Hearing More Than What's Said: Exploring Workplace Feedback Among Early-Career Gen Z Professionals

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Supervisor: Dr. Ishan Jalan

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Completing my master's at LSE stands as proof that with courage, determination, and the support of those we love, no dream is ever too far to reach. Thank you for helping me turn mine into reality.

To my parents – Your unwavering belief in me has made this journey possible, standing by me through every challenge and celebrating every success. You taught me resilience, patience, and the value of hard work. Everything I achieve is a reflection of what you have given me.

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1. ABSTRACT

This study explores how early-career Gen Z professionals experience and interpret feedback at work. While feedback is widely framed as key to growth, limited research has examined how it is perceived by those navigating the transition into organisational life. Addressing this gap, the study adopts a qualitative approach, phenomenologically inspired and interpretivist in paradigm, drawing on 15 semi-structured interviews with Gen Z knowledge workers across organisational settings. The findings reveal that feedback is experienced as a reflective and directional force – a mirror shaping identity and a guide leading to action. This interpretation is influenced by processes of socialisation, early-career vulnerability, and organisational dynamics. Emphasising how participants make sense of feedback in context, the study reframes it as a relational, processual, and situated practice. In doing so, it extends feedback theory and offers valuable insights for leaders in delivering feedback and for organisations in designing feedback systems tailored to this group.

Keywords: *feedback, early career, Gen Z, sensemaking, identity, organisational dynamics*

2. INTRODUCTION

Across professional and social domains, performance is increasingly tracked, compared, and made visible, elevating the significance of evaluation in both theory and practice. Espeland and Sauder (2007) note that over the past two decades, rising demands for accountability and transparency have driven the widespread use of metrics and rankings applied to individuals and organisations alike. Praise and judgment now unfold in real time, and workplaces are no exception. Within them, a key mechanism for assessing employees is feedback (Anseel & Scherf, 2025).

Although extensively studied, feedback lacks a singular definition (Anseel & Scherf, 2025). It is broadly described as the "communication of information about past performance, ... implicitly implying future change" (Anseel & Scherf, 2025, p. 23). Organisationally, it is often framed as a managerial tool to align behaviour with strategic goals, making it central to employee development (Kahmann & Mulder, 2011). Much research has therefore focused on linking its valence to various outcomes such as performance, commitment, and organisational effectiveness (Becker & Klimoski, 1989; Norris-Watts & Levy, 2004). However, such approaches tend to treat feedback as an output-driven transmission from giver to receiver, overlooking emotional, relational, and contextual dynamics that shape its interpretation. In essence, this technocratic framing reduces feedback to a deliverable product, rather than a felt experience.

Recognising these limitations, scholars have begun to challenge dominant models, citing inconsistent findings and stagnated empirical progress (Anseel et al., 2013; Anseel & Scherf, 2025). Calls for more experience-oriented approaches are growing (Mattick et al., 2019), and this thesis responds by examining feedback through the lens of a specific group: early-career professionals within Generation Z (Gen Z). Born between 1997 and 2012, Gen Z is entering the 21st-century workplace rapidly, yet organisations remain largely unprepared to support their integration (Schroth, 2019). Socialised in evaluative environments shaped by education and media, they are acutely attuned to impression management and validation (Ballara, 2023; Leslie et al., 2021).

This generational orientation intersects with a pivotal career moment: organisational entry, marked by psychological precarity and identity formation (Ibarra, 1999). During that phase, individuals negotiate perceptions of competence, belonging, and legitimacy (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Nevertheless, little is known about how early-career Gen Z professionals experience feedback amid the transition, despite the awareness that their circumstances and

requirements differ from those of seasoned colleagues, primarily because of limited familiarity with workplace routines (Mattick et al., 2019).

Importantly, instead of seeking to define a singular Gen Z feedback experience, the dissertation foregrounds participants' narratives, showing how meaning emerges from the interplay between personal and contextual factors. Anchoring reflections in a wider socio-cultural backdrop, it sheds light on how individuals raised in contemporary performance cultures engage with an established organisational practice of evaluation at a formative stage. A qualitative methodology was chosen to illuminate the interpretive dimensions of this unique negotiation.

Ultimately, this study positions the intersection of generational context, career phase, and workplace feedback as an underexplored site of sensemaking, understood as the process by which individuals make meaning of their experiences (Weick, 1995). Findings reveal feedback as more than a performance management tool: it is a cultural artefact influenced by institutional logics, a relational event driven by tone and trust, and a developmental pathway that helps early-career Gen Z professionals orient themselves and act. Through these interwoven dimensions, feedback becomes a medium for newcomers to locate themselves within, and adapt to, the workplace. Such insights matter for research and application, as approaches to feedback rooted in outdated assumptions risk missing the needs of a generation actively reshaping the workforce.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

To illustrate why the study brings Gen Z, early career, and feedback together, the following sections synthesise three siloed strands of literature: (1) Gen Z's socialised orientations to feedback, (2) early career as a formative and precarious period, and (3) feedback at work. Across these domains, feedback emerges as an affectively charged, high-stakes practice, yet one remaining under-theorised in concept and experience. In response, this review argues for a more psychologically embedded and socially situated approach to feedback that recognises its role in processes of adjustment, thereby establishing the study's rationale and identifying the gaps it seeks to address.

3.1 Gen Z's Socialised Orientations to Feedback

As members of the contemporary early-career workforce, Gen Z professionals enter organisations with experiences shaped by digital and educational environments (Schroth, 2019). While scholars have outlined workplace preferences for this cohort, including around feedback (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021), the literature remains largely descriptive, offering limited insight into how they navigate feedback within complex organisational settings. To contextualise the study's inquiry, it is hence useful to consider how orientations to feedback may have been developed through the evaluative cultures many have grown up in.

Social media, a ubiquitous part of Gen Z's lives, has become a key site of evaluation (Gaidhani et al., 2019). Marwick's (2013) analysis of status-seeking online illustrates how likes, comments, and shares function as feedback loops, placing the self in public hierarchies of approval. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory, these exchanges can be seen as extensions of performance work – interactive "front stage" (p. 23) moments in which users actively manage impressions. Turkle (2011) further contends that such interactions carry emotional weight, priming individuals to monitor external cues for a sense of connection and worth.

Ballara's (2023) synthesis of social validation literature reinforces this view, showing how exposure and reaction cycles influence self-presentation strategies long before work life begins. Curated online displays invite evaluation and highlight success, prompting upward and downward comparison (Anderson & Wood, 2020). Within those spaces, digital communication normalises frequent rating, and the sense that one's value is both measurable and contingent. Many Gen Z professionals thus enter the workplace with a baseline relationship to feedback formed through constant benchmarking, having learned to track approval and reposition themselves strategically.

These mechanisms intersect with broader societal pressures. Han (2015) argues that neoliberal achievement societies progressively frame every interaction as a test of adequacy, fuelling burnout masked as self-optimisation. Similarly, Butler and Spoelstra (2012) describe cultures of excellence in which relentless demands for performance render success provisional and belonging dependent on impression management. Together, such dynamics propose that many young entrants face a double bind: accustomed to and at times craving continuous appraisal, yet primed to experience criticism as a threat to belonging and future viability. This becomes even more pronounced for Gen Z, who transition from safe-to-fail educational environments emphasising encouragement over correction, offering little preparation for hierarchical and critical feedback (Schroth, 2019).

However, socialisations do not apply uniformly, with feedback expectations varying across personality types and settings (London & Smither, 2002). Accordingly, the section treats digital feedback cultures and generational identity not as fixed determinants of workplace behaviour, but situates them as one layer in a wider psychological context for interpreting the feedback patterns observed in the study. Specifically, it suggests that organisational feedback systems can misalign with the micro-feedback cultures that have taught Gen Z employees to expect regular, emotionally salient input. Recognising this mismatch is central to rethinking how feedback is delivered in today's generational landscape. Ultimately, it is the interplay between formative influences and the specifics of early career life that this research underscores. The next part therefore turns to these proximal factors, focusing on the demands characterising this stage of working life.

3.2 Early Career as a Formative and Precarious Period

The transition into work marks a profound developmental period, exposing newcomers to unfamiliar surroundings (Louis, 1980). Beyond mastering role-specific skills, this phase requires crossing functional, hierarchical, and inclusionary thresholds reshaping one's sense of self (Schein, 1971). Organisational entry initiates what van Maanen and Schein (1979) call the "outsider-to-insider passage" (p. 6), a rite by which individuals begin to internalise the tacit logics and expectations of their workplace. In that context, newcomers must navigate structures, manage supervision and feedback, decode reward systems, and build a credible presence (Louis, 1980; Schein, 1978). Far from a straightforward learning curve, it is a dynamic and precarious terrain.

A central mechanism in this adaptation is organisational socialisation, involving the transmission of cultural knowledge – "the way we do things around here" (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, p. 4) – and

the development of perceptual filters that help newcomers interpret events in line with workplace norms (van Maanen & Schein, 1979). The process is thereby mediated through relationships with supervisors and peers, who signal which behaviours are valued or to be avoided (van Maanen & Schein, 1979). The affective intensity of those encounters is heightened by what Hughes (1958) termed "reality shock" (as cited in Louis, 1980, p. 230), namely the dissonance between prior routines of working and the unforeseen demands of organisational life. Such shocks activate identity motives, prompting efforts to reposition oneself within the social fabric (Ashforth, 2000). They also make newcomers especially sensitive to environmental cues, with everyday experiences potentially unfreezing identities and catalysing personal change (Ashforth, 2000).

Early career becomes a period of identity play, where individuals test, revise, and sometimes discard provisional selves (Ibarra, 1999). By gauging others' reactions to one's behaviour, newcomers learn how possible selves are perceived (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Hereby, the stakes are high: failure to convey role-consistent impressions can erode legitimacy, while successfully enacting one's position facilitates passage through inclusion boundaries and supports identity consolidation (Goffman, 1959; van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Clear input plays a critical role in refining values and talents, and identification with admired role models infuses action with meaning, helping individuals move from compliance to internalised commitment (Ibarra, 1999; Schein, 1978).

Ashforth and Schinoff (2016) similarly frame early career as an identity-disrupting experience, characterised by cycles of sensebreaking and sensemaking. Sensebreaking involves destabilising previous self-conceptions, creating a void that fuels the search for new meaning (Pratt, 2000). This process is deeply affective, driven by needs for coherence, control, belonging, and validation. Emotions shape which cues people attend to, how they interpret ambiguity, and which experiences trigger sensemaking, especially during crisis and change (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Following Weick et al. (2005), sensemaking enables newcomers to craft narratives rendering those experiences actionable, an essential step in forming a professional identity. Such narratives guide behavioural adjustments, as individuals test actions, receive reactions, and gradually articulate who they are becoming (Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2008).

Throughout the process, identity construction hinges on the interplay between self-perception and others' reflections (Burke, 1991; Mead, 1934). Newcomers actively solicit feedback to calibrate behaviour and self-concept, relying particularly on input from supervisors and peers (Ashford &

Taylor, 1990). Social validation thus becomes an important mechanism for consolidating mind and self, ultimately asserting belonging (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). However, as Ibarra (1999) cautions, input is always filtered through emotional and relational lenses. Affirming signals can bolster growth, whereas negative responses from close connections may erode confidence and exacerbate imposter feelings (Clance & Imes, 1978), breaking the loop by leaving individuals to wrestle with fears that their competence is under scrutiny.

Psychoanalytic perspectives on organisations further illuminate the affective currents within these relationships (Gabriel, 1999). Gabriel's (1997) work on leader-follower bonds shows how employees oftentimes project unconscious fantasies of omnipotence and omniscience onto authority figures. Moments of interaction with leaders become significant, with the potential to affirm or destabilise identity claims. This helps explain why seemingly trivial events – "the nature of one's first major assignment, a chance remark overheard in the wash room, poor advice from a veteran coworker, the first invitation from a coworker to a social event, an unpleasant feedback session with one's supervisor" (Ashforth, 2000, p. 174) – can evolve into formative turning points.

Taken together, early career is an affectively charged, relationally sensitive period of identity development and professional adaptation. It is characterised by sensebreaking and sensemaking, the testing and revision of possible selves, and the weighted dynamics of feedback. Recognising this complexity is essential to understanding why early feedback encounters become pivotal sites of meaning-making, an aspect overlooked in mainstream literature, as the following section explores.

3.3 Feedback at Work

Organisational psychology has long conceptualised feedback as a core tool for shaping behaviour, learning, and performance at work (Johnson et al., 2023; London, 2015). Yet, despite this centrality, it remains a heterogeneous construct: studied across divergent fields, operationalised through inconsistent assumptions, and analysed at multiple levels. As a result, rather than a unified body of theory, research presents a landscape of "faces" (Anseel & Scherf, 2025, p. 20), a scattered terrain struggling to explain what feedback is and what it yields.

