “Then I think I would need to consider returning (for another season)” (P4), “Only reason I have not left is that I have trust in our owners” (P6). In defining trust, it meant the belief that the owners respond to feedback, which aligns strongly with Lundberg et al. (2009)'s suggestion that actioned feedback motivates seasonal workers. Some mentioned that if they did not see improvements in response to their feedback, they would not return the next season.

Lastly, the experience of relatedness was also felt among those encountered only briefly: the customers. In defining relatedness, it is evident that it involves a need for care and a sense that one's presence matters (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 11). As participants clearly defined these moments with customers as meaningful encounters, they also extended to relatedness. It is especially the reactions to the unique setting that created lasting memories and were rewarding:

> This season, a lady hugged me as I gave her a suggestion for a restaurant and a number to call (for a reservation). She was grateful that her birthday was special; she got to eat good food and even see the northern lights. (P7)
>
> The encounters with customers, those who ask keenly…and then to see their reactions to food, and to hear their side as a tourist. (P5)
>
> (With tourists) you get to hear their thoughts and stories about their lives, like many of them come from Australia and have never seen snow. Then they come here, and you

may be the first local they meet with. (P8)

The experiences add to studies that discuss the positive impact of customer encounters in seasonal work on a sense of fulfillment, success, and value as a seasonal worker (Heiskanen, 2025; Veijola & Paakkonen, 2014).

5.4 Seasonality as a motivator

During the analysis, additional themes emerged that did not fit the SDT framework for the three needs but were related to the participant's decision to return. This section discusses these themes, better named as 1) seasonal work as a lifestyle, 2) the impact of high and low seasons, 3) material factors, 4) employment certainty, and 5) the natural environment in Finnish Lapland.

The first theme centers on seasonal work as a lifestyle, which was a suitable option for the participants. For example, some participants explained that having a clear start and end to the season eased stress: “It’s momentary, you know the pressure, stress and rush won’t last all year” (P4), “by end of December it may be torture, but then you think you don’t have to do it for months” (P7). One participant noted that working through the season can help with mental health during the lack of light: “…when you have something to do in the dark and cold it helps through the winter” (P6). Another consideration was that the longer break afterward helped to gather energy for another season:

> Without a longer recovery time, I don’t think I could do it. I need 2-3 months after the intensity (of the season)—the first month the season is done, I still feel the phone ringing when it’s not. (P6)

Honkanen (2017, p. 115) and Rantala (2019, p. 39) explain that taking a break from the season can help in recovery and help prevent burnout. On the other hand, some worked in the summer as well, and it helped them return: “It keeps work pleasant—you get a break from people, if there are concerns, they pass, and you can start from a clean slate” (P4). In this case, combining both seasons can also help keep the work aligned with one's own preferences; here, it helped one forget the concerns of the previous season and eased the return to the next season.

It was further explained that understanding the season in practice encouraged returning. All had experienced the other side of high season as well, the low season: "(In low season) quality of work was more relaxed than expected—starting in the mid-season helped to comprehend what seasonality is" (P1). By experiencing both intense and calm periods, participants generally had a mindset that they knew what to expect. The low periods were mentioned, especially for better opportunities to spend more time with the customers:

> —fewer people, you can interact with them, chat with them, and get to know their culture. You can ask where they're from, what their local food is, for example, and how they like Finland. But when it's busy, it's only when you have time, there's a difference in having 2 or 208 customers. (P2)

Remembering the moments the low season offers could ease stress during the high season, as there is something to look forward to. In addition, the low season can improve a sense of authenticity in customer encounters (Rantala et al., 2019, p. 26).

Among participants, some were students who mentioned the practicality of seasonal work alongside their studies, consistent with prior studies (Lee & Moreo, 2007; Rantala et al., 2019). Working is a way to unwind: "I've worked alongside school—for me it's a way to relax, no need to think of mathematics" (P3). Combining studies with seasonal work was described as convenient, and the opportunity to earn extra income added motivation: "It's a big thing as a student, when otherwise you try to survive with 500 euros a month, but in seasonal work you can earn 4 times more" (P7). The participant referred to the specific amount of student support in Finland, which some students rely on to cover their expenses. The amount is limited, and seasonal work offers an option to clearly increase one's income.

