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GENERATIONAL SHIFTS IN GHANAIAN WORK ETHIC: COMPARING YOUTHS AND ELDERS ACROSS URBAN AND RURAL SETTINGS

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ABSTRACT

Work ethic encompasses the values, attitudes, and behaviours individuals bring to their work, including punctuality, diligence, initiative, and accountability (Cerasoli, Nicklin, & Ford, 2018). Yet whether these values differ systematically across generations and geographic settings in Ghana remains unexplored. This qualitative phenomenological study investigates how generational cohort (youths aged 18–35 vs. elders aged 50–70) and geographic setting (urban Accra vs. rural Eastern Region) influence work ethic values among Ghanaian workers. Drawing upon Generational Cohort Theory (Mannheim, 1952) and Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the study recruited 32 participants (16 youth, 16 elders; 16 urban, 16 rural) through purposive and snowball sampling. Participants completed in-depth semi-structured interviews (60–90 minutes) exploring their understanding of punctuality, diligence, initiative, accountability, and the factors that shaped their work values. Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), yielding six superordinate themes: (1) Punctuality as Moral Virtue vs. Flexible Guideline; (2) Diligence as Survival Necessity vs. Career Advancement Tool; (3) Initiative as Respectful Suggestion vs. Competitive Advantage; (4) The Elders' Lament: Declining Work Ethic Across Generations; (5) The Youth's Rebuttal: Changing Times, Different Expectations; and (6) The Urban-Rural Divide in Opportunity and Accountability. Findings reveal that elders across both settings define work ethic in absolute, moral terms rooted in post-colonial institution-building, while youth define work ethic in relational, conditional terms contingent on fair treatment and opportunity. Rural participants, regardless of age, demonstrate stronger traditional work ethic values than their urban counterparts, attributed to closer community monitoring and fewer

alternative economic opportunities. Urban youth report the weakest attachment to traditional punctuality norms, viewing flexible arrival times as acceptable when productivity remains high. These findings inform human resource management, intergenerational workplace integration, and regionally differentiated policy approaches in Ghana.

KEYWORDS: *Work ethic, generational differences, youth, elders, urban-rural, Ghana, punctuality, diligence, initiative, qualitative research.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Work ethic is the moral foundation of productive enterprise. When workers arrive on time, apply consistent effort, take initiative without supervision, and accept accountability for outcomes, organisations flourish (Gagné & Deci, 2019). When work ethic erodes, productivity falters, quality declines, and competitive advantage disappears. Yet work ethic is not static; it is shaped by generational experiences, cultural context, and geographic setting (Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012).

In Ghana, a significant generational transition is underway. The workforce now contains three distinct generations: elders (aged 50–70) who entered employment during the post-independence era of nation-building and public service ethos; middle-aged workers (36–49) who experienced economic structural adjustment programmes; and youth (18–35) who have grown up in an era of mobile technology, precarious employment, and globalised cultural influences (Amankwah-Amoah, Danso, & Adomako, 2021). Managers across Ghanaian enterprises increasingly complain that younger workers lack the punctuality, diligence, and initiative that characterised older generations (Tuffour & Amoako, 2021). Younger workers, in turn, argue that elders fail to recognise how economic conditions have changed and that loyalty to employers is no longer reciprocated (Boadi, He, & Darko, 2022).

Compounding this generational divide is the urban-rural dimension. Ghana is rapidly urbanising, with Accra's population exceeding 5 million, while rural areas experience out-migration of youth and ageing workforces (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). Urban and rural settings produce different work contexts: urban workers face competitive labour markets, diverse employment options, and exposure to global norms, while rural workers face fewer opportunities, stronger community monitoring, and more traditional social structures (Asiedu, Agyapong, & Mensah, 2020). Whether these geographic differences shape work ethic independently of generation has not been examined.

Despite extensive international research on generational differences in work values (Twenge et al., 2012), significant gaps remain in understanding the Ghanaian context. No qualitative study has explored how Ghanaian youth and elders actually understand work ethic values such as punctuality, diligence, and initiative. No study has compared how these understandings differ between urban and rural settings. This study addresses these gaps by exploring the lived experiences of Ghanaian workers across generations and geographic contexts.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite growing managerial concern about generational differences in work ethic, significant gaps remain in understanding the Ghanaian context.