This fragmentation reflects feedback's instrumental scope, encompassing informal remarks, formal reviews, and ambient cues embedded in everyday work (London & Smither, 2002). It also stems from the dominance of linear models that frame feedback as a one-way flow from giver to

receiver, ideally resulting in behavioural change (Kahmann & Mulder, 2011). Within this paradigm, valence has attracted the most empirical attention, with many studies linking the sign of feedback to its acceptance and impact (Podsakoff & Farh, 1989). Feedback Intervention Theory (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) is one of the influential theories further exemplifying this framing, proposing that task-focused feedback improves performance, whereas feedback directed at one's personality can undermine it. However, as Anseel and Scherf (2025) argue, these models fail to capture the complexity of real-world responses that feedback can trigger.

Initial integrative reviews, notably by Ilgen et al. (1979), already mapped feedback reception as a multidimensional process shaped by message characteristics, source attributes, recipient traits, and contextual factors. From this perspective, feedback is not simply delivered but interpreted through the self and the dynamics of the encounter. Factors such as the credibility of the source, the clarity of delivery, as well as the recipient's expectations all impact whether feedback is attended to and used (Ilgen et al., 1979). Nonetheless, seminal insights have been overshadowed by research favouring measurable outcomes, at the expense of subjective experiences (Anseel & Scherf, 2025). The result is a reductionist framing of feedback as a discrete intervention.

To tackle those limitations, scholars have re-centred systemic and cultural influences. London and Smither (2002) introduced the concept of feedback culture, framing feedback as a process embedded in a social system, where repeated experiences shape individuals' perceptions of how feedback operates and how safe or worthwhile it feels to engage with. This culture is reinforced through practices that improve feedback quality and provide support for using input, thus signalling its value. Building on that foundation, recent work advocates for examining feedback in an ecosystem, "where feedback events and reactions to them are embedded within cultural systems" (Anseel & Scherf, 2025, p. 37). Together, such perspectives foreground the interaction between micro-level exchanges and macro-level contexts.

Interpersonal and identity-focused studies of feedback expand this view. For example, Rösler et al. (2023) used EEGs to show that feedback from ingroup members can heighten rather than reduce emotional threat. Despite assumptions that shared identity promotes openness, their participants exhibited greater defensiveness and decreased engagement when criticised by people from the same social group. Similarly, Geddes and Konrad's (2003) survey study demonstrated that negative feedback from demographically similar leaders can provoke identity threat when it violates

expectations of support and solidarity. These findings challenge the idea that feedback simply lands based on its content, highlighting its relational and emotional texture.

In sum, the literature reflects a field in transition: from transactional models towards more socially embedded, affectively attuned understandings. Nevertheless, the shift remains partial and unevenly integrated, with research continuing to study feedback instrumentally through quantitative and experimental designs. While this critique underpins emerging feedback literature, the present study extends them by focusing specifically on early-career Gen Z professionals. The following section articulates these conceptual and empirical gaps, culminating in the research question.

3.4 Gaps and Research Question

Despite growing interest in how generational shifts are reshaping workplaces, research on feedback and Gen Z remains underdeveloped. Although many sources offer surface-level generalisations regarding this cohort's preferences (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Schroth, 2019), few ground those claims in lived experiences. As Benítez-Márquez et al. (2022) observe, scholarship on Gen Z as workforce entrants is still in its early stages. In parallel, feedback research itself is fragmented and distant from practice (Anseel & Scherf, 2025), providing little insight into how feedback shapes the learning and identity development of newcomers (Mattick et al., 2019).

Consequently, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no approach yet integrates generational context, early career, and workplace feedback, leaving an intersecting gap. While studies in academic settings have started to highlight its formative weight (Rowe, 2016; Ryan & Henderson, 2018), little is known about how young professionals – socialised through feedback loops, cultures of excellence, and performance pressures – engage with feedback upon organisational entry. Moreover, much of the generational literature tends to position Gen Z as a cohort to manage (Schroth, 2019), flattening their narratives into stereotypes rather than amplifying their voices.

By centring participants' stories, the study addresses these gaps, offering a nuanced understanding of how feedback is made meaningful and carried forward in early career. In doing so, it contributes to generational, early career, and feedback literatures, at a time when organisations are managing multiple generational cohorts simultaneously (Wyatt & Potage, 2024). It therefore asks:

How do early-career Gen Z professionals experience and interpret feedback at work?

4. METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology used to answer the research question. It begins with the research design, followed by participant recruitment and data collection. It then describes the analytic process, concluding with ethical considerations and researcher reflexivity.

4.1 Research Design

To examine how early-career Gen Z professionals experience and interpret feedback at work, a qualitative, phenomenologically inspired approach was selected. Given the study's exploratory focus on meaning-making, this design was considered most appropriate (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Phenomenology offered a lens for exploring lived experiences as perceived by individuals themselves, emphasising how feedback is felt, interpreted, and integrated into practice and self (Frechette et al., 2020; Moustakas, 1994). This orientation also pointed to relational and symbolic dimensions, treating participants as co-constructors of meaning in dialogue (Gill, 2020). It was thus both philosophically coherent and practically flexible for investigating feedback as an experientially embedded phenomenon.

4.2 Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. An initial call for participants via LinkedIn (see Appendix A) generated no responses, prompting a shift to personal outreach. Contacts referred people in their networks, which created a snowballing chain. Within that pool of referrals, participants were purposively sampled to ensure they met the study's inclusion criteria. It also enabled the intentional selection of individuals with direct experiences of early career feedback (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Although the recruitment route proved effective in accessing professionals across different roles and industries, it may have introduced sampling bias (Parker et al., 2019). Because the initial connections came from the researcher's peers, female individuals with degrees from research-intensive institutions such as LSE were slightly overrepresented, potentially narrowing perspectives to more privileged educational backgrounds. This homogeneity could have shaped how feedback was articulated and discussed, differing from the experiences of professionals in less elite or structurally distinct environments, hence not reflecting the total Gen Z workforce. These factors should be considered when assessing the findings' broader applicability.

The final sample comprised 15 participants, ten women and five men. Participants were based in continental Europe, Asia, the US, and the UK, offering insight into varied national and organisational cultures. Inclusion criteria were as follows:

(1) Graduates, aged 18-28
(2) In their first 6-24 months of full-time employment
(3) Employed in knowledge-worker roles (e.g., finance, consulting, HR, design, tech, research).

The age range reflected the upper boundary of Gen Z, respecting ethical guidelines that exclude interviewing individuals under 18. The employment window ensured participants had received feedback beyond probation but remained within the formative stages of their careers, aligning with Mattick et al.'s (2019) definition of early career professionals as graduates in their first two years of practice. The focus on knowledge workers – employees applying specialised expertise to problem-solving and innovation (Drucker, 1959) – was equally deliberate. Success in those roles often lacks clear metrics, requiring individuals to process feedback in high-pressure, fast-paced environments (Ashford et al., 2003). As such, the sample offered an especially rich context for studying how feedback is experienced and interpreted.

4.3 Instruments and Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their fit with a phenomenological orientation, enabling participants to articulate feedback experiences in their own words. This method balanced consistency with flexibility, allowing narratives to unfold while giving the researcher scope to clarify meaning when needed (Brinkmann, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Additionally, it created space for situated storytelling crucial for uncovering deeper layers of interpretation beyond surface-level descriptions (Abkhezr et al., 2018), and aligned with the study's aim of theory-building in an underexplored area of sensemaking (Lee et al., 1999).

Upon participants' request, two interviews took place in person in undisturbed meeting rooms on campus, whereas the remaining thirteen were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. Several participants were native German speakers and hence offered the option to be interviewed in German. Nonetheless, all chose English, citing its use as the primary language in their organisation or previous university. Interviews averaged 55 minutes in length.

A topic guide (see Appendix C) outlined key areas of interest, at the same time provided flexibility in sequencing of the questions. Two pilot interviews, conducted with peers prior to formal data

collection, led to minor refinements in wording for improved clarity and flow. Instead of a rigid script, the guide functioned as a conversational scaffold, prompting reflection and enabling a responsive interviewing style that invited participants to speak freely (Knott et al., 2022). As a result, interviews unfolded in a relaxed manner, with participants often taking the lead. The researcher intentionally cultivated this dynamic to promote ease and safety, yet ensured that all core themes were covered to support comparability during analysis.

Alternative methodologies were considered; however, they were set aside. A quantitative study was rejected because the goal was not to measure or generalise, but to explore the "what's" and "how's" of feedback as subjectively experienced. Standardised scales risk flattening these nuanced aspects, thus obscuring below-the-surface dynamics involved in their interpretation (Gioia et al., 2013). Other qualitative methods, such as ethnography and focus groups, equally seemed less appropriate. Ethnography, while useful for in-situ observation, offered limited access to participants' internal reflections surrounding feedback (Knott et al., 2022). Focus groups were ruled out due to the potential for group dynamics to inhibit individual storytelling (Morgan, 1997).

4.4 Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams' transcription function, then manually reviewed for accuracy and anonymised in Microsoft Word. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), supplemented by thematic network techniques described by Attride-Stirling (2001). RTA was chosen for its compatibility with the study's experiential orientation and interpretivist aims, placing particular value on the meaning participants ascribed to the topic under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Themes were developed inductively through close engagement with the data rather than imposed from pre-existing theoretical categories (Boyatzis, 1998). Although the study did not aim to critically interrogate discourse or power structures, it acknowledged that organisational hierarchies and broader socio-cultural factors shaped participants' interpretations of feedback. The analysis attended to those influences as described directly by participants, treating their accounts as contextualised experiences of feedback analysed through the researcher's active role in identifying salient patterns across the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Coding was iterative and recursive, starting with line-by-line readings of printed transcripts to build familiarity. During the readings, reflective memos were written and meaningful segments, namely

explicit statements and subtler emotional cues, were highlighted. Early codes hence included both semantic (surface-level) and latent (underlying) elements (Byrne, 2022). These elements were then clustered into interrelated ideas, forming the basis of themes. Further comparing across transcripts, themes were refined based on their coherence and relevance to the research question, consistent with an experiential orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2014). This process yielded two global themes: "Feedback is a Mirror and a Guide" and "Shaped by the System and the Situated Self", each comprising three organising themes and associated basic codes (see Appendix D).

4.5 Ethics and Reflexivity

The LSE Psychological and Behavioural Science Department granted ethical approval for the study on May 9, 2025. Although the topic posed low-risk, provisions were in place to safeguard participant well-being in the event of distressing feedback disclosures. An information and consent form was emailed in advance, detailing the study's aims, anonymity measures, and participants' right to withdraw and skip questions (see Appendix B). The sheet additionally obtained consent for audio recording. These aspects were reiterated verbally before each interview, in line with LSE's guidelines and best practices in qualitative social science research, thereby helping to establish a respectful and trusting interview environment (Knott et al., 2022).

Beyond procedural ethics (Guillemin & Guillam, 2004), reflexivity was central. As a Gen Z researcher with recent internship experiences, I shared several touchpoints with participants, including navigating feedback and early career challenges. This conferred a partial insider-status (Fujii, 2017), surfacing in participants' use of colloquial affirmations ("you know?"; "right?") and invitations for me to share my perspective. Exactly half of the sample were also LSE alumni, adding a layer of familiarity.

While the proximity facilitated rapport-building (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), it carried the risk of projecting my experiences onto participants or interpreting their narratives through my lens. At times, participants' accounts mirrored feedback I had encountered, prompting an urge to validate their stories or share experiences of my own. Aware of this dynamic, I engaged in deliberate reflexive practices. During data collection, I maintained an exploratory stance, listening carefully and using neutral prompts to clarify rather than confirm preconceived assumptions (Adams, 2010). Similarly, during analysis, moments of personal resonance were noted in a reflexive journal, providing a space to assess how my positionality might be impacting the data's interpretation (Smith, 1999). At times, I also returned to the transcripts to re-engage with participants' exact

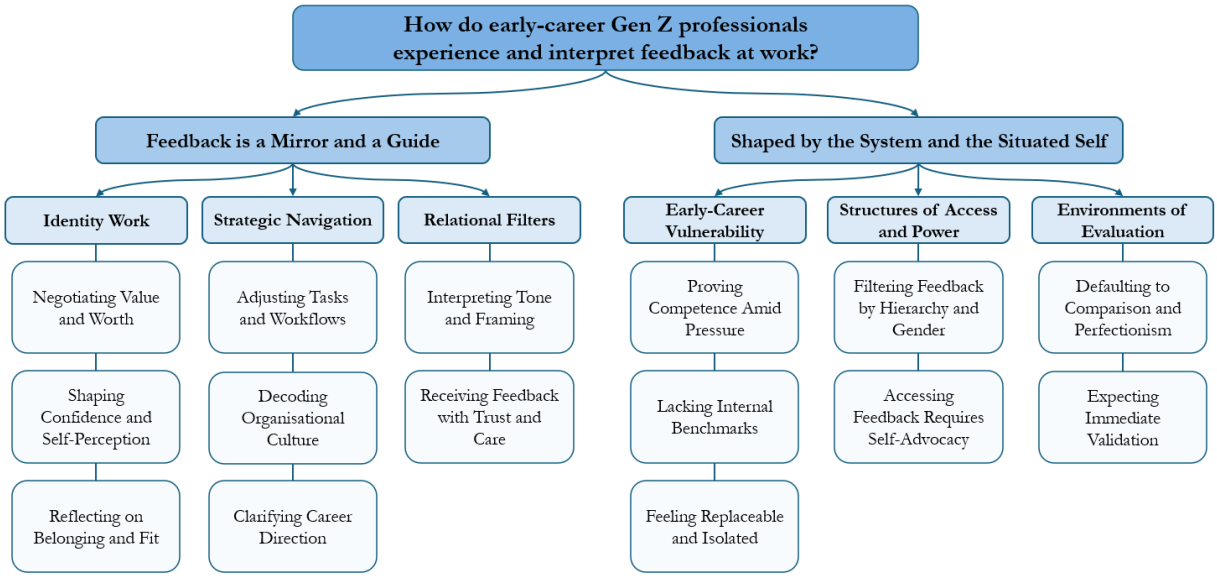
words, ensuring that coding remained grounded in their perspectives. Altogether, these efforts helped centre their voices in alignment with the research design, while recognising that researcher influence is inevitable and may have shaped the findings presented in the following chapter.