The effect of seasonal work on other social relations outside the company was also considered. Heiskanen (2025, p. 284) says that in some cases it can be a reason to leave seasonal work, a point that this quote supports:

> Not sure, would I have other life (anymore) if I kept going like this, it would take away so much. It has made me wonder how many seasons I want to work (still), I want to have another life outside work as well.

In this case, the seasonal work had taken a toll on social life, as there was no time during the season to spend with one's social circle. In addition, there is concern about work-life balance,

which may be difficult to maintain during intense seasons. For some, the lack of work-life balance began to affect their decisions for future seasons.

The third theme centers on material factors, such as salary, which was described as increasing each year. All interviewees said they were happy with their salary and valued it: "It surprised me—if I went to another job, I don't think I'd earn as much" (P1). All received compensation that was higher than the minimum average set by law in Finland. These findings contrast with research that characterizes seasonal jobs as low-income (e.g., Alverén et al., 2012; Heiskanen, 2025; Lundberg et al., 2009). However, a good income combined with a limited season can create a temptation to work longer:

> …you earn someone's 3-month salary in 1 month just with the hours. When you know you receive more some months, it keeps you going, but because it's based on volume, it's not good in the long run. (P1)

P4 is considered similar to how it can lead to overworking oneself, since long days are common in seasonal work. Therefore, the risk of overworking raises the question of whether it is worth working another season.

In addition, there were bonuses, such as Christmas gifts from the owners, discounts on services, and the end-of-the-year trip, in which workers travel together at the company's expense to a destination unknown until the end of the season. Together, these factors were seen as a form of gratitude for all the work: "I've never been in a company where you get Christmas presents" (P8), "Other places give a beanie for a great job, and here it's travel, it's insane" (P4). However, this trip was not considered essential to returning, and all said they would return for another season even without it: "It's not what keeps me coming, but it's a plus" (P1). Interestingly, the most important material factor was the tools: "It's how all has been arranged, all works". Participants described being content with the work environment's provision of necessary tools, consistent with ideas by Lee and Moreo (2007): (P3).

The fourth theme was the most distinct reason to return: employment certainty. It was described as something easy and certain, creating a strong sense of safety: "I know I can get

back, no need to apply for (other) jobs, it can be stressful" (P8). What made participants especially confident was the encouragement to return: "They told me in feedback I'm welcome to return—didn't need to think further" (P3). By feedback, the participant referred to the end-of-season development discussion, in which the manager's immediate suggestion eased the decision to return for another season.

Lastly, the final theme is the natural environment of Finnish Lapland, which poses challenges due to winter conditions. 'Being ill' came up frequently and was identified as an annual challenge across all premises, affecting well-being and staff numbers. In the example described, P2 would have no problem working if it were not for the flu taking one's strength. The seasonal change in Lapland causes other challenges as well:

> Now it's plus degrees—if I had been at work, it would have been difficult as it's slippery and you need to maintain the snow premises for safety—it does take lots of work. (P2)

The quote emphasizes concern about how the premises may change as temperatures rise over time. There was the other end as well: the weather can be extremely cold and cause challenges at work and outside of it:

> I was leaving work when my colleague's car didn't start. We tried to get the car going in -40 degrees. We gave up, and I gave a ride at 1 AM. My roommates were worried about me. The environment creates this, but also bonds us. (P4)

The incident describes how seasonal workers in Finnish Lapland face extreme conditions that can make some days difficult and occasionally prompt them to question their motivation. On the other hand, unusual incidents can become memories, as the quote shows.

6. DISCUSSION

This thesis provided updated insights into Generation Z and seasonal work in Finnish Lapland. Through qualitative research using a case study and semi-structured interviews, the experiences of returning Generation Z seasonal workers helped answer the research aim of exploring why this group of employees returns to the same employer in Finnish Lapland. The findings show that the decision to return is a combination of fulfilled inner needs and factors relevant to seasonal work. This chapter discussed how the supporting research questions helped answer the aim.