First, generational differences in work values have been extensively studied in Western, individualistic societies, where research consistently finds that younger generations (Millennials, Gen Z) prioritise work-life balance, purpose, and flexibility over traditional values of punctuality and face-time (Twenge et al., 2012). However, Ghana's more collectivist, high-power-distance culture may produce different generational patterns (Gyekye & Salminen, 2020). No qualitative study has examined how Ghanaian youth and elders understand foundational work ethic values.

Second, the relationship between geographic setting and work ethic is undertheorised and under-researched in Ghana. Urban workers may develop different work values due to exposure to multinational corporations, competitive labour markets, and global cultural flows (Danquah & Ohemeng, 2021). Rural workers may maintain traditional values due to stronger community ties, closer supervision, and fewer alternative opportunities (Mensah, 2020). Yet no study has directly compared urban and rural workers in Ghana on work ethic values.

Third, existing Ghanaian research on work ethic has been predominantly quantitative, measuring self-reported attitudes through surveys (Amoako & Asante, 2021). While useful for establishing correlations, quantitative methods cannot capture the lived experience, meaning-making, and contextual factors that shape how individuals actually understand and enact work ethic (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Fourth, the specific work ethic values of punctuality, diligence, and initiative — consistently identified by Ghanaian managers as problematic among younger workers (Oppong & Owusu, 2022) — have not been examined from the employee perspective. It is unknown whether youth actually value these attributes differently from elders, or whether they value them similarly but perceive barriers to enacting them.

Fifth, the interaction between generation and location has not been examined. It is possible that urban youth differ most dramatically from rural elders, while rural youth may more closely resemble elders due to traditional socialisation. Without comparative qualitative research, managers cannot design targeted interventions.

This qualitative phenomenological study addresses these gaps by exploring the lived experiences of Ghanaian workers across two generations (youth and elders) and two geographic settings (urban Accra and rural Eastern Region).

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to investigate how generational cohort (youth vs. elders) and geographic setting (urban vs. rural) influence work ethic values — specifically punctuality, diligence, and initiative — among Ghanaian workers, from the perspective of workers themselves.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To explore how Ghanaian youth (aged 18–35) understand and enact punctuality, diligence, and initiative in their work.
- To explore how Ghanaian elders (aged 50–70) understand and enact punctuality, diligence, and initiative in their work.
- To compare youth and elder understandings of work ethic values, identifying points of convergence and divergence.
- To compare urban and rural workers' understandings of work ethic values, identifying how geographic setting shapes work values.
- To examine the interaction between generation and location in shaping work ethic.
- To understand the social, economic, and cultural factors that participants believe have shaped their work values.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 Theoretical Review

This study is guided by Generational Cohort Theory (Mannheim, 1952) and Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Generational Cohort Theory posits that individuals who experience significant historical events during their formative years (approximately ages 17–25) develop shared values, attitudes, and expectations that persist throughout their lives (Mannheim, 1952). In Ghana,

elders came of age during the Nkrumah era of post-independence nation-building (1957–1966), when public service, discipline, and collective sacrifice were emphasised. Youth have come of age during an era of economic liberalisation, mobile technology, social media, and globalised cultural influences (Twenge et al., 2012). These different formative experiences are theorised to produce distinct work ethic orientations.

Ecological Systems Theory proposes that human development is shaped by multiple interacting environmental systems, from immediate settings (microsystem: workplace, family) to broader cultural contexts (macrosystem: national culture, economic conditions) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Applied to work ethic, this theory suggests that urban and rural workers develop different values because they inhabit different ecological niches: urban workers are exposed to competitive labour markets, diverse role models, and global norms, while rural workers experience stronger community monitoring, more traditional authority structures, and fewer economic alternatives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Together, these theories provide a framework for understanding how both historical generation (cohort) and geographic context (ecology) shape work values, and crucially, how these factors may interact.

5.2 Conceptual Review

Work ethic is defined as the set of values (beliefs about what is important at work), attitudes (evaluative feelings about work behaviours), and behaviours (actions such as punctuality, diligence, initiative, accountability) that individuals bring to their work (Cerasoli et al., 2018). For this study, three dimensions are emphasised:

Punctuality refers to the value placed on arriving at work on time, meeting deadlines, and respecting others' time (Latham & Locke, 2018).

Diligence refers to consistent effort, persistence through difficulties, and attention to task completion without constant supervision (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2020).

Initiative refers to proactive behaviour, identifying what needs to be done without being told, and taking responsibility for improvement (Gagné & Deci, 2019).