5. FINDINGS

This chapter summarises the themes identified from the data (Figure 1), illustrated with participant quotes.

Figure 1

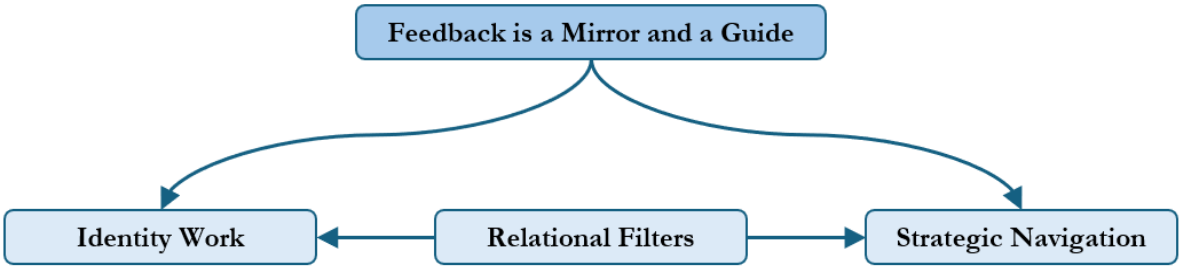
Thematic Network



5.1 Feedback is a Mirror and a Guide

The first global theme showed that for early-career Gen Z professionals, feedback is strategically used to understand who they are, how they are perceived, and where they are headed. Accordingly, feedback was experienced as serving two roles simultaneously: a mirror, reflecting a sense of self, and a guide, orienting action. Crucially, both roles were shaped by who delivered the feedback and how it was framed, making it relationally situated (Figure 2). Mirrors were held by others, and their angle and intention clarified or distorted the reflection. Guidance, too, only became actionable when it felt credible and safe to follow.

Figure 2



5.1.1 Identity Work

Across the data, feedback emerged as a key site of **identity negotiation**, where participants grappled with questions of place, purpose, and potential. Three dynamics stood out: feedback became a means of negotiating value and worth, shaped confidence and self-perception, and prompted reflection on belonging and fit. Collectively, they represent a developmental arc from seeking reassurance, to building belief, to evaluating alignment, suggesting that feedback functions as a scaffold for professional identity formation in early career (Ibarra, 1999).

For participants, feedback was **emotionally anchoring**. Validation from others often outweighed self-assurance, stabilising identity during periods of doubt:

> *"...having other people believe in yourself because often something goes wrong, or nothing comes out, or you put a lot of work in and nothing comes out. In those moments, I rather need someone else to believe in me than myself because what do I know? I'm so early in this role."* – P1

> *"...I think an individual can know their strong suits, but sometimes external validation helps them believe in those strong suits. And while I am very confident with certain skills of mine..., at the end of the day, without the validation, sometimes it feels like an open-ended circle."* – P12

Feeling seen sustained motivation when the value of one's work felt unclear. Here, validation was less about praise and more about being noticed in environments where effort could easily become invisible:

> *"Because I think like being gratified at work is quite important, and you having satisfaction and feeling important is key to working. Otherwise, you're just a cog in the machine. It's like the work you do doesn't even matter."* – P6

Over time, **affirmations crystallised stronger self-narratives**. Feedback closed a psychological loop between internal belief and external recognition, enabling a progression from "I think I'm good at this" to "others think so too" and finally "I know I am":

> *"...I always saw myself as somebody that wouldn't be very good at the corporate life…, but increasingly realising more that I can do it. ... And so feedback has been a learning journey, like through it I saw my self-esteem and skills, and as a person, that I'm made for the corporate world, no matter where my future takes me."* – P2

Some recounted how feedback **reframed traits** they had doubted, transforming behaviours they had viewed as flaws into professionally desirable traits:

> *"...his feedback to me was like 'I like how you come and you get the things done that you need to get done.' Like even if there's one minute left in the meeting, I'm like 'No, no, no, I have one more thing.' ... And I was thinking like oh wow, 'cause that same behaviour, like I thought it was annoying, but he liked it. He thought it showed something else."* – P4

Feedback, then, acted as a diagnostic tool for alignment, prompting reflection on whether they were in the right role or organisation. In that sense, it revealed **connection or dissonance between self and setting**, with negative feedback sparking doubts surrounding fit:

> *"...I was questioning my role. Like if I'm doing the right thing, if I should do something else, whether I belong here, or whether I should just go and find something new..."* – P1

Affirming feedback, by contrast, strengthened **belonging** and increased **organisational commitment** (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Being recognised by others helped participants internalise their place in the system, reinforcing contribution:

> *"...I think you also feel a little bit more integrated into the organisational culture. You feel like a lot more like you want to do well for the company, you know? So yeah, I think like when people appreciate work..., it feels like you want to keep doing that. You keep wanting to like help others and keep the whole thing up and running."* – P2

5.1.2 Strategic Navigation

While "Identity Work" explored what feedback meant to the self, "Strategic Navigation" centres on what participants did with it. They emerged as **intentional curators**, using feedback to adjust, improve, and gain clarity. The theme therefore marks a shift from affirmation to action: whether recalibrating short-term tasks or planning long-term moves, feedback converted uncertainty into momentum.

At a micro level, feedback supported day-to-day learning by enabling participants to refine their approaches to tasks. Instead of relying solely on trial and error, participants described how targeted input accelerated their **learning curve** by revealing more efficient mental models:

> *"I was working on this modelling project, and it's very technical. ... And I was doing it in, let's say, ACBDZHG order. And just three pointers on the way of thinking...was very important as feedback that I was given, and it enabled me to solve it in ABCDEFG."* – P7

Some recalled adopting new habits that enhanced structure and reliability. In such cases, feedback facilitated **behavioural change**, oftentimes through small but visible acts of adjustment signalling competence to others as well as to the self:

> *"...my manager also gave me feedback that initially, when I joined, they were slightly worried because they didn't see me making many notes. And I'm the kind of person where I think I learn through conversation, not necessarily through notes, but then I understood the value of that when I forgot something important they'd said in the meeting, so now I carry around like a notebook where I make notes of important tasks that I want to discuss. So I think that has directly impacted, you know, like, yeah, my organisational skills at work and how people see me because now they see me as someone, you know, who has the desire and order essentially, 'cause I have that notebook that I carry around to meetings..."* – P6

Additionally, feedback served as **cultural orientation**, helping them decode unspoken norms and adapt their communication styles. Such moments reveal how feedback bridges gaps between formal onboarding and the tacit expectations that define organisational fit:

> *"Coming from an internship in consulting, I was very like formal in how I wrote to people because I'm writing to a client, and clients are kind of rude and that, being like super nice to them. So I'm like, very like, super formal, like nice email. And my manager's like 'We don't do that here.'"* – P13

Overall, these insights guided early career professionals through an **implicit curriculum of organisational socialisation** (van Maanen & Schein, 1979):

> *"...in the beginning, feedback is very much about like ways of working in the organisation. ... What does good look like? And what does it mean to do well? Like what are the norms in this organisation? Like how do you want your outputs?"* – P15

Moreover, as participants looked ahead, feedback informed **strategic decisions** around what to pursue and what to avoid. In moments of career uncertainty, **validation clarified direction**, particularly when personal preferences were still forming:

"I think feedback is helpful where my manager's like 'Oh, you're quite good at this' because then it tells you oh, this is something that maybe I should continue to do because I'm good at it. You know, especially if you're lost in terms of what am I actually passionate about?" – P4

For others, feedback prompted a **rethinking of paths** altogether, pushing participants to reassess the industry's alignment with their aspirations and redefine their goals:

"...I kind of realised that I don't want to be doing this long-term, like particularly HR long-term. I could work in HR because I understand most of how things work, but I just, at this stage of my life..., I kind of want a more like fast-paced, a more like challenging job, just because I can learn more. So one of the things that...the feedbacks and everything made me realise is that...I've been able to figure this industry out a little bit, and so maybe I want to do something new now." – P10

5.1.3 Relational Filters

Lastly, **interpersonal dynamics** were a key determinant of how feedback was experienced and interpreted. This organising theme serves as a bridge between "Identity Work" and "Strategic Navigation", illuminating why some feedback builds identity and fuels action, whereas other feedback is resisted or dismissed.

Tone and framing significantly shaped feedback's impact. Participants did not resist critique per se; many welcomed directness but cared about **intention**: it needed to be formulated constructively and rooted in a desire to help them improve. When delivery felt cold or harsh, they disengaged both from the content and from the relationship:

"...like even though some of his points were valid, I knew that the way he would say it would kind of destroy my confidence, so I would rather not do that. And I also had, for example, another colleague speak to him about my project, such that I don't get immediate feedback from him, but basically a detour that the other colleague could kind of extract his feedback, but that I don't have to listen to the way he phrases it." – P1

Conversely, participants appreciated honesty when it was paired with a **commitment to growth**:

"I hate when people are fake. So even if I'm not doing a good job, if I'm getting negative feedback, I would love that. I mean, I prefer getting roasted by my manager or even my teammates, saying 'You're stupid, you

don't know how to do that' rather than them saying 'Yeah, it's fine.' ... But yeah, maybe not saying like 'You're stupid', but honestly and directly telling me what I've done straight away and how I can improve what I've messed up." – P8

"...you're delivering it to me in a way that you want to see my growth. You want to see me improving is what makes the difference between good and helpful and unhelpful feedback. ... You want to be a mentor and want to like guide me through, versus you're just giving me feedback because I did bad work and I need to fix it so that you can get on with your day." – P11

Besides the how, feedback was more readily absorbed when it came from people they felt understood by and care for. **Emotional intelligence** helped create this safety, for example when leaders were interpersonally attentive or disclosed their own weaknesses (Goleman, 1995):

"...my manager, she started to share with me stories about when she was a graduate and like she was in graduate in the same company. So she's shared with me like times when she's like messed up and everything, and that was actually quite nice because it's nice to know that everybody wasn't perfect." – P2

"She really made it a point, like in all of our feedback one-on-ones she would always start them on like...a kind of personal way, where she sort of made me feel like she cared about me as a human being first, and then employee second..." – P10

Perceptions of the giver's **competence** also influenced receptivity. When participants admired or aspired to emulate the person, they were more likely to take it on board:

"I think what I find unhelpful is when someone tells me any piece of feedback, but I believe okay, not in a not humble way, but I like just don't think they're very good at their job. You know, like if I have no trust in their ability or their skills, then whatever feedback they give me, I'm like yeah, well, you're not better. You're not good at your job. So why should I listen? You know, like I don't want to become you, so I'm not going to listen to your feedback." – P4

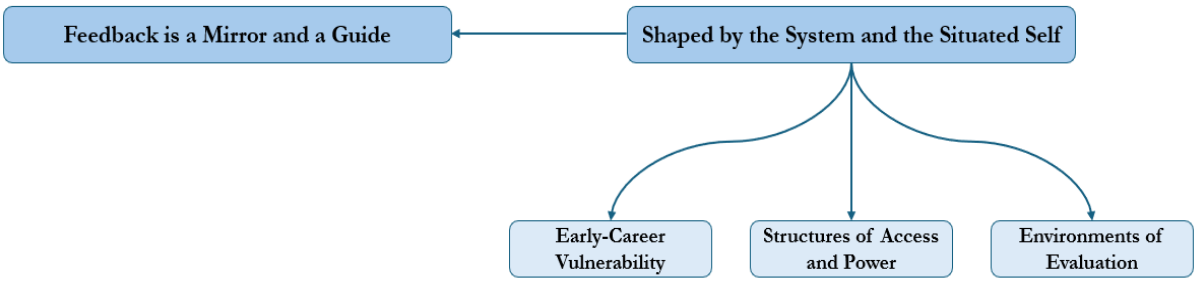
"...my current manager, I think he does a really good job. I look up to him. I like think he's super smart, and I think he communicates very clearly. ... And I think I'm definitely a lot more open to feedback from people who like I respect, and they work in a way that I admire and want to like embody." – P13

5.2 Shaped by the System and the Situated Self

While the first global theme revealed how feedback shapes the ways in which early-career Gen Z professionals see themselves and navigate their work, the second theme steps back to consider the context framing that sensemaking process. Feedback was not experienced and interpreted in isolation; instead, its meaning was influenced by the systems participants moved through, the norms they had internalised, and the inherent uncertainties of early career.