The main research question was “Which factors motivate Generation Z seasonal workers to return to the same employer in Finnish Lapland?” Through the conversations, it became clear that social connections enhance the intention to return, especially the family-like atmosphere within the company, where everyone felt equal despite their roles. A low hierarchy and support from superiors encouraged both autonomy and responsibility. Recognition motivated participants to return and take on more responsibility, as it made them feel important and allowed them to continue developing their competence. A clear reason not to return was the lack of development opportunities. Another condition for returning was seeing action on the feedback employees gave to management. This supports the prior discussion of Generation Z, with a strong will to see change and concrete actions, as these emphasize a sense of meaningfulness (Engström et al., 2025; Krishna & Agrawal, 2025; Nieżurawska, 2023). Findings, in particular, support Heiskanen's (2025, p. 285) finding regarding management, where employees are motivated to return if they experience the company as developing.

However, the strongest reason to return was guaranteed employment and a good salary, which contradicts prior research describing seasonal work as low-income (see, e.g., Alverén et al., 2012; Heiskanen, 2025; Lundberg et al., 2009). In this case, these factors fostered a sense of safety, which aligns with studies describing Generation Z as safety-driven (e.g., Deloitte, 2025; Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Iorgulescu, 2016; Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). Together, these findings support Seemiller and Grace's (2019) description of Generation Z

as loyal, as long as needs are met. In this case, the results highlighted the need for equality, superior support, freedom, development, and safety. Their fulfillment is a reason to return for another season at the same company.

To consider the main aim in more detail, the first sub-question examined whether fulfilling inner needs through the SDT lens can explain the return. The first sub-question was the following: “How do autonomy, competence, and relatedness at work impact Generation Z seasonal workers' decision to return?” In discussing autonomy, it was noted that some tasks are repetitive and can be exhausting, with long days. However, the integration phase used in the analysis helped explain that routine and control are not necessarily unmotivating when understood as part of the job. Clarification of the role, especially, helped set personal limits and even created a sense of safety. Findings support prior research on the importance of structure in work tasks (Arasli & Arici, 2019; Nieżurawska, 2023, p. 13). However, participants reported they were not fully constrained in their work and experienced flexibility, as they could choose preferred tasks, take days off when necessary, and were encouraged to have fun at work, which made them feel empowered. A fun work environment, identified by Ahmad et al. (2025) as a motivational factor, also aligns with Generation Z values (Nieżurawska, 2023, p. 12; Goh & Okumus, 2020). Considering autonomy as an inner need, the analysis showed that participants were motivated to return as freedom increased with experience. Coincidentally, the one case of control showed diminished motivation but also highlighted Generation Z's will to be effective in their own work (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). In the absence of autonomy, this need is challenged and can lead to consideration of not returning.

The second need for competence was strong and consistent with Lundberg et al. (2009), who found that responsibility leads to development and the intention to return. The first season provided an intense learning ground, but workers returned because they felt confident in their skills, which in turn translated into a sense of safety. Additionally, the possibility of development was motivating, and multitasking helped keep the days different, as noted, 'no day is the same' in seasonal work. The practical skills (language, cultures, and people

management) were appreciated because they were concrete and recognized as important for Generation Z (Krishna & Agrawal, 2025). Responsibility was another factor in learning, but it required recognition, especially from managers. Interestingly, there was a recognized limit to responsibility, as it could limit effectiveness in current tasks. On the other hand, this can signal a need for work-life balance, as mentioned, which is important for Generation Z (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). The considerations against returning centered on whether the limit of learning had been reached. These thoughts support how Generation Z can become ‘job hoppers’ to satisfy the need for learning (Deloitte, 2025).

The third competence of relatedness was the most evident in explaining motivation to return; it was 'the people,' who were recognized as four groups. The colleagues were recognized as important, consistent with prior research (Thulemark, 2017), as they were part of the experience and provided a sense of comfort during challenging days. However, unlike prior research that cited changes in people as a reason to leave (Alverén et al., 2012; Heiskanen, 2025), in this study, such changes were described mostly as an acceptable part of seasonality among the participants. A recognized factor was the 'atmosphere' within the company, which was experienced as open and caring, where getting along with anyone was considered certain and eased employee turnover. Those who originated from southern Finland wondered whether the company created this feeling or whether Lapland in general was the reason to return. One consideration regarding the atmosphere was the second group, the managers, who could encourage this feeling by treating everyone equally and with care, resulting in even a full-time position being declined. The case further supported the study of Arasli and Araci (2019) on the impact managers can have on the intention to return. However, the least common group mentioned in the interviews was the owners, who were seen as a reason to return, as there was trust that they would act on feedback and appreciate their workers. Lastly, the customer encounters created meaningfulness despite their short duration and extended prior studies on their impact on seasonal work as a motivator (Heiskanen, 2025; Veijola & Paakkonen, 2014).