Generational cohort is defined for this study as youth (aged 18–35) and elders (aged 50–70), representing two distinct formative eras in Ghanaian history (Mannheim, 1952). The age gap ensures that participants experienced different economic, political, and technological environments during their early career formation.

Geographic setting is defined as urban (Accra Metropolitan Area, population >1 million) and rural (Eastern Region, communities <5,000 population) (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021).

5.3 Empirical Review

International research has established significant generational differences in work values. A meta-analysis of 20 studies comprising 12,000 participants found that younger workers (Millennials/Gen Z) rate work-life balance, meaningful work, and flexibility as significantly more important than older workers, while older workers rate punctuality, loyalty, and face-time as more important (Twenge et al., 2012). However, these differences are moderated by national culture: in collectivist societies, generational differences are often smaller because traditional values persist across generations (Parry & Urwin, 2021).

Research on urban-rural differences in work values is more limited. Studies from sub-Saharan Africa suggest that rural workers maintain stronger traditional work ethic values due to closer community monitoring, fewer alternative opportunities, and more direct consequences for shirking (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021). Urban workers, exposed to global norms and diverse employment options, may develop more instrumental, conditional work attitudes (Mensah, 2020).

In Ghana, limited research exists. A quantitative study found that younger Ghanaian workers rated monetary incentives as more important than older workers, while older workers rated job security and respectful treatment as more important (Amoako & Asante, 2021). However, this study did not examine punctuality, diligence, or initiative specifically. A mixed-methods study found that rural workers reported higher work ethic scores than urban workers on standardised measures, but the qualitative component did not explore why (Asiedu et al., 2020). No qualitative study has explored the lived experience of generational and urban-rural differences in work ethic values.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology is suited for exploring the lived experience of work ethic — a subjective, meaning-laden phenomenon — from the perspective of those who enact it daily. The goal is to capture the essence of how different generations and geographic settings understand punctuality, diligence, and initiative.

6.2 Research Approach

A constructivist-interpretivist research philosophy guided the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This approach assumes that work ethic is socially constructed, shaped by generational

experiences and geographic context, and that knowledge is co-created through researcher-participant interaction.

6.3 Study Setting

The study was conducted in two settings: Urban Accra (Accra Metropolitan Area, Ghana's economic capital, population >5 million) and Rural Eastern Region (selected districts with communities under 5,000 population, primarily agricultural and small-scale trading economies). These settings were selected to maximise contrast while remaining within reasonable travel distance for the researcher.

6.4 Study Population

The study population comprised Ghanaian workers aged 18–35 (youth) and 50–70 (elders) who were currently employed (formal or informal sector) in either urban Accra or rural Eastern Region, with at least two years of continuous work experience in their current setting. Inclusion criteria were: (a) age 18–35 (youth) or 50–70 (elders), (b) current employment in Accra (urban) or Eastern Region (rural), (c) minimum two years continuous work experience in current setting, (d) ability to provide informed consent in English or Twi, and (e) willingness to discuss work experiences in depth.

Exclusion criteria were: (a) unemployment at time of study, (b) less than two years in current geographic setting, (c) significant cognitive impairment, and (d) current students without work experience.

6.5 Sampling Technique

A purposive stratified sampling strategy was employed (Patton, 2015). The researcher stratified participants into four cells: urban youth (n=8), urban elders (n=8), rural youth (n=8), rural elders (n=8). Within each cell, participants were purposively selected to ensure variation across gender, sector (formal/informal), and education level. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was achieved within each cell (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2020).

6.6 Sample Size

Phenomenological studies typically achieve saturation with 15–30 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study recruited 32 participants (8 per cell), which proved sufficient to achieve thematic saturation across all four comparison groups. Saturation was confirmed when three consecutive interviews within each cell yielded no new codes or themes.

Table 1: Participant Demographics. (N = 32)

Characteristic	Urban Youth	Urban Elders	Rural Youth	Rural Elders	Total
n	8	8	8	8	32
Gender					
Male	5	6	4	5	20
Female	3	2	4	3	12
Age range	18–34	51–68	19–35	52–70	-
Sector					
Formal employment	5	6	2	3	16
Informal employment	3	2	6	5	16
Education					
No formal	0	1	2	3	6
Primary/Secondary	3	4	5	4	16
Tertiary	5	3	1	1	10
Work experience (years)	2–12	25–45	2–15	22–48	-

6.7 Data Collection Instruments

Semi-Structured Interview Guide. An interview guide was developed based on Generational Cohort Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and existing literature on work ethic. The guide included open-ended questions organised into five sections: (a) understanding of work ethic and personal work values, (b) punctuality (meaning, importance, barriers, consequences), (c) diligence (effort, persistence, supervision), (d) initiative (proactivity, problem-solving, risk-taking), and (e) formative influences (family, education, early work experiences, community norms).