Viewed together, the two global themes form part of the same interpretive ecology: how feedback is made sense of is inseparable from the structures in which the self is situated (Figure 3).

Figure 3



5.2.1 Early-Career Vulnerability

The transitional and fragile nature of early career heightened the psychological intensity of feedback, with participants craving input for growth yet fearing its professional consequences. **Missing internal benchmarks** and operating under **perceived precarity**, even minor comments were magnified. Against this backdrop, feedback became a **condition for survival** closely tied to employability, especially for those who had struggled to find work:

> *"...when I got the job, I was like okay, there's no messing around. There's no bullshit. I want to keep this job. So I think this plays, in my case, I think it plays a big role in how I was doing things and how I was feeling about feedback."* – P8

The **sudden leap in responsibility** intensified this tension. Some narrated the shock of being treated as fully accountable before feeling ready, revealing a mismatch between preparedness and the demands placed upon them:

> *"...I actually did not have that expertise somewhere in the back of my head, I just, I had to learn it myself. Like genuinely learning everything on the job from scratch, and I think that's something that I was a little*

insecure, or not a little, I was super insecure about. Also, people referring to you as the expert or something and you're just like I don't think I'm an expert yet at all." – P5

For others, pressure manifested as an expectation to reach a high standard almost instantly:

"...I'm like yeah, I might be new, but that's whatever. Like I should still be performing at this higher level, as someone who's been here for five years or things like that." – P13

As responsibilities escalated, so did the stakes of feedback, not just in perceived severity but in the **real-world impact of mistakes** on business outcomes:

"...when I get feedback from my like manager..., it feels a bit more intense in a way because I know that if I've made a mistake, that's impacted the price for a number of days, for a lot of people, for the entire company. So it is a bit peak level of accountability that essentially connects to when I do get feedback." – P6

Lacking experience and sector knowledge, they consequently described feeling epistemically adrift. Feedback filled that **self-assessment vacuum**, offering an anchor when they couldn't yet trust their own judgment:

"...you don't know how good you are, you cannot assess how good the work is you do because you have no experience..." – P1

Finally, vulnerability was intensified by organisational cultures that provided little safety or structured support upon entry. Unlike in university, where feedback felt collaborative and negotiable, feedback at work was experienced as **directive** – something to be acted on rather than debated:

"In uni I'm like okay, I disagree with what you wrote about how I should frame this essay or whatever, but we can talk about it. I can research more, I can figure it out. But then at the end of the day, I guess it's still kind of my decision. But at work, it's not your decision. So feedback is not optional..., it's like if you don't take feedback, the worst thing is you get fired." – P4

5.2.2 Structures of Access and Power

In addition to the vulnerabilities of early career, feedback was shaped by the **socio-cultural architecture** of the workplace. Access to input was filtered through **power relations**, often intensified by **gender**, and required initiative. As a result, feedback was not equally accessible, meaningful, or safe across the workforce.

While senior feedback was frequently treated as the gold standard, it was also the most politically charged. Participants emphasised the need to suppress reactions and defer to authority, casting feedback from above as a **test of self-control**:

> *"...for me, this is then like a battlefield. Because blaming the seniors as a junior is never a good thing to do, and I would never ever get into a fight or yeah, confrontation with them."* – P3

> *"Like I really bite my tongue for the most part. I'm like no, like I need to weigh all the possibilities before I say anything here. ... So I just like shut up and I'm like okay, it's fine, like it's okay, like I will let it [the feedback] pass at this point. ... And I feel like in the nascent stages of our career, you are kind of expected to do that as well. Like there is a certain expectation: you're a junior, you can't like really put your foot down..."* – P10

This made some participants hesitant to seek feedback at all, fearing they would appear needy, disruptive, or incompetent. Juniors were expected to grow through feedback, though the act of asking for it could risk reputational harm. The result was a **tightrope** of remaining visible but not demanding, competent but not presumptuous:

> *"I'm not really sure what I'm doing at all, every day. So like why am I here still asking you for things, you know? And also he's just extremely busy like he's so high up, I didn't want to disturb him or be another thing he has to think about."* – P4

Even when mistakes were ambiguous, participants **absorbed criticism silently**, aware that challenging a superior could backfire and opting instead to take feedback "with a grain of salt":

> *"...don't get on their bad side, especially if they're in a higher position than you because what they see, they will tell the person above them, who will tell the person above them, and if you're performing well, you'll be in the good books."* – P7

> *"...even if your manager calls you out on a call and they might be fully wrong, ...you're not going to tell them that they're wrong on the call. It's not going to flow well with the manager, it's not going to look good on you."* – P12

For women, notably, these dynamics were compounded by **gendered authority**, particularly in male-dominated fields. Some described unsolicited input as patronising, more about asserting dominance than being committed to development:

> *"...there are a lot of mansplainers around in the financial industry..., and they like to give you feedback that you did not ask for, it's something they love to do. ... And usually I think what it comes down to is that the feedback is not, or the intention of the feedback is not to genuinely help me improve. But the intention of the feedback is to make me feel small, or make them feel big."* – P5

In the absence of consistent structures, participants further had to engineer their own feedback opportunities. **Agency** became a prerequisite for access, and **staying on the radar** of seniors required continuous signalling through proactive communication or strategic self-promotion:

> *"...if you don't schedule a meeting with him, so I scheduled a feedback meeting with him because I wanted to know what he thinks..., but if I wouldn't schedule that, he wouldn't give me feedback."* – P1

> *"So I need to manage to my senior associate...because they're not going to know my day-to-day. They're not going to know how much I'm doing. If I don't say it, so I can do all the work and be like oh my god, I did so much work. You need to make them visible to the work you're doing and that way, they know how much to assign, and ultimately the amount of feedback they give on it."* – P12

5.2.3 Environments of Evaluation

Lastly, participants described how growing up in a hyperconnected, always-on world shaped their orientations to feedback. Constant exposure to performance and validation cycles cultivated habits of self-monitoring and comparison, with participants expressing a **tendency to benchmark themselves** against peers or their own imagined potential. This impulse, reinforced through academic and digital environments where identity is constructed in reference to others (Anderson & Wood, 2020; Ballara, 2023), carried into workspaces:

> *"I think you just always compare what other people are doing to what you're doing because you're just kind of grown up doing that. I think most of your young adult life has been doing that, at uni, always doing that. Uni is like huge imposter syndrome. ... Also online like just showing the best side of yourself and putting yourself out there. ... And yeah, tying that back to feedback, I'd say that negative makes you aware of these things that you like maybe don't want to be seen, and yet they came through and were noticeable. So yeah, a little shatter to yourself, what you thought you were doing right."* – P2

Feedback also surfaced the tension between ambition and perceived underperformance, rupturing that curated self-image. Even when evaluations were neutral, participants interpreted them through a lens of **personal maximisation**, revealing how average feedback can feel insufficient to those conditioned to constantly strive for **exceptionalism**:

> *"…there were certain criteria and I forgot what they were, but it was like, I forgot, just generic stuff, but they were all like at expectation. ... She was like 'That's a good thing.' But for me, like that feedback was like oh, I'm just meeting requirements. I'm not going like above and beyond, but I always want to, 'cause that's what I'm always supposed to do, like do better and be the best."* – P4

This pressure to keep improving was amplified by **constant visibility** and the sense that others were accelerating faster, mirroring the logic of digital life where progress is relative, and stagnation equates to failure (Anderson & Wood, 2020):

> *"You know, so I think that's the case for a lot of people in our generation that they feel like the sky is the limit. So I think we're very ambitious in that sense, but also expectations are a lot higher. Well we look around, look out a lot more and think about oh, this person's doing that, this other person's doing that. Constant comparison…has made me feel like I constantly have to reach higher, like for the stars."* – P2

Such habits created a desire for **immediacy**. Delayed feedback disrupted participants' need for real-time self-adjustment:

> *"But ultimately, I think we're all, like we Gen Zs are always looking for reassurance. Like that instant gratification of like oh, I do this, and this happens. And sometimes, you know, like feedback is not as easy to take in because we're used to being like consistently stimulated and, you know, gratified."* – P6

6. DISCUSSION

Following the findings, this section links the two global themes back to the literature, integrating theoretical and practical implications. It concludes by acknowledging the study's limitations and suggesting directions for future research.

6.1 Discussion and Implications

This study explored how early-career Gen Z professionals experience and interpret feedback at work, demonstrating that for this group, feedback is less a passive evaluative transaction and more an interactive process of meaning-making. Participants described negotiating and repurposing feedback within the relational and structural conditions of their workplace, using it as lens through which belonging and legitimacy were continuously constructed and contested.

The results expand classical social-psychological theories of the self. Foundational work established that an individuals' self-image develops through the evaluations of others, and that one's sense of worth is shaped by interpersonal reactions (Argyle, 1972; Burke, 1991; Mead, 1934). In line, Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory postulates that people continuously compare themselves as a way of assessing their abilities, while Rogers (1951) emphasises the innate human need for self-esteem driving people to seek affirmation from those around them. Viewed through these lenses, feedback becomes a central arena in which core mechanisms are activated: the comments and signals individuals receive at work both reflect and shape how they see themselves, what they value, and how they position themselves in relation to others.

The first global theme highlighted how feedback functions simultaneously as a mirror and a guide, underscoring how this meaning is constructed at an individual level of experience. Participants engaged with feedback to make sense of emerging professional selves (Ibarra, 1999): it reflected back a picture of how they were perceived and, at the same time, provided direction for future action, with its value inseparable from the quality of delivery. When comments were framed in a climate of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018), even criticism was experienced as developmental. Conversely, feedback interpreted as careless or ill-intentioned had a disproportionate impact, undermining the selves they tested. In this respect, affirming feedback proved to be a powerful resource for building self-efficacy and social acceptance, echoing Bauer et al.'s (2007) indicators of successful newcomer adjustment. Furthermore, the findings deepen multidimensional conceptualisations of feedback (Ilgen et al., 1979) by pointing out that, particularly in early career, one of its primary functions lies in supporting identity negotiation. This

strongly resonates with identity-based perspectives on transitional phases (Ashforth, 2000; Ibarra, 1999; Markus & Nurius, 1986), and with the notion of early career as a period of intense sensebreaking and sensemaking (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016).

Alongside identity work, feedback played a key role in social learning (Saks & Gruman, 2012; Weick, 1995). Input enabled participants to decode the organisational culture, bridging the gap between formal onboarding and an embodied understanding of how things are done, strengthening van Maanen and Schein's (1979) conceptualisation of organisational socialisation as central to newcomer integration. For early-career Gen Z professionals, it served as a route through which norms, values, and practices were internalised, allowing them to become effective and established employees. Therefore, the findings advance our understanding of the relationship between feedback and socialisation by demonstrating that feedback facilitates both cognitive and affective dimensions of new-joiners' workplace adjustment.

Nevertheless, this individual-level process of interpretation was influenced and steered by organisational structures and politics. The second global theme shifted focus to these dynamics, showing how meaning is filtered through systems, with access to feedback unevenly distributed and shaped by power relations. While prior research has broadly documented asymmetries in information-seeking (London & Smither, 2002; Morrison, 1993), the study's results extend the literature by illuminating how gendered imbalances, politicised gatekeeping, and the need to earn feedback intensify disparities among early career employees. Participants displayed considerable agency in trying to secure input, but those strategies came with a cost, especially for individuals at the margins of influence. From this perspective, receiving feedback is also a form of social currency, aligning with dramaturgical views in which interactions convey one's standing in place and space (Goffman, 1959).

Taken together, the results have important implications for organisations aiming to attract, develop, and retain young talent. Annual performance reviews positioning feedback as a rare, high-stakes event risk placing the burden of constant self-promotion on early-career Gen Z professionals, and such systems can hence generate emotional labour for those still learning to navigate workplace norms and build connections. By contrast, cultures that embed feedback into the rhythm of work – treating it as an ongoing dialogue instead of a one-off transaction – enable feedback to act as a true mirror and guide.