In the analysis, SDT provided a useful lens for examining motivation, but it could not fully

account for the distinct factors associated with seasonal work. New themes were created, and the second sub-question helped consider them: “Which aspects of seasonal work Generation Z seasonal workers consider encouraging or discouraging to return?” Prior research has described seasonal work as insecure, characterized by short-term contracts and limited development (Harju-Myllyaho et al., 2020; Rantala et al., 2019, p. 35). Yet the findings emphasized that participants returned because of employment certainty, which, coincidentally, made them feel secure. The seasonal experience was also seen as motivating, with a defined period to focus on, and could even help with past seasonal depression. Work could also be adjusted to one's life situation, such as taking a longer break for the next season, studying alongside, or doing summer work afterward. Even when peak times were intense and challenging, participants described how being aware of the low season motivated them to keep going, as it provided opportunities to rest and offered better chances for memorable customer encounters.

Regarding salary, prior research has emphasized that seasonal work is low-income (see Alverén et al., 2012; Heiskanen, 2025; Lundberg et al., 2009), yet all participants reported being content. However, because the amount was described as higher than the Finnish minimum wage, it was a specific factor within the case company, and it motivated them to return, as they believed they could not earn as much elsewhere. Interestingly, benefits such as an end-of-season trip were not the main reasons to return, but they conveyed a sense of appreciation. Factors in seasonal work that raised questions about returning included the intensity of the seasons, which can limit one's relationships. Other factors, such as flu cycles and extreme weather conditions, raised questions about their effects on one's well-being. Results align with Generation Z literature on work-life balance as an important factor for this cohort (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). Overall, the findings support Deloitte’s (2025) suggested trifecta of money, meaning, and well-being for motivating Generation Z, and, interestingly, this could be achieved in the seasonal environment of Finnish Lapland.

7. CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to explore the motivation of Generation Z seasonal workers to understand why they return to the same employer in Finnish Lapland. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through a case study at Snowhotel Family via semi-structured interviews to address the aim and research questions. Data from eight interviews with Generation Z seasonal workers were analyzed using directed content analysis grounded in Self-Determination Theory. During the analysis, additional themes outside the theory were identified and included. The main findings support the fulfillment of the inner needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Even if tasks can be routine in seasonal work, flexibility and encouragement to have fun were motivating. Structure and quick learning created confidence in one's own skills, and opportunities for learning and responsibility were relevant factors. The social atmosphere is an important motivator, as all are treated equally and openly, and workers receive management support. In addition to inner needs, seasonal work as a lifestyle, employment certainty for the next season, proper tools, and a fair salary motivated returning. Reasons not to return included limitations on further development, a lack of action on feedback, and concerns about work-life balance. Together, the findings emphasize well-being and experiences of safety and meaningfulness as reasons for returning for another season.

The study contributes to prior research using SDT to explain motivation in tourism and extends this framework to Generation Z seasonal workers in Finnish Lapland. Findings also contradict studies on seasonal work, which mention low salary as a common factor. Additionally, the study includes owners of the company to relatedness, which has not been discussed in prior research as a reason to return. Lastly, the study addresses the lack of research on Generation Z and shows how seasonal work can meet this generation's needs and encourage future employment in the field.

Practical implications support responsible tourism, in which management considers the rightfulness and provides sufficient salaries and working conditions for employees (Hakkarainen et al., 2014, p. 85). This includes practices such as offering a salary that

exceeds the legal average in Finland. Generation Z is ready to work but needs support from management, including the necessary tools, encouragement, guidance, and flexibility. Equal treatment of workers can further foster a pleasant atmosphere in the company. Lastly, end-of-season development meetings can encourage them to return for another season if executed properly. This means collecting feedback and taking transparent action toward solutions. As an ideal outcome, the decision to return for another season may become easier than before.