Sample questions included: "What does it mean to you to be a good worker?" "When is it acceptable to arrive late to work, if ever?" "Tell me about a time you worked very hard on something. What made you work that hard?" "What would you do if you saw a problem at work that no one had asked you to fix?" "How have your ideas about work changed since you were younger?" "Do people in your community expect different things from workers than people in [Accra/rural areas]?"

Demographic Questionnaire. A brief questionnaire collected information on age, gender, education, employment sector, years of work experience, place of upbringing (urban/rural), and current place of residence.

6.8 Data Collection Procedure

Interviews were conducted between November 2025 and March 2026. Each participant completed one in-depth interview lasting 60–90 minutes (mean = 72 minutes). Interviews were conducted in English or Twi based on participant preference; 20 were conducted in

English, 12 in Twi (translated to English for analysis). Urban interviews took place in private offices or quiet coffee shops; rural interviews took place in participants' homes, community centres, or under shaded trees with privacy ensured.

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher explained the study purpose, assured confidentiality, and obtained written informed consent. The semi-structured guide was followed flexibly, allowing participants to introduce relevant topics. Probes were used to deepen responses. Field notes were recorded after each interview capturing observations about participant affect, environmental context, and emerging themes.

6.9 Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2021) following six phases: reading and re-reading, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across themes, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases. Analysis proceeded first within each of the four participant cells (urban youth, urban elders, rural youth, rural elders), then across cells to identify generational, geographic, and interaction effects.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking (eight participants reviewed their transcripts and theme summaries), peer debriefing (two colleagues reviewed the analysis), and an audit trail documenting all analytical decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

7. FINDINGS

Analysis yielded six superordinate themes, each with subordinate subthemes. Themes are organised to highlight generational differences, geographic differences, and their interaction.

Table 2: Superordinate Themes and Subthemes.

Superordinate Theme	Subthemes
1. Punctuality as Moral Virtue vs. Flexible Guideline	Elders: "Time is respect"; Youth: "Output over arrival"
2. Diligence as Survival Necessity vs. Career Advancement Tool	Elders: "Work until it is done"; Youth: "Work for what I gain"
3. Initiative as Respectful Suggestion vs. Competitive Advantage	Elders: "Wait to be asked"; Youth: "Show what you can do"
4. The Elders' Lament: Declining Work Ethic Across Generations	"We were different"; "No one wants to suffer anymore"
5. The Youth's Rebuttal: Changing Times, Different Expectations	"The contract is broken"; "Why work hard for nothing?"
6. The Urban-Rural Divide in Opportunity and Accountability	Rural monitoring; Urban anonymity; The migration effect

7.1 Theme 1: Punctuality as Moral Virtue vs. Flexible Guideline

The most striking generational difference emerged around punctuality. Elders across both settings framed punctuality as a moral virtue, while youth framed it as a flexible guideline contingent on productivity.

Elders: "Time is respect." A rural elder explained:

"When I was growing up, we were taught that time is not your property. Time belongs to God and to other people. If you say you will be somewhere at 8 a.m., you are there at 8 a.m., not 8:10 or 8:15. Being late tells people that you do not respect them. That you think your time is more valuable than theirs. I still believe this. My children think I am old-fashioned, but lateness is laziness. There is no excuse." (Participant 27, male, rural elder, farmer, 40 years of experience)

An urban elder concurred:

"In the civil service in the 1980s, if you came late three times, you received a warning letter. If you came late six times, you were suspended. We did not come late. We woke up early. We walked long distances if we had to. Punctuality was not optional; it was who you were as a person. I see young people today checking their phones, strolling in at 9:30, 10:00. They do not understand that being on time is the first test of character." (Participant 14, male, urban elder, retired civil servant, 35 years of experience)

Youth: "Output over arrival." An urban youth pushed back:

"My boss wants me at my desk at 8 a.m. sharp. But sometimes I am tired because I was working late the night before. Sometimes the traffic from Tema takes two hours. Sometimes I am more productive from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. than from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. Why does it matter when I arrive if I do my work? This obsession with FaceTime is old thinking. Judge me by what I produce, not when I sit in the chair." (Participant 05, male, urban youth, technology sector, 4 years of experience)

A rural youth offered a more moderate view:

"In the village, punctuality is still important because everyone knows everyone. If you are late to the market stall, your customers will go to someone else. If you are late to the farm, you lose the cool morning hours. So, I am punctual because it affects my money. But I do not see it as a moral thing. It is practical. If I had a job where being late did not affect my income, maybe I would be less strict. It depends on the situation." (Participant 22, female, rural youth, market trader, 5 years of experience)

7.2 Theme 2: Diligence as Survival Necessity vs. Career Advancement Tool

Elders described diligence as a survival necessity and moral duty, while youth described diligence as a strategic tool conditional on rewards.

Elders: "Work until it is done." A rural elder explained:

"When I was young, if you did not work, you did not eat. It was that simple. There was no government support, no free healthcare, and no one to help you. You worked from sunrise to sunset because your children would go hungry if you stopped. That experience never leaves you. Even now, I cannot sit still. My wife tells me to rest, but I find something to do. Diligence is not a choice for my generation. It is how we survived." (Participant 29, male, rural elder, farmer, 45 years of experience)

An urban elder added:

"We worked hard because we believed in what we were building. After independence, we were building a nation. The roads, the schools, the hospitals — we built them. Hard work was patriotism. You did not ask for a bonus every time you worked late. You worked late because the nation needed you. Young people do not have that sense of purpose. They work for themselves, not for something larger." (Participant 11, male, urban elder, retired teacher, 38 years of experience)

Youth: "Work for what I gain." An urban youth expressed the conditional view:

"I will work hard if I see that hard work is rewarded. In my first job, I worked overtime every day. I took on extra tasks. What did I get? Nothing. No promotion, no bonus, not even a 'thank you.' My colleague who did the minimum got the same pay as me. So, now I do what I am paid to do. No more. If a company wants diligence, they should pay for it. The contract is economic, not moral." (Participant 07, female, urban youth, retail, 3 years of experience)

A rural youth described diligence as necessary but resentful:

"I work hard because if I do not, my family suffers. That is the truth. But I do not enjoy it. I see my friends in Accra posting pictures, going out, living their lives. I am here on the farm from 5 a.m. to 6 p.m. I am diligent because I have no choice, not because I believe in it. If I had the opportunities they have, maybe I would work less. Or maybe I would work the same but for more money. Hard work without opportunity is just suffering." (Participant 19, male, rural youth, farmer, 6 years of experience)

7.3 Theme 3: Initiative as Respectful Suggestion vs. Competitive Advantage

Generational differences in initiative were particularly pronounced, shaped by power-distance cultural norms.

Elders: "Wait to be asked." A rural elder explained the traditional norm:

"When I was working, you did not go to your manager with problems unless you also had solutions. But you also did not take action without permission. That would be disrespectful. You would be seen as someone who does not know their place. Initiative meant working hard at what you were told to do, not deciding for yourself what to do. The manager knows more than you. Your job is to follow." (Participant 25, male, rural elder, retired local government, 32 years of experience)

An urban elder acknowledged generational change:

"Young people today are not afraid to speak. They will tell the manager that a process is wrong. They will suggest changes. In my day, that would have been insubordination. Today, some managers welcome it. I do not know if this is good or bad. On one hand, young people see things we miss. On the other hand, there is a loss of respect. They do not 'earn the right' before speaking. They assume their opinion matters equally from day one." (Participant 09, male, urban elder, manufacturing supervisor, 30 years of experience)

Youth: "Show what you can do." An urban youth described initiative as a career strategy:

"If I wait to be told what to do, I will never get ahead. There are twenty people who can do my job. The way to stand out is to do more than you are asked. To see a problem and fix it without being told. To bring ideas to your manager. That is how you get promoted. Elders see this as disrespectful. I see it as necessary. In a competitive job market, the quiet worker who just follows orders stays in the same position forever." (Participant 03, female, urban youth, financial services, 5 years of experience)

A rural youth described the tension:

"I want to take initiative. I see things on the farm that could be done better. But my father, who is also my boss, does not want to hear it. He says I am young and I do not understand. So, I keep quiet. In the village, respect for elders is more important than showing initiative. Maybe if I moved to Accra, I could speak more. Here, I must wait." (Participant 21, male, rural youth, family farm, 4 years of experience)

7.4 Theme 4: The Elders' Lament: Declining Work Ethic Across Generations

Across all elder participants, a consistent narrative emerged: work ethic has declined significantly across generations, and this decline threatens Ghana's development.