Significantly, the impact of feedback was not determined by its valence. As mentioned, participants welcomed critique when it was grounded in trust and framed in a way that signalled investment in their growth, suggesting a shift in research focus from the content of feedback to the quality of the interaction. It also prompts a redefinition of courage in leadership, not as softening critique but in training leaders to have the relational competence to convey honest messages without eroding psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018; Uhl-Bien, 2003; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Additionally, participants described projecting idealised expectations onto those in positions of power, seeking recognition and care. These factors transformed feedback into a symbolic self-test, in turn infusing leaders' judgments with disproportionate weight (Gabriel, 1997, 1999). Making feedback genuinely developmental thus requires acknowledging these projections and recasting feedback as a two-way process rather than a top-down verdict.

Finally, the study draws attention to the inequalities that arise when access to feedback depends on informal networks: individuals with limited social connections or more introverted personalities risk being excluded from the developmental opportunities they need to adapt to the workplace. Such issues call for organisations to democratise feedback access by establishing mentoring arrangements and peer forums, hereby explicitly positioning it as a collective responsibility. In this sense, feedback can become part of the infrastructure of inclusion, offering visible recognition that each employee is valued and invested in. Yet without explicitly accounting for how feedback is allocated, these systems may inadvertently reproduce exclusion under the guise of inclusion, positing that feedback practices must be understood not only as developmental tools but also as mechanisms of power, both theoretically and practically.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although the study offers a distinctive perspective on feedback among early-career Gen Z professionals, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, data saturation was not fully reached, with new insights continuing to surface at the end of data collection. Despite active efforts to recruit via personal outreach and referral chains, all contacts who met the inclusion criteria were exhausted in the available timeframe, restricting the possibility of expanding the sample. The study's conceptualisation of "*feedback as a mirror and a guide shaped by the system and the situated self*" should therefore be seen as emergent, underscoring the need for continued exploration.

Second, responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias. Given the prevailing framing of feedback as essential to development (Anseel & Scherf, 2025), some participants could

have overstated its importance or refrained from voicing scepticism to avoid appearing resistant to learning. The retrospective nature of interviews also introduced challenges in accurately reporting experiences, with individuals tending to recall positive feedback more reliably than negative (Ilgen et al., 1979). However, within an experiential orientation, what participants chose to share remains analytically meaningful, as it reveals how they wish to position themselves relative to the research topic even if shaped by impression management (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Third, the small sample size constrains transferability, limiting the ability to capture the diversity of early-career Gen Z feedback experiences across all roles and industries. Instead of providing a definitive model, the results reveal patterns in how feedback was experienced and interpreted by knowledge workers in the specific sample, offering an in-depth conceptual lens others can use to explore similar dynamics in different contexts. Accordingly, the practical implications outlined in the previous section should not be seen as prescriptive solutions but as promising ideas inviting further reflection.

Future research may overcome these limitations and refine the findings in two ways. One is to narrow focus to specific sectors or national settings, enabling a deeper exploration of how contextual factors shape feedback dynamics. While gendered power relations surfaced in the interviews, they were not a central analytic lens, and future studies should examine how culture, gender, and hierarchy intersect in feedback interpretation, particularly among women. Another is to broaden scope through larger and more diverse samples, allowing comparisons across generations and feedback modalities. Together, such inquiries can continue to advance our understanding of how socio-cultural influences and organisational structures shape feedback experiences, informing the design of more inclusive, group-sensitive systems.

7. CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate early-career Gen Z professionals' experiences and interpretations of feedback, addressing an underexamined area of sensemaking in the literature. The analysis found that it functions as a mirror, reflecting how participants saw themselves, and as a guide, informing how they acted moving forward. Meaning-making was relational, intertwined with the negotiation of identity and belonging during the formative stages of professional life. Crucially, the findings showed that feedback is not a discrete intervention but a socially and structurally embedded process, shaped by the narratives attached to the giver and by the way it is framed. Its impact is also influenced by organisational culture and power dynamics. Consequently, future research and practice should address these aspects, ensuring that feedback acts as a catalyst enabling Gen Z professionals in organisations today – and those yet to join them – to become sustainable contributors.

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9. APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recruitment Message

🕵️‍♀️ Are you an early career professional navigating feedback at work? If yes, I'd love to hear your story!

For my MSc dissertation in Organisational and Social Psychology within the **LSE Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science**, I'm exploring how early career professionals within Gen Z experience feedback, how it makes them feel, and what role it plays in shaping their sense of self, relations, and practices at work.

Specifically, I'm looking for participants who are:
🎓 Graduates, aged 18-28
💼 Employed in a full-time knowledge-worker role - any job involving non-routine, thinking-based tasks (like finance, consulting, HR, design, tech, research, marketing, engineering, architecture, healthcare)
⏳ At least six months and no more than two years into this role

We'll have a 45-60 minute conversation online (Zoom/Teams) or in person if you are in London, and everything shared will remain confidential and anonymous.

📩 If you or someone in your network is interested, feel free to reach out to me - also if you have any questions - via direct message or email at [redacted]. Thank you so much for your support!

Appendix B: Participant Information and Consent Form

Participant Information and Consent Form

Thank you for considering participating in my study which is expected to take place between the 1st and 31st of May, 2025. This information sheet outlines the purpose of the research and describes your involvement and rights as a participant. If you agree to take part, please fill out the consent section below the information sheet.

1. What is the research about?
The research explores experiences of workplace feedback, focusing on early career professionals within the Gen Z age range (18-28). It looks at what feedback means to them, how it makes them feel, and how it may impact the way they work, relate to others, and see themselves professionally.

2. What will my involvement be?
As a participant of the study, you will be invited to take part in a semi-structured interview. This will involve asking you a set of questions centring around your experiences with feedback in your current role. The interview will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes and can be conducted via Zoom, Teams, or in person if you are in Greater London.

3. Do I have to take part?
Participation is entirely voluntary, so it is your choice whether or not to take part. If any questions during the interview make you feel uncomfortable, please feel free to tell me. You do not have to answer, and we will move on without addressing them.

4. How can I withdraw from the study?
You can cancel your interview at any time before the scheduled date, without needing to provide a reason. There are no negative consequences for choosing not to participate. If you withdraw, any data you have provided up to that point will not be retained, unless you are happy for me to do so. If you complete the interview but later decide you do not want certain insights you shared to be included in the dissertation, please let me know within two days after the interview.

5. What will my information be used for?
The information will be used for my Master's dissertation in the Organisational and Social Psychology programme at The London School of Economics and Political Science.

6. Will my participation and data be kept confidential? Will it be anonymised?
Participation and data will be kept confidential. Only my dissertation supervisor and I will have access to the recordings and transcripts from the interview. Your data will be anonymised, meaning any information that can identify you will be removed from reports or publications resulting from the study. Any hard copies of research information will be encrypted and stored securely on LSE's OneDrive, complying with LSE's data management policy and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

7. Who has reviewed this study?
This study has undergone ethics review in accordance with the LSE Research Ethics Policy and Procedure.

The LSE Research Privacy Policy can be found here: https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/Secretarys Division/Assets/Documents/Information-Records-Management/Privacy-Notice-for-Research-v1.2.pdf.

8. What if I have a question or complaint?

If you have any queries regarding this study, please contact the researcher, (name removed for anonymity), on (email removed for anonymity).

If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the conduct of this research, please contact the LSE Research Governance Manager on research.ethics@lse.ac.uk.

If you are happy to take part in this study, please complete the consent section below.

Your name:

Your email:

Please read these statements. If you agree with them, put a X in the boxes below	
I have read the information sheet and had the opportunity to ask questions.	
I consent voluntarily to participate in the interview.	
I understand that I can refuse to answer questions and that I can withdraw at any time up until the scheduled date of the interview, without justification.	
I agree to the interview being audio recorded.	
I understand that my responses will be kept confidential and anonymous and that my personal information will be kept securely and destroyed at the end of the study.	

Once completed, please email this document back to me at (email removed for anonymity). Please also retain a copy of the document. Thank you!

Appendix C: Interview Topic Guide

Introduction	• Hello, thank you so much for agreeing to take part in my study and for taking the time to talk to me today. First of all, how are you doing? • **Self-Introduction and Aim of Study**: I'm (researcher's name removed for anonymity), an Organisational and Social Psychology student at the LSE, currently working on my master's dissertation. As outlined in the information sheet I've provided you with, my research explores how early career professionals within Gen Z experience feedback at work. I'm particularly interested in the reactions feedback triggers and what early career professionals do with feedback after they receive it, so how it's felt, interpreted, and carried forward. • **Background on Feedback**: Just so you know, when I say "feedback", I mean it in a broad sense. What really matters is how you experience it and what it means to you in your role, so feel free to share whatever stories or moments come to mind. There are no right or wrong answers. • **Confidentiality and Ethics:** Everything you share will be anonymised and kept confidential, meaning your identity can't be linked to your responses. If there are any questions you'd rather skip as they make you feel uncomfortable, please let me know and we'll move on without addressing them. • Do you have any questions before we begin? • I'd now like to start the audio recording, is that fine with you?
Warm-up and Participant Context	1. Could you tell me a bit about your role and how long you've been in it? 2. What was is like going from university to working life? • Prompt: What's been most surprising or challenging? 3. What do you enjoy most and least about your role?
Initial Prompting: Free Association	4. When you hear the word "feedback", what comes to mind? • Prompt: This could be words, images, situations...
The Feedback Environment	5. What's feedback like in your workplace? 6. Who usually gives you feedback, and how often do you get it? • Prompt: Is it written or spoken, planned or spontaneous?
Zooming In: Personal Experience of Feedback	7. Can you walk me through a memorable piece of feedback you received? • Prompts: What made it stand out? How did you feel at the time? What did you tell yourself it meant? 8. Can you think of a time when feedback felt helpful, and maybe another time when it felt unhelpful?

	• Prompt: What made those experiences feel different from each other? • Follow-up if needed: Was it the tone, the timing, who gave it, or something else?
Meaning-Making and Reflection	9. Thinking about everything we've talked about so far, what does feedback mean to you at work? • Prompt: What's its purpose for you?
Internalising and Acting on Feedback	10. After you receive feedback, what tends to stick with you – thoughts, feelings, reactions? 11. What do you usually do with the feedback you get? • Prompt: Do you sit with it, share it with someone, revisit it later, or something else? 12. Can you think of a time when feedback shaped how you work? • Prompt: That could be how you approach a task, how you communicate, or handle similar situations in the future. 13. Can you think of a time when feedback shaped how you see yourself? • Prompt: That might be how you think about your strengths and weaknesses, your goals, or your career direction.
Generational Framing	14. How do you think your experience of feedback compares to others of your age? • Prompt: What do you think shapes your generation's view of feedback, based on what you've noticed or felt? 15. How do you think your generation sees or handles feedback compared to older colleagues? • Prompt: What do you think explains these similarities or differences?
Closing Reflections	16. What place, if any, does feedback have in these early stages of your career? 17. If you had the chance to redesign how feedback is given in your organisation, what, if anything, would you change? • Prompt: Why would you like this to change? 18. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience of feedback at work?
Conclusion	Thank you so much for sharing your experiences with me today. I really appreciate your openness. As mentioned, your details will be kept confidential, and any quotes will be anonymised. If you change your mind about anything you've shared and would like me not to mention it in my dissertation, feel free to contact me within the next two days. Also, is it okay if I follow up with you in case I need clarification on any of your responses? Once again, thank you for helping me out, and have a great day.