7.1 Limitations of the research

When reviewing the research, several limitations should be considered. As discussed in the participants' characteristics, all were Finnish. As noted in the limitations of SDT's use, autonomy may be understood in relation to culture. Finland has a culture that emphasizes independence, which may have influenced how the author and participants perceived the concept of autonomy. Therefore, the results could have been different if other nationalities had been included. Another consideration concerns the Finnish language and the translation process. In the translations, some expressions may have lost their deeper meaning and could have provided further insight had they been in Finnish. One example is ’elämys’, which translates as an experience but is deeper than that in Finnish. Additionally, even though two of the participants were originally from southern Finland, the number was too small to provide deeper insight into the experiences of seasonal workers from farther away.

Because the study is qualitative, the results cannot be generalized to Generation Z seasonal workers. The sample included eight people and was a case study. With a retention rate of 86%, the experiences of seasonal workers at this company may not represent the average seasonal work experience in the tourism field. The timing of the interviews should also be considered. The interviews took place during the season, and the social aspect as a motivation could have been emphasized as a result. For example, if the data collection had been conducted during the summer after recovery, the results might have been different. This could also have provided insight into whether the participants had decided to return for another season. Lastly, the researcher's positionality is relevant. While doing one's best to

evaluate results with equal consideration, personal experiences could have influenced the selection of certain quotes. Participants could also have described their experiences differently, as some knew the researcher in advance; this was the case for five participants.

7.2 Recommendations for future research

Given the limitations, recommendations for future research are offered. Because the sample consists solely of Finnish participants, it would be ideal to conduct similar research among non-Finnish seasonal workers. The presence of other generations should not be ignored either; their motivations are equally important to research. The study by Baum (2020) combining Millennials and Generation Z could be interesting to follow, but in the context of Finnish Lapland tourism. This thesis also did not provide insight into technology and sustainability, even though these have been discussed in the literature as important for Generation Z. Therefore, it would be interesting to see whether these factors motivate employment in other seasonal positions.

Another suggestion is to conduct case studies at other companies in the area and run them for longer than one season to compare results and see how many return in the end. For the research methodology, a similar topic could be used, but with a quantitative approach to see whether anonymity would change responses. As noted in the previous section, the researcher knew some of the participants, which could have influenced responses. Therefore, it would be ideal to have a similar case study conducted by an 'outsider'. The use of SDT should be tested in other studies as well. It was interesting how using this theory as a lens helped consider in detail how the three needs can be realized in practice. In Heikkanen (2025, p. 296), there was a recommendation for development discussions, and this thesis proposes further research on effective development discussions, as they clearly influenced the decision to return. Additionally, Heiskanen (2025) and McCole (2015) discussed the lack of research on non-returnees, and this thesis further encourages research on this topic.

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APPENDIX 1. INTERVIEW GUIDE IN ENGLISH

Beginning
Asking permission to record and if yes, start recording for voice note. Introducing myself and describing to interviewee the purpose of the research and checking letter of consent together before signature.
Reminder about anonymity and no need to answer anything they don't wish.

1. Background and work history
Could you describe your background and outline your work history at the Arctic Snowhotel Family?

- initial decision to join the company
- number of seasons worked
- work units
- main responsibilities

2. Experience of seasonal work
How would you characterise your overall experience of seasonal work in Lapland?

- expectations versus reality
- comparisons with previous seasonal workplaces, if applicable

3. Decision to return for another season
What factors influenced your decision to return to the same employer for an additional season?

- changes in feelings toward work overtime
- moments that encouraged or discouraged returning
- considerations of leaving

4. Autonomy at work
In what ways do you feel you have influence over how you perform your work?
Do you have the ability to work independently without constant supervision?

- decision-making: can the person make decisions without checking superiors?
- feeling of confidence in making decision
- control over tasks: can the person decide what tasks to perform and how or are there set orders to follow?
- flexibility in scheduling: can the person affect planned work schedule easily?

5. Experiences of competence
Can you describe situations that have supported helped you develop skills in your role?
Do you feel you can learn/develop new skills?

- possible learning experiences they recall
- development across seasons, any differences?

6. Workplace relationships (Relatedness)
How would you describe your relationships with colleagues, supervisors or guests?

- support received from others, do you feel appreciated?
- do you feel cared for eg manager considering your wellbeing?
- team dynamics, is it easy to work together? If so, any common factor why?
- influence of relationships on returning

7. Sense of community
To what extent do you experience feeling part of the workplace together with the people involved?

- shared experiences in and outside work environment
- involvement in the team. If there is much team work, are all working together?
- moments of inclusion. In an example, do you feel people want to involve you in what they do?
- has the feeling changed if people have left the company?