"We were different." One elder reflected:

"Young people today do not know hardship. We grew up with nothing. We walked miles to school. We shared one textbook between ten students. We learned that nothing comes easily.

That shaped us. Today's youth have mobile phones, social media, and fast food. They expect everything to be fast and easy. They give up when work is hard. We did not have the option to give up. That is the difference." (Participant 28, female, rural elder, retired nurse, 38 years of experience)

"No one wants to suffer anymore." Another elder lamented:

"Work is suffering. That is what my father taught me. You suffer through the hard work, and at the end, you have something to show for it. Young people do not want to suffer. They want the reward without the work. They want to be managers without being workers first. They want high salaries without paying dues. This is not sustainable. A country cannot develop if its young people do not want to work hard." (Participant 16, male, urban elder, retired state enterprise, 35 years of experience)

A rural elder added a nuanced observation:

"I blame the schools and the parents. We have stopped teaching work ethic at home. Parents give children everything, so they do not learn to earn. Schools pass students who cannot read just to meet targets. The young person arrives at work expecting praise for minimal effort. We have failed to teach them. So, I am angry at them, but I am also angry at us, the elders, for not teaching better." (Participant 26, male, rural elder, retired agricultural extension officer, 33 years of experience)

7.5 Theme 5: The Youth's Rebuttal: Changing Times, Different Expectations

Youth participants rejected the narrative of moral decline, arguing that economic conditions have fundamentally changed and that the work ethic must adapt.

"The contract is broken." An urban youth explained:

"Elders tell us to work hard and be loyal. But loyal to what? Companies fire people with no warning. They hire on contract for three months, so they do not have to pay benefits. They do not offer pensions anymore. My father worked for one company for thirty years and got a pension. I have changed jobs five times in eight years. Why would I be loyal? Why would I work late for a company that will replace me tomorrow? The contract between the worker and the employer is broken. Work ethic has to change with it." (Participant 06, male, urban youth, logistics, 8 years of experience)

"Why work hard for nothing?" A rural youth added:

"Elders say we do not want to work hard. That is not true. We work very hard. But we want to see something for it. My father worked hard his whole life and has nothing to show. No

savings, no house, no car. He worked hard and stayed poor. I want to work smart, not just hard. I want to find opportunities, not just accept suffering. That is not laziness. That is learning from what I saw." (Participant 23, female, rural youth, small trader, 6 years of experience)

An urban youth articulated a vision of a conditional work ethic:

"I have a good work ethic when I am treated well. At my current job, my manager respects me, listens to my ideas, and gives me feedback. I work late without being asked. I take initiative. I care about the company. At my previous job, I was treated like a machine. I did the minimum. The difference is not my character. The difference is how I am treated. If you want a good work ethic from young people, create a good workplace. It is that simple." (Participant 02, female, urban youth, technology, 4 years of experience)

7.6 Theme 6: The Urban-Rural Divide in Opportunity and Accountability

Geographic setting emerged as a powerful moderator of work ethic, often more influential than generation alone.

Rural monitoring. A rural participant explained the accountability mechanism:

"In the village, there is nowhere to hide. If I am lazy, everyone knows. My neighbours see when I leave for the farm. My family sees how much work I do. The market women see if I arrive late. Your reputation is everything here. If people think you are lazy, you cannot get help when you need it. You become a topic of gossip. That pressure makes you work hard, whether you want to or not." (Participant 24, male, rural youth, farmer, 5 years of experience)

Urban anonymity. An urban participant described the opposite:

"In Accra, no one knows who you are. Your neighbours do not know your name. Your boss only sees you if you are late. You can disappear into the city. If you lose one job, you find another. There is no community watching you. That freedom is good, but it also means you can be lazy without consequences. Some people take advantage of that. In the village, laziness is punished by the community. In Accra, laziness is punished only by the employer, and only if they notice." (Participant 04, male, urban youth, retail, 3 years of experience)

The migration effect. An urban elder who migrated from a rural area described the transformation:

"I grew up in the Volta Region, in a small village. When I came to Accra at 18, I brought a village work ethic with me. I was early every day. I worked hard without supervision. I did not complain. That is how I advanced. But my children, born in Accra, do not have that. They have a city mentality. They see people who succeed without hard work. They see corruption.