Appendix D: Thematic Codebook

Research Question: How do early-career Gen Z professionals experience and interpret feedback at work?			
Global Theme 1: Feedback is a Mirror and a Guide			
Organising Theme	**Code**	**Description**	**Example Quotes**
Identity Work	Negotiating Value and Worth	For participants, affirmations offered reassurance, countering self-doubt by signalling that contributions were valued. This, in turn, made them feel seen, worthy, and ultimately motivated.	*[Researcher: And how would you define feedback for yourself? Like what would you say it means to you?]: I'd say a couple of things. I mean, if I'm being completely honest, a big part is validation. You know, that you, if you feel like you've been doing a good job, it's nice to also hear it from somebody else. So I'd want, I'd want to see that some things that I think that I've done well, that she also thinks that I've done well, just making sure that I'm not delusional, you know?* – P2 *But I think if I would have been in an environment where the positive feedback was more absent, then I think I would also value it more because just having so much of it, I think makes it easy to forget how important it is to have this reassurance that you're doing okay.* – P5 *Because I think like being gratified at work is quite important and you having satisfaction and feeling important is key to working. Otherwise, you're just a cog in the machine. It's like the work you do doesn't even matter. And having that recognition, I think, really improved my motivation to be in that job.* – P6 *So it's like when you're producing large amounts of work and getting no feedback..., it definitely like dims the spirits. So I think that small even if it's recognition like 'Hey, she was up all night doing it' or 'Hey, she was working later hours to produce this work', you don't have to say more than that. It's just*

			acknowledgement that like, so a 'Thank you' goes a long way than just like 'Hey, here's your next task'. – P12
	Shaping Confidence and Self-Perception	Participants experienced feedback as shaping self-belief by reinforcing or challenging internal narratives, helping them build confidence and gain clarity about their strengths and weaknesses.	*...his feedback to me was like 'I like how you come and you get the things done that you need to get done.' Like even if there's one minute left in the meeting, I'm like 'No, no, no, I have one more thing.' ... And I was thinking like oh wow, 'cause that same behaviour, like I thought it was annoying, but he liked it. He thought it showed something else.* – P4 *Also like help me recognise what I bring to the table in a lot of ways. Like genuinely made me realise that I have, like how I add value and what my USP is when I am like pitching myself for interviews, whatever.* – P10 *...I think an individual can know their strong suits, but sometimes external validation helps them believe in those strong suits. And while I am very confident with certain skills of mine..., at the end of the day, without the validation, sometimes it feels like an open-ended circle.* – P12 *And like after you get all that feedback where you know like okay, this is right, this is right, people are happy with what I'm doing. And I regained that confidence, or like I gained that confidence in work. It allowed me to like take a lot more initiative and be a lot more proactive in work, both in like my projects, for example, like suggesting new ways of doing this or suggesting solutions and stuff like that, but also within the team, like take a bit more like prominent role and be a bit more of like, you know, like a person within the team...* – P15
	Reflecting on Belonging and Fit	Feedback often sparked questions around alignment and belonging, influencing whether participants felt	*...I was questioning my role. Like if I'm doing the right thing, if I should do something else, whether I belong here, or whether I should just go and find something new...* – P2

		connected or out of place in their role or organisation.	*...I think you also feel a little bit more integrated into the organisational culture. You feel like a lot more like you want to do well for the company, you know? So yeah, I think like when people appreciate work..., it feels like you want to keep doing that. You keep wanting to like help others and keep the whole thing up and running.* – P2 *...despite the fact that I'm looking for other jobs, it makes me want to be there more. So I might, you know, lose my motivation to apply to other jobs just because I feel like this one, I feel quite happy at work. I feel like I'm being recognised. The progression is quick. My manager is someone who listens to me and values me.* – P6 *...I was getting to the point where I stopped wanting to do my job, at least not in the best way possible. So I just wanted to give just enough for them to get off my back at some point. ... Because I genuinely, they pushed me to not want to be around them anymore. Because when you hear negative things so much and so consistently, you get so sick of it, I cannot tell you, you cannot get through your day anymore.* – P11 *Maybe the one thing that feedback contributed to is like, you know, I said people can be quite indirect here and don't really tell you directly. In feedback, they're not very direct sometimes. And that did get me thinking about like okay, being in this like English company and this English like working culture, I'm not sure if that fits with like who I am and how I work.* – P15
Strategic Navigation	Adjusting Tasks and Workflows	Participants viewed feedback as helping them refine day-to-day work, improving effectiveness and efficiency.	*I think learning...is the currency in any job that you do at the start of your career. And learning is only possible when there's some sort of criticism that helps you action..., and I think feedback is central to that.* – P6

			And I've realised that if I encounter the same problem again in the future, I just go oh, I did this before. I encountered the same problem, and then I solved it way less time. So this loop, you're always going to find it at work, and it's always, feedback is always going to be beneficial in overcoming any obstacle in front of you. – P7 *...so you learn something with every feedback you get. Like every feedback matters and like everything like where you can improve, like you should take a note of it or maybe like make it part of your workflow. So you can integrate it to just make your work like a lot more efficient than if you hadn't gotten the feedback.* – P9 *...it's gonna be the one tool that like helps me grow and become better, like genuinely believe that. The feedback, yeah, like it's important because I also, I'm the kind of person who like I try to look for the most efficient way to do a certain task, whatever task it is, I'm gonna spend more time thinking about how can I efficiently do this, as opposed to trying a million things.* – P10
	Decoding Organisational Culture	Feedback was seen as revealing implicit norms and expectations, guiding how to behave, communicate, and succeed within the system.	*And then next morning when I had a look on my phone, there was just a message which said 'Sick Slide (participant's name removed for anonymity).' ... And that was feedback that I could then use to think okay, that seems to be the style he likes, so for future occasions, I can keep this in mind. ... And I like it to know what people expect from me 'cause then I can do expectation management from that.* – P3 *...it [the feedback] kind of gets ingrained into you because you learn what's valued in the corporate life.* – P6 *And there're a lot of unsaid things that nobody, like HR is not gonna tell you, but it's like tiny...[Researcher: Insider knowledge?] Exactly, and it's like tiny things that make a huge difference. ... So those are the things that*

			you don't know if you just leave uni, but they are very, very important in your career. – P14 *...in the beginning, feedback is very much about like ways of working in the organisation. ... What does good look like? And what does it mean to do well? Like what are the norms in this organisation? Like how do you want your outputs?* – P15
	Clarifying Career Direction	Feedback signalled future paths that fit or misfit, impacting participants' long-term decisions about roles, industries, and professional growth.	*So I think one of my biggest things going forward is I know I don't want to work anywhere where it's possible to work remotely, you know, like I'm either working and I'm in a place of work where I can build up relationships and really connect to the people who then give me the feedback, or I'm not working.* – P4 *...I'm going to do a PhD, actually. And I also remember before I said yes, I had an extra call with them again to get to know them and to really know that I'm working together with people that I can build a relationship with. So I guess this kind of, in the end, draws back to feedback, to be able to give and especially receive really good feedback from them, so I can actually grow and not only depend on myself. So I think for me, also in terms of what I want from my next steps and what prioritise in my future career, it has a really big role.* – P5 *...like you can just become more specific about like the work you want to do.* – P9 *...I kind of realised that I don't want to be doing this long-term, like particularly HR long-term. I could work in HR because I understand most of how things work, but I just, at this stage of my life..., I kind of want a more like fast-paced, a more like challenging job, just because I can learn more. So one of the things that...the feedbacks and everything made me realise is that...I've been able to figure*

			this industry out a little bit, and so maybe I want to do something new now. – P10
Relational Filters	Interpreting Tone and Framing	Feedback landed best when direct yet constructive, with clarity and intention valued over softness. Dismissiveness or vagueness eroded trust and made feedback feel demoralising, sometimes even long-term anxiety-inducing.	*...we also do presentations quite often like internal presentations and for my first time, I got very deconstructive feedback. So basically it was 'Your whole project is shit, you can just throw it into the trash.' ... So what this guy also told me is 'If you present this somewhere else it will destroy your reputation.' ... So just from this experience with him, I kind of developed an anxiety of presenting.* – P1 *...I do need the positive framing. ... If it's negative, like either I'm going to be like okay, I'm going to do this really well, or I'll be like I'll quit kind of thing. So I just, I think positive framing makes this chance [of quitting] as low as it can be.* – P2 *I think it's not specifically the content of the feedback, I think the way it's delivered is what the difference is. Let's say my work is terrible, for example. You can tell me 'Hey, your work is terrible, fix it.' Or you can say 'Hey, I think there's room for opportunity in terms of how we're presenting this.' Or 'Hey, can we talk through how we're going to present this to the client?' And it's the second part of that where it's like you're delivering it to me in a way that you want to see my growth. You want to see me improving is what makes the difference between good and helpful and unhelpful feedback. It's the fact that you're in my corner and that you want me to improve. ... And it's not the idea that you can't give straightforward feedback. You can. You can give very honest feedback in a well-delivered manner and it'll hit the same..., but if you're going to be, I don't know if mean is the correct word to use, but if you're not going to be very professional about it, I think that's when it becomes unhelpful.* – P11

	Receiving Feedback with Trust and Care	Participants were more open to feedback from people they trusted and who showed care, competence, and genuine investment in their growth.	*He's very aware of other people's emotions. So sometimes I just want to get feedback on the project but then he goes 'Wait, I see that you're not feeling that well, do you want to talk about it?'* – P1 *I think what I find unhelpful is when someone tells me any piece of feedback, but I believe okay, not in a not humble way, but I like just don't think they're very good at their job. You know, like if I have no trust in their ability or their skills, then whatever feedback they give me, I'm like yeah, well, you're not better. You're not good at your job. So why should I listen? You know, like I don't want to become you, so I'm not going to listen to your feedback.* – P4 *He makes sure that you're doing alright. Not just job-wise, but mentally. Even yesterday, out of nowhere, he asked me how I'm doing. So I replied, I thought he meant the job, so I gave him an update. So he said 'No, I meant how you're doing, not the job.' ... He's our manager, but sometimes it just feels like we're on the same level. Because he's, I'd say, so down-to-earth, he's humble, he's very eye-to-eye.* – P8 *...my current manager, I think he does a really good job. I look up to him. I like think he's super smart, and I think he communicates very clearly. ... And I think I'm definitely a lot more open to feedback from people who like I respect, and they work in a way that I admire and want to like embody.* – P13
Global Theme 2: Shaped by the System and the Situated Self			
Organising Theme	**Code**	**Description**	**Example Quotes**
Early-Career Vulnerability	Proving Competence Amid Pressure	Participants sought and feared feedback as a measure of legitimacy. Under	*...before that [my first full-time role], it was like they were giving you work just because they had to, 'cause you were like an intern. It wasn't stuff that would impact the, like the*

		heightened expectations and responsibilities, they felt intense pressure to prove they were skilled and thus belonged.	*trajectory of the company or their business at all, which is what I do now. So the pricing I put directly impacts the pricing that customers see and like accounts are exposed to. So it has like real-time ramifications on like their revenue and their profit, so yeah, like the organisation in total.* – P6 *And maybe like also the early career moment adds a layer to all of that need or those needs to get recognition and validation and reassurance because you're like new and you're trying to find or even secure your place in the organisation.* – P6 *I think, yeah, I think when you're starting a career, I think you value feedback more than when you've been there for a while, because when you've been there for a while, you've already heard enough, I wouldn't say enough, but, you know, a good amount of feedback compared to someone just starting out. So you don't necessarily need the feedback to progress anymore.* – P8 *...especially so early in my career, they're not going to know me as an individual. They're going to know me through my work.* – P12 *[Researcher: How would you say, like what was it like shifting from uni to work life? How did it feel like for you?]: That was a bit tough because there was a little bit of onboarding, like one week and then the expectations after were very, very high, I would say. There was not much understanding that I literally do not know much what I'm doing because I went from writing essays to now having to present in front of partners in the company. So it was definitely challenging and it was basically going from 0 to 100 with no time to prepare.* – P14
	Lacking Internal Benchmarks	Without prior frames of reference, participants relied on feedback to assess	*...you don't know how good you are, you cannot assess how good the work is you do because you have no experience...* – P1

		performance and progress, filling gaps in self-judgment.	*And especially as a new-joiner, I am kind of like walking in the dark, so I want to make sure that I have as much visibility on my progress, as I can.* – P2 *...what I've also seen is that people give very different feedback, you know? So like maybe your manager says one thing, but someone you work with says another thing, and then the general CEO says another thing. So then you're like oh, okay, so I have three pieces of feedback for one piece of work. I have no opinions because I've been working here for six months. What do I do now? I'm just like how am I supposed to know? But so I think it always makes me a bit more anxious because it's not really in my control, and I also don't know what's right.* – P4 *You know nothing. You think you're good at Excel, but I was so bad at Excel, like I knew no xlookups, no vlookups, no pivot tables, no nothing. But you start getting into it slowly, and then the train just goes from the feedback you get.* – P7
	Feeling Replaceable and Isolated	Feedback had heightened psychological weight in workplaces that offered little containment. Participants felt dispensable and alone, amplifying feeling of insecurity.	*So you have the full responsibility for yourself and there's no one that will catch you. And I feel like that applies a lot of pressure and you can build your safety network..., but you need to do it on your own.* – P1 *In uni I'm like okay, I disagree with what you wrote about how I should frame this essay or whatever, but we can talk about it. I can research more, I can figure it out. But then at the end of the day, I guess it's still kind of my decision. But at work, it's not your decision. So feedback is not optional..., it's like if you don't take feedback, the worst thing is you get fired.* – P4 *And then like she decided to review it on a weekend, you know, on a Saturday. And then because she knew like I just joined, so just to, you know, like build an image or something*