8. Workplace culture and values
Do you know the company values?
The Snowhotel Family (the company) has values, such 'having fun at work', 'professional pride', 'honesty' and 'appreciation. Do you relate to these and sense them at work?

- connection to organisational values
- sense of being part of the workplace community if others share these too

9. Motivating and demotivating factors
What aspects of the work motivate you or reduce your motivation to return for another season?

- intrinsic motivators (development, meaningfulness, enjoyment, freedom
- external factors (salary or benefits)
- features specific to seasonal work (intensity, limited work period)

10. Reflections and suggestions
Is there anything you believe could improve the experience for seasonal workers to return for multiple seasons?

- additional comments
- consent to follow-up contact
- checking do they want the final report

APPENDIX 2. INTERVIEW GUIDE IN FINNISH

Alku
Pyydetään lupa nauhoittaa haastattelu ja mikäli lupa saadaan, aloitetaan äänitallennus. Esittelen itseni ja kerron haastateltavalle tutkimuksen tarkoituksen sekä käyn suostumuslomakkeen yhdessä läpi ennen allekirjoittamista.
Muistutetaan anonymiteetistä ja siitä, ettei haastateltavan tarvitse vastata kysymyksiin, joihin hän ei halua vastata.

1. Tausta ja työhistoria
Voisitko kuvailla taustaasi ja kertoa työhistoriastasi Arctic Snowhotel Familyssa?

- alkuperäinen päätös hakeutua yritykseen
- työskenneltyjen kausien määrä
- työyksiköt
- pääasialliset työtehtävät

2. Kokemukset kausityöstä
Miten kuvailisit kokonaiskokemustasi kausityöstä Lapissa?

- odotukset verrattuna todellisuuteen
- vertailu aiempiin kausityöpaikkoihin, mikäli sovellettavissa

3. Päätös palata uudelle kaudelle
Mitkä tekijät vaikuttivat päätökseesi palata saman työnantajan palvelukseen uudelle kaudelle?

- muutokset suhtautumisessa työhön ajan myötä
- hetket, jotka kannustivat tai vaikeuttivat palaamista
- pohdinnat lähtemisestä

4. Vapaus työssä
Millä tavoin koet voivasi vaikuttaa siihen, miten teet työsi?
Koetko, että pystyt työskentelemään itsenäisesti ilman jatkuvaa valvontaa?

- päätöksenteko: voiko henkilö tehdä päätöksiä ilman esihenkilön hyväksyntää?
- varmuus päätöksenteossa
- tehtävien hallinta: voiko henkilö päättää tehtävistään ja niiden suorittamistavasta vai onko toiminta ennalta määrättyä?
- joustavuus työvuorosuunnittelussa: voiko henkilö helposti vaikuttaa suunniteltuun työaikatauluun?

5. Osaamisen kokemukset
Voisitko kuvailla tilanteita, jotka ovat tukeneet tai auttaneet sinua kehittämään osaamistasi työssäsi?
Koetko, että voit oppia tai kehittää uusia taitoja?

- mieleen jääneitä oppimiskokemuksia

- kehittyminen kausien välillä, onko eroja?

6. Työpaikan ihmissuhteet (yhteenkuuluvuus)
Miten kuvailisit suhteitasi kollegoihin, esihenkilöihin tai asiakkaisiin?

- saatu tuki muilta, koetko itsesi arvostetuksi?
- koetko, että sinusta välitetään, esimerkiksi huomioiko esihenkilö hyvinvointisi?
- tiimidynamiikka: onko yhteistyö helppoa? Jos on, mitkä tekijät siihen vaikuttavat?
- ihmissuhteiden vaikutus päätökseen palata

7. Yhteisöllisyyden tunne
Missä määrin koet olevasi osa työyhteisöä yhdessä muiden kanssa?

- jaetut kokemukset työssä ja työn ulkopuolella
- osallistuminen tiimityöhön: jos tiimityötä on paljon, toimivatko kaikki yhdessä?
- osallisuuden hetket: koetko, että sinut halutaan ottaa mukaan toimintaan?
- onko yhteisöllisyyden tunne muuttunut, jos ihmisiä on lähtenyt yrityksestä?