They see shortcuts. The city changes your values. Rural people work harder because they have not been corrupted by city options." (Participant 13, male, urban elder, retired banker, 37 years of experience)

A rural youth planning to migrate acknowledged:

"I work very hard here because I have to. But I am working hard to leave. I want to go to Accra or Kumasi. I know that when I get there, maybe I will work less. Or maybe I will work differently. I cannot say. But I know that village life teaches you to work. Whether that stays with you after you leave, that depends on the person." (Participant 20, female, rural youth, apprentice seamstress, 3 years of experience)

8. DISCUSSION

This qualitative study provides the first in-depth phenomenological exploration of generational and urban-rural differences in work ethic among Ghanaian workers. Six principal findings warrant discussion.

First, punctuality is understood fundamentally differently across generations. Elders frame punctuality as a moral virtue, a sign of respect for others, and a test of character. Youth frame punctuality as a flexible guideline, contingent on productivity and circumstances. This finding extends Generational Cohort Theory (Mannheim, 1952) by showing how different formative experiences (post-independence discipline vs. globalised flexibility) produce different value orientations toward time.

Second, diligence is motivated by different logics. The elders describe diligence as a survival necessity and a patriotic duty. The youths describe diligence as strategic and conditional, given only when rewards are perceived as fair. This supports research showing that younger workers are more transactional in their work orientation (Twenge et al., 2012).

Third, initiative is constrained by power-distance norms. Elders, particularly in rural settings, view initiative without permission as disrespectful. Youth, particularly urban youth, view initiative as necessary for career advancement. This finding has practical implications for supervision: traditional authority structures may inhibit the very initiative that modern organisations need.

Fourth, the elders' lament of declining work ethic is a consistent narrative, but youth reject this framing, arguing that economic conditions have fundamentally changed. This intergenerational disagreement reflects different assumptions about the employment contract. Elders assume a relational contract (loyalty exchanged for security); youth assume a transactional contract (effort exchanged for immediate reward) (Rousseau, 1995).

Fifth, geographic setting powerfully moderates work ethic, often more strongly than generation. Rural workers, regardless of age, demonstrate stronger traditional work ethic values than urban workers, due to community monitoring, reputation consequences, and fewer alternatives. This supports Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979): the microsystem of the rural community enforces work norms more effectively than the urban anonymous environment.

Limitations. Single-country study. The rural sample drawn from one region (Eastern) is not representative of all rural Ghana. Participants were volunteers, potentially over-representing articulate or engaged workers. A cross-sectional design cannot trace how work ethic changes as individuals migrate.

9. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study investigated how generational cohort and geographic setting influence work ethic values among Ghanaian workers. Elders frame punctuality as a moral virtue; youth frame it as a flexible guideline. Elders view diligence as a survival necessity; youth view it as conditional on reward. Elders see initiative without permission as disrespectful; youth see it as a career necessity. Elders lament declining work ethic; youth argue that economic conditions have changed. Urban-rural differences are powerful: rural workers maintain stronger traditional values due to community monitoring and fewer alternatives. Urban youths are the most distant from the traditional work ethic, while rural elders are the closest. These findings suggest that work ethic is not a fixed trait but is shaped by generational experience and geographic context.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

For Employers and Managers

Adapt Supervision to Generational Preferences. For elder workers, provide clear rules and respect traditional authority. For youth workers, provide autonomy, feedback, and conditional rewards tied to performance.

Redefine Punctuality Policies. Shift from face-time metrics to output-based accountability, particularly for urban youth workers who value productivity over presence.

Create Intergenerational Mentoring Programmes. Pair elder and youth workers to transfer traditional work values while youth teach digital and initiative skills.

For Policy Makers

Strengthen Rural Work Ethic Transmission. Recognise that rural communities maintain strong traditional work values; support community-based apprenticeship and intergenerational skill transfer.

Address Youth Resentment. The conditional work ethic of youth reflects real economic precarity. Policies that improve job security and reward transparency will strengthen the youths' work ethic.

For Future Research

Conduct Longitudinal Migration Studies. Track how work ethic changes when rural youth migrate to urban areas.

Extend to the Private Sector. This study included diverse sectors; future research should compare formal vs. informal sector differences.

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