			that she's online at like at 8am on a Saturday, so I checked my phone. I was like what? On a Saturday morning, I was receiving a call. I was like no way, I'm not going to pick it up, so I just declined and then I messaged her 'All good? What happened?' She was like 'Oh, let me know when you're free, we need to talk.' ... Anyways, I called her back. She said like 'Oh, the work you did is too bad, it's below the standard.' I told her like 'Yeah, I understand you, but maybe you can give me this feedback on Monday?' She's like 'Yeah, but I just want to let you know, if you want to stay in this role, you need to do more.' – P9 *And it's like natural, like when you're so young in your career, you're going to think oh my god, I'm never going to get, they're going to fire me tomorrow. Like that's just an extreme mindset, but I think when you're so early in your career, like that is the mindset you have, that does impact like how you view feedback.* – P12
Structures of Access and Power	Filtering Feedback by Hierarchy and Gender	Participants often sought feedback from senior figures but recognised the risk it carried. Hierarchies compounded fear of judgment, and women described additional gendered dynamics such as condescension and unsolicited advice.	*...for me, this is then like a battlefield. Because blaming the seniors as a junior is never a good thing to do, and I would never ever get into a fight or yeah, confrontation with them.* – P3 *...there are a lot of mansplainers around in the financial industry..., and they like to give you feedback that you did not ask for, it's something they love to do. ... And usually I think what it comes down to is that the feedback is not, or the intention of the feedback is not to genuinely help me improve. But the intention of the feedback is to make me feel small, or make them feel big.* – P5 *...when I get feedback from him, like my boss, I get feedback from like the top roles. The best in the business, like he's worked at so many big companies before, before starting this. And I know that it's so important to pick his brain*

			and know exactly how he thinks when it comes to this stuff because like 20 years is not something, not something easy. – P7 *Like I really bite my tongue for the most part. I'm like no, like I need to weigh all the possibilities before I say anything here. ... So I just like shut up and I'm like okay, it's fine, like it's okay, like I will let it [the feedback] pass at this point. ... And I feel like in the nascent stages of our career, you are kind of expected to do that as well. Like there is a certain expectation: you're a junior, you can't like really put your foot down...* – P10 *And another thing that I think is not really like that common is upward feedback. So in my industry, we're being told that upward feedback is welcomed, but it actually is not. It's not. People do not like hearing that they are not doing well. And that's also something that is not being taught to you when you're a junior, but then you notice that actually upward feedback, well just don't say anything negative because it will backfire against you.* – P14
	Accessing Feedback Requires Self-Advocacy	Feedback had to be claimed and elicited. Participants reported managing up and actively creating opportunities to be evaluated and recognised regularly.	*So outside of the formal process, I set up things for my own side, for like, just for me. And yeah, I wouldn't really want to get to a stage where when we do our mid-year check-in, she's had all these things in her head that she's not been able to tell me. I'd rather kind of understand now.* – P2 *...I initiated it. So I also asked for it or I said 'Hey, can we do a little feedback round with each other?'* – P5 *So I need to manage to my senior associate...because they're not going to know my day-to-day. They're not going to know how much I'm doing. If I don't say it, so I can do all the work and be like oh my god, I did so much work. You need to make them visible to the work you're doing and that way, they know how much to assign, and ultimately the amount of feedback they give on it.* – P12

			It's been kind of a "make it your own" with the lack of like company structure... – P13
Environments of Evaluation	Defaulting to Comparison and Perfectionism	Participants constantly benchmarked themselves against peers or ideals, with feedback exposing gaps between curated self-image and external perception.	*I think you just always compare what other people are doing to what you're doing because you're just kind of grown up doing that. I think most of your young adult life has been doing that, at uni, always doing that. Uni is like huge imposter syndrome. ... Also online like just showing the best side of yourself and putting yourself out there. ... And yeah, tying that back to feedback, I'd say that negative makes you aware of these things that you like maybe don't want to be seen, and yet they came through and were noticeable. So yeah, a little shatter to yourself, what you thought you were doing right.* – P2 *I think, you know, like obviously social media in general has made it a lot more visible to what people are doing. You know, everybody's growing up trying to make their Instagram look good, like as perfect as it can be, you know, like all these kinds of things. So I think the kind of external validation, I think is a lot bigger in our generation just because that's kind of how we've grown up, like having that especially online.* – P2 *...there were certain criteria and I forgot what they were, but it was like, I forgot, just generic stuff, but they were all like at expectation. ... She was like 'That's a good thing.' But for me, like that feedback was like oh, I'm just meeting requirements. I'm not going like above and beyond, but I always want to, 'cause that's what I'm always supposed to do, like do better and be the best.* – P4 *So I'm grateful for what I have, you know, but if I heard around me that, you know, my friends get more feedback than me, maybe, or, yeah, then maybe I would have thought that I'm not getting enough feedback.* – P8

	Expecting Immediate Validation	Accustomed to instant responses, participants felt frustrated by delayed feedback, which clashed with their need for quick reassurance and guidance.	*Well at work you also look for exactly that external validation you get there [on social media], so that gives you a lot more understanding and visibility on how you're doing. ... So if you know that from your manager, how you are doing personally, then you know more about yourself, you have more information about yourself. And then you can use that, again, that whole process of kind of, I suppose, looking out. You just know more information about yourself. Now you can, you know that you're better at this skill, not so good at this skill. Naturally, then I would try and understand who can I look at to kind of build up the skill that I'm not so good at. So ultimately using that information to adjust and adapt your behaviour right now and on the spot, yes, I need it [the feedback] immediately to be able to work with it.* – P2 *...it also doesn't help if it is honest but only comes after a long time because then you could have used the time to invest it differently and invest in improving straight away.* – P3 *But ultimately, I think we're all, like we Gen Zs are always looking for reassurance. Like that instant gratification of like oh, I do this, and this happens. And sometimes, you know, like feedback is not as easy to take in because we're used to being like consistently stimulated and, you know, gratified.* – P6

Appendix E: Sample Interview Transcript

Researcher

So yeah, recording should be on, maybe you could just start off by telling me a bit about your role and how long you've been in your role?

P2

Of course, so I work at (company's name removed for anonymity). So (company's name removed for anonymity), they have two companies. They have a ratings and credit ratings company and an analytics company. So I'm on the analytics side. So that's a lot of providing, helping banks to manage their risk. I work in, so we cover a lot of different clients, insurance, asset management, and banks. So I'm in the banking sector. And what I do is basically look at how well are our solutions working? What do we need to invest more into? What do we need to divest more? And what should, what should we, what new things should we be building? How can we better serve our clients? So I'm in the banking strategy side. So thinking about what's next for our banks, thinking about our product, how well do our products work for them? That's, that's what I'm looking at. And also the health of the products as well, like a lot more on the business side. It's like how well is the overall portfolio of products that we have? How good are they? How much revenue is it bringing us? How much money is it making? Are they at high expenses, et cetera? So it's like a banking, my kind of official title is like a banking business strategy analyst at the moment.

Researcher

Really interesting, thanks for sharing that (participant's name removed for anonymity). And how long have you been in that role?

P2

Since September, so about eight months, nine months.

Researcher

And you got into that job like right after your master's, or wait, was it your undergrad, actually?

P2

Yeah, exactly, I got into this job right after undergrad.

Researcher

Okay, and how has that shift from uni to work life felt for you?

P2

So it's been difficult. I think trying to find a routine that works for you because at uni, you just had one life, it was just uni life. But then when you're like working, you have a work life and a personal life, so creating that barrier was difficult, I think. And also trying to figure out what to like do in your personal life, that's also been difficult. I also moved back home, so I don't live in London anymore, so commuting is also tedious. It's a long, long journey, I live on the train basically. But yeah, it's been, I think I'm finding my place more and more, I know I have a routine. I know what

works for me, but it took some time to figure that out. And also with a work life, you have to kind of change the way you socialise, the way you talk to people, network, et cetera. You really have to go out of your way to do these things because at uni, you knew you just kind of bump into people, or you're in like a class with them and you get to know them, et cetera, whereas at work, you have to actively make a choice to socialise. And also because a lot of people work from home nowadays, so you don't see them in the office as much, so maintaining relationships is also difficult because it means somebody wants to get in touch with you, but at the same time you don't know when the next time you're actually going to meet them is. It could be in a couple of weeks, a couple of months, you just don't really know. So yeah, maintaining relationships is difficult. So for now, like most of my work friends, typically like the rest of my graduate cohort and a couple of other people in the office who come in regularly, but yeah. So yeah, I'd say it's been a lot of changes and the networking part really requires you to step out of your comfort zone.

Researcher

Yeah, makes sense. So you'd say you really just like have to put yourself out there in some kind of way?

P2

Yeah, so you just have to be like 'Hey guys, I'm here.' And like a lot of times 'cause you're, you're new to the, to the company. Some people are willing to give that time, et cetera, but you know, like you also feel like everybody's so busy that you don't want to feel like you're, you know, putting a burden on them or you're kind of wasting their time. So even when you do want to speak to somebody new, you have to kind of go with them, go to them with something that is like meaningful. And most of the time that's not really the case because, you know, the things that are meaningful, I can ask my manager, I can ask my teammates and stuff. So yeah, it's tricky because you don't want to waste people's time, but you also want to get to know more people.

Researcher

Okay, yeah, absolutely. Any other shifts you can tell me more about?

P2

So since you said we're also going to talk about feedback, I think in terms of evaluation your work is a lot more visible to people at work because at uni, it's your work is your work and you kind of, it's a lot more like self-assessment type things. You get, you know, you get it reviewed and stuff by professors and all that now and again, but at work, it's very much like you need to do your work well so that others can do their work well as well. Like especially my team, we are very dependent on each other. We have a lot of big business cases, and so we all take a little chunk of it. And so that means that sometimes I need to make sure that I do my work well so that somebody else can do their work properly. So I think just the visibility and accountability are probably the biggest things. But you know the thing that's also different is that you really have to kind of be humble, I think, in work because you really don't know. I mean, I had no, like I had zero skills with what I do right now before I joined, like it's, it's all learning by doing. I didn't know Excel before I joined, like now, I'm almost an Excel master. And so like I had to really learn everything on the job as well because I got kind of got thrown into this role because we had like a big reorg in February,

so I had to kind of quickly learn things. Still learning because there's a lot of things going on and stuff to kind of learn on the job rather than be trained, but I still make mistakes every day. But because I think my manager is kind of the type of person, she's very welcoming. She always makes sure that if I don't know what's happening, she explains to me, she sets up time to explain it to me. And then I feel like I can ask questions when I don't know something. She's going to be very open and honest to like 'I want to do this, can I go about it like this? It may not be right, but can you check it?', that kind of stuff. So I do feel like I can get feedback whenever I need it and they can also give me feedback when something is good or bad, which is nice.

Researcher

That's so good that she's like approachable. And maybe how would you describe the feedback culture in general in your organisation? How is it like?

P2

Sure. So we have, there's like, there's two things, I'd say. There's the more formal process of feedback, so we have something called GPS, it's like growth, something, succeed. This is the review that your manager does with you, so that happens, I think, twice a year. There's one at the end of the year and one mid-year. So we write our objectives at the beginning of the year that we want to achieve these things, this year, and then during, so you have a mid-year check-in to see how you're doing with those goals. Yeah, you have to kind of do them formally because these things feed into your bonus and all. So we have that, which is good, and they help you to really write your objectives in a way that you can articulate what you want to do, and also helps you think about how you can achieve them. But what I've been doing recently is I've just been trying to, I actually set up a call with my manager for next week to consider two, three months check-in's. So I'm kind of three months into this new role that I'm doing, so just to kind of see, just to reflect on what I've learned so far, to see what my gaps are, what she, what she expected me to do, and if I've met those expectations and what she would expect me to do in the next couple of months. And then also when September comes, that's when my grad programme ends, and so naturally there's more responsibilities that you take on, so I'd want to know what that expectation would be in September, just so that I'm prepared and I can kind of build my skills up leading up to that point. Yeah, so very healthy, like everybody's willing to give you feedback when you ask for it. At the same time, I would say because they're so busy that it's difficult for them to give detailed feedback all the time, which is fair. But when ask for it, I do get it and they, they, they give like constructive criticism, so it's very much like 'You did this well, but you really could try this', or, you know, it's very, it's not like you feel like rubbish after they say it, you know? So overall the work culture is great in that sense, like they're very open, always happy to help, so it's been really good.

Researcher

Great, that's so lovely. So you said you're manager primarily gives feedback to you, am I right?

P2

Yeah, exactly.

Researcher

But you said you set something up? So it was like kind of your initiative or how does it work?

P2

Yeah. So outside of the formal process, I set up things for my own side, for like, just for me. And yeah, I wouldn't really want to get to a stage where when we do our mid-year check-in she's had all these things in her head that she's not been able to tell me. I'd rather kind of understand now. And especially as a new-joiner, I am kind of like walking in the dark, so I want to make sure that I have as much visibility on my progress, as I can. And she, she does give me like chunks now and again. But you know, sometimes people like don't tell you, they don't say anything, they just tell you task by task, how you've been doing, so I'd want to know kind of overall how I've been doing, like basically like a parent's evening kind of thing, you know?