8. Työpaikan kulttuuri ja arvot
Tiedätkö yrityksen arvot?
Snowhotel Familylla (yritys) on arvoja, kuten ”hauskanpito työssä”, ”ammatillinen ylpeys”, ”rehellisyys” ja ”arvostus”. Samaistutko näihin ja koetko ne näkyviksi työssä?

- yhteys organisaation arvoihin
- tunne kuulumisesta työyhteisöön, jos muut jakavat samat arvot

9. Motivoivat ja rajoittavat tekijät
Mitkä työn osa-alueet motivoivat sinua tai heikentävät motivaatiotasi palata uudelle kaudelle?

- sisäiset motivaatiotekijät (kehittyminen, merkityksellisyys,, nautinto työstä, vapaus)
- ulkoiset tekijät (palkka tai edut)
- kausityölle ominaiset piirteet (intensiivisyys, rajattu työnjakso)

10. Pohdinnat ja kehitysehdotukset
Onko mielestäsi jotakin, millä kausityöntekijöiden kokemusta voitaisiin parantaa, jotta he palaisivat useammalle kaudelle?

- muut kommentit
- suostumus jatkoyhteydenottoon
- haluaako haastateltava saada lopullisen raportin

APPENDIX 3. LETTER OF CONSENT SAMPLE IN ENGLISH

LAPIN YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY OF LAPLAND

LETTER OF CONSENT

Dear employee of the Snowhotel Family,

My name is Jemmi Levonen. I am Master student at University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland under the supervision of Senior Lecturer Linda Tallberg (linda.tallberg@ulapland.fi). You are invited to participate in my master thesis study entitled 'Understanding the re-engagement motivations of Generation Z seasonal workers in Lapland'. The purpose of the study is to understand what motivates Generation Z seasonal workers to work several seasons in the same company in Lapland. The result of the study will be published as part of my master thesis. The thesis is conducted as part of the Master's Degree Programme in Tourism, Culture and International Management (TourCIM).

You are invited for the interview as you represent this group personally and your insight is considered valuable for the research.

By signing this letter, you give consent to use the interview material confidentially and exclusively for research purposes. The research follows the principles for responsible conduct of research dictated by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research. The data will be handled anonymously. Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw your permission even after signing this document, by informing the below mentioned contact person.

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor, if you would need further information regarding the study and the use of the research data.

Sincerely,

Jemmi Levonen
TourCIM Master student
Phone
Email jelevone@ulapland.fi

I give consent to use the interview as data for the purpose mentioned above.

_____ _____
Signature Date

_____
Print Name

APPENDIX 4. LETTER OF CONSENT SAMPLE IN FINNISH

LAPIN YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY OF LAPLAND

TUTKIMUSSUOSTUMUS

Hyvä haastateltava,

Opiskelen matkailuntutkimusta Lapin yliopistossa. Olen pyytäneet Teitä osallistumaan haastatteluun pro gradu -tutkielmaani varten, joka käsittelee 'Sukupolvi Z:n sesonkityöntekijöiden motivaatiota palata samaan työpaikkaan useammalle kaudelle. Tutkielmani ohjaajana toimii Linda Tallberg.

Haastattelut nauhoitetaan ja vastauksia tullaan käyttämään vain tutkimustarkoitukseen. Ensisijaisesti aineistoa tullaan käyttämään pro gradu -tutkielmassani.

Tutkimus noudattaa tutkimuseettisen neuvottelukunnan määrittelemiä vastuullisen tutkimuksen periaatteita. Aineisto käsitellään nimettömänä. Osallistumisenne haastatteluun on vapaaehtoista ja mikäli myöhemmin haluatte vetäytyä tutkimuksesta, voitte tehdä sen ilmoittamalla asiasta alla mainitulle tutkimuksen toteuttajalle.

Tarkempaa tietoa tutkimuksesta ja haastattelumateriaalien käytöstä saa tutkimuksen toteuttajalta tai ohjaajaltamme Linda Tallberg linda.tallberg@ulapland.fi

Ystävällisesti,

Jemmi Levonen
jelevone@ulapland.fi

Matkailututkimuksen opiskelija

Suostun haastatteluaineiston käyttöön tutkimustarkoituksessa.

_____ _____
Allekirjoitus Päivämäärä

_____
Nimenselvennys