Researcher

Yeah, yeah. Just like regular catch-ups to make sure that she actually knows where you're standing and you also know what she like expects from you?

P2

Yeah, exactly.

Researcher

Okay, get it. And how would you define feedback for yourself? Like what would you say it means to you?

P2

I'd say a couple of things. I mean, if I'm being completely honest, a big part is validation. You know, that you, if you feel like you've been doing a good job, it's nice to also hear it from somebody else. So I'd want, I'd want to see that some things that I think that I've done well, that she also thinks that I've done well, just making sure that I'm not delusional, you know? And then I'd say, I really do want to be the best that I can be, like continuously striving to be the best. I want every piece of work that I do to be the best, and I know it's not there yet, so I'd want to know what else I need to do for it to be valuable. And that, I think that's one of the biggest things like I, as a graduate, like it's tough to see where you add value because, you know, the work that you do is very kind of grunt work, very like, you don't even know, once you do a piece of it, you don't know where it leads to or if it leads to anything at all. So I'd want to know that I am adding value, especially after eight months now, like, it's not just like I joined two months ago. Yeah, they're, they're investing in me and I want to make sure that they see that return, essentially. So to me, it's just about making sure that the feedback is used, like I know that I used X, Y, Z to reach these goals. And that I'm also aligned with my manager in terms of 'I'm thinking of being at this level in a couple of months, do you think I can do it? And what do I need to do to get there, essentially?'

Researcher

Okay, so correct me if I'm wrong, but maybe also like kind of a forward-looking perspective that you actually know like these are the steps that I have to take, so you're not just like working in the darkness?

P2

Yeah, exactly. Yeah, I completely agree with you.

Researcher

And maybe building on that, what would you say is like feedback's purpose for you?

P2

I think the purpose would be, I think kind of similar, like I don't want to, I don't want to sit here and think that I'm doing a good job when I'm not. I don't, I wouldn't want to feel as if my work isn't adding value or if I wasn't a good investment to make, a good person to hire, essentially. So I'd want to know that I'm capable of doing what is asked of me. I think also, it's kind of like I want to be the best I can be at this job, so that when it comes to looking for a new job or going to another company or changing my role, that I know that I've kind of done, I've kind of done the best I could with this role. You know what I mean? Like I fulfilled this role, I'm kind of ready for another role. And so I'm just trying to quickly get to that, that point, you know, 'cause, 'cause in corporate, like it, it takes ages to get to the top, so I just want to speed this up, yeah. So I think it's just mainly skills, visibility, making sure that I'm where I am at the moment, like that I'm okay where I'm at the moment and that I have, I know what I need to do to move up and to go forward, essentially.

Researcher

Makes sense. And like thinking of the experience of just getting feedback, what makes you feel like it was helpful or generally like a positive experience?

P2

I think obviously when it's framed positively, like the tone is positive, I think that, that's always helpful when someone starts off in like a formal, in a positive sense. Then I do like when we talk about specific tasks, not just kind of feedback in general, like I'd want to know very specific details that 'Oh, in this task, like you did this well, but you could have tried this, or maybe next time try this.' And I'd want to know best practices, so in general, how do we, what is the best practice to do this task or this type of a task? So if we're doing like a, we're trying to put together like a business case, like 'Oh, this is the best way to do it.' I think also just having a very open conversation, like I want my manager to know a little bit about me. Like it's not just like we just know each other, but I'd want her to know like me on a bit of a deeper level, just so that she understands how I think and vice versa. I'd want to know her on a little bit of a deeper level as well, just that I can understand her as a person and how she likes to work, 'cause naturally I'm just going to work in different ways, so I think feedback is also helpful to understand how each person works, so we can complement each other when we work together. So yeah, essentially just specific, task-based

feedback is always useful, positive framing, and also just an open conversation about who we are as people.

Researcher

Absolutely. You mentioned the tone and framing being like super important. Could you tell me more about that?

P2

Yeah, no, exactly that. Also, I think I, I think I have a little bit of a fear of failure kind of thing. Like I, I don't want to feel as if I'm doing a bad job. I think that's also why I want feedback as well, like I'm kind of scared that I'm doing a bad job and I wouldn't want to know that I am. So it's kind of like, it's tough. Like I, I want to like know all the time, like how I've done that task, but just in case, like sometimes I don't necessarily ask but I want that reassurance. So I think the positive frame is just so that it doesn't kind of trigger that sense of fear of failure, I think. Yeah, I think that's why it's important. I think I respond better to that rather than something being negative as, as, as most people do, right? But yeah, it's just for me, I do need the positive framing. I wouldn't want someone to start with 'No', but I think it would push me a lot to turn that into like a 'You did that well, but this is what you could do better.' Well generally I'd say it can either go in a good way or like the wrong direction. If it's negative, like either I'm going to be like okay, I'm going to do this really well, or I'll be like I'll quit kind of thing. So I just, I think positive framing makes this chance as low as it can be.

Researcher

Sure. Could you describe other things that makes it feel like it was all helpful and positive?

P2

So maybe more broader from the person who gives feedback to me, I need to know the person is an honest person, that they, when they do say something's good or when they say something's bad, they're being very honest about the work. Because you can tell when someone's just saying it just for the sake of it, like, and, you know, that's not useful at all as much as, you know, you want things to be positive. It's not useful if they're going to tell me things that I just want to hear, that's it. And vice versa as well. So since I've been here I've had two managers, and with like my first manager, he would always, he wasn't very formal about these processes. He would just say 'Yeah, you're doing a good job', like he wouldn't really give too much feedback, like specific feedback. And I know that there's some tasks that I could have done better, and like I know that he's expecting more from me in some things, so I would have wanted him to pick up on that and be like 'I recognise this. You did a good job, but you could have done this more.' I was like that would have been great. And so my current manager, she, I asked, I think I prompt her to give me these things more, just 'cause I need to make sure that what I'm doing is correct. So just honesty, yeah, I guess credibility and trust makes me feel like the person actually thought about me and my work.

Researcher

Get that. And what types of feedback don't feel helpful to you at all?

P2

I think just the kind of general feedback, like just someone saying to me 'Oh, you did a really good job', like you've got good skills in whatever. Yeah, I think that's like kind of just the very general, nothing kind of specific. It's not talking about, you know, the skills that you'd like to say. My previous, my first manager, he would just tell me 'Oh, you have really good communication skills, good writing skills, good analytical skills.' Like okay, but I know that it's not perfect, like I know that it's not great, what else can I be doing? I'd have to prompt him to kind of give me that. So if I were a leader or manager, good feedback would be a discussion where I'm getting super specific. When I prompt the other person, then that needs to prompt further things in my head. You know like if I asked my manager, 'Can you tell me how I've been doing?', I'd want her to break it down project by project that I've done so far, or I'm happy to also break it down by that. And then we can delve into each one together and like discuss it rather than it just being for one person to tell you I've done a good job and you're thinking like okay, thanks.

Researcher

Okay, yeah, so basically just like being specific and maybe also being like task-focused? So you actually know, okay, this is what the feedback is referring to and not just like taken out of the blue?

P2

Oh, completely. And 'cause like a lot of the type of tasks in my role, they repeat, just the different types of use cases change, basically. So it's like by knowing how I did on one task, it's going to help me for the next one, so especially when your tasks are like repeated a lot, it's really useful.

Researcher

Makes sense. And how would you say you generally feel like before you get feedback?

P2

Oh, I'm fucking nervous. I always have to, I write everything down, so I have to make sure that I'm prepared for it. If I don't feel prepared for it, I think mentally then, yeah, I don't think I can kind of just go straight into it. I think positive or negative I feel nervous 'cause I don't know how to react to positive, but I don't know what to say to negative, you know? So it's either worry or don't really know what to say, so I have to prepare for it. I have to make sure that I know what I want to talk about. But I think, as you work, you know, like you, so many things pop into your head just like over the months, like on specific things that go, how do I do this? Or in this scenario, what should I do? And sometimes you don't get the time to ask them then and there, so I also want to make sure that I use the opportunity of these feedback sessions to get everything out of my head in terms of my progress into the role itself. So yeah, I definitely have to plan and prepare for it. Like this meeting that I have with her, I've set up, I set up like two, three weeks ago, so you know, it's like, she, I sent her an agenda as well to make sure that she also has some ideas to think about before we sit down. I want it to be, yeah, I want it to be something that we're both prepared for. It's like when you have to like have a difficult conversation with someone that you need to, you need to both prepare for it.

Researcher

Yeah. Maybe to dig a bit deeper, you could walk me through a memorable piece of feedback you've receive where you're like this still sticks to me?

P2

I think two pieces of feedback. So one from my previous manager, he told me that I was, that it was a good decision to hire me, which was nice. That was actually really nice 'cause I think, I think that's always running through and it gave me peace of mind 'cause I always thought like oh, I hope that they see that it was worth kind of hiring me. And then second actually was from my current manager, I think last week or so. No, it was this week. So a lot of the work that we do is for like, for the board. So it was, she mentioned, she gave me very specific details that some of the work that I've done, it's been kind of repeated a lot, like it's been useful for the board meetings and discussions with some of the clients and all. That was nice because sometimes you don't know what you give, you give, you do some work, you don't really know where it goes, you don't know how people react to it, so it was nice. It was really nice to know that the work that I did has not only been kind of used in this, like for the board meetings, that it's also been received well enough to be mentioned to clients. So it was nice to hear that because it meant that there was actually, there was value to the work that I did, it provided some insight that helped people, it helped a lot of senior people, so that's super positive feedback. It kind of reinforced my value in the organisation because like I knew it's received well not only internally, but also like externally used.

Researcher

That's lovely to hear. And so we've talked about your experiences with positive and negative feedback and what the experience feels like. And thinking now specifically about the period after receiving feedback, could you describe any thoughts and feelings that tend to stay with you?

P2

Of course, so I definitely feel a lot more motivated after getting any sort of feedback, a lot more, whether I kind of realise it or not, I definitely do think I've become a lot more interested in the work and a lot more incentivised to do well. Just because I know that what I'm doing is working or even if it's kind of negative because the way that my manager would tell me or my teammate would tell me, it makes you want to be better, like work harder, essentially. So even in that sense, it makes you want to work and work more. So yeah, I think you also feel a little bit more integrated into the organisational culture. You feel like a lot more like you want to do well for the company, you know? So yeah, I think like when people appreciate work on a company-wide level, it feels like you want to keep doing that. You keep wanting to like help others and keep the whole thing up and running. Yeah, that's it, so it's like a booster. If it's positive and negative, maybe even more negative, well like constructive, because it makes me want to work harder and get better and better and better.

Researcher

Yeah.

P2

And luckily, I've not had like horrendous feedback yet, so fingers crossed. But I think there was a point, actually, I think with my previous first manager, where we had like a pretty tight deadline. And I'm just going through this, like a rough like weekend, couple days of the week. And I just couldn't really, and I was doing some other work, I was kind of quite overloaded with work that week, I think. And I just literally just had to form one slide for him, that was it, no, it was like one or two slides back then. And I just couldn't really, I just couldn't do it, I just couldn't get myself to do it. And that was, I knew that he was frustrated at me, like the next day, I knew that he was like 'I just need these slides, like as early as possible' because that was like holding up something in sending them out or whatever. And then so I talked to him, I was like 'I understand that, like I'm really sorry, like I didn't get it to stand', explained to him some of the reasons. And like that was nice, because he, then we were like, so he appreciated I'm very open, and he was like 'Just come talk to me if anything's the issue.' But when I could sense that negative energy, like the frustration from him, I think that kind of pushed me away a little bit more, like I didn't want to do the work. And he was also very blunt in the way he'd say like 'Oh, this slide needs fixing.' And wasn't very clear, he wasn't very good at communicating, like clearly what I need to do. It'd be just like random texting, so I didn't really know what I needed to do, and then that kind of stressed me out more. And then it wasn't the right way, and then he was like 'No, this isn't right, messed up slide.' So he was very direct and not very clear on like what he needed to be done, so I naturally kind of pushed away from the kind of negative feedback that he'd give. Yeah, sorry, that kind of went a bit off track but I'd say that negative feedback is fine for me, but it's just the way that it's framed matters to me because if it's framed very bluntly and without compassion, and I can sense this frustration, or like the other person's frustration, then I kind of naturally will push away. And yeah, I wouldn't really want to engage with it. But if I feel like it's just, it's constructive, and they're not frustrated, they just need me to do this quickly, then I'm happy to obviously accommodate.

Researcher

Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

P2

Of course, so what I mean is that it needs to be, it really needs to, I think sometimes you can sense how upset somebody is at you, depending on like, just like their general presence, the tone, even when they just like email, text, whatever it is. So tone and like the way they say it, they like frame something is super important because I think that can either make you want to make it better, can either make you push away. So yeah, I think those two things are important.

Researcher

Yeah, makes sense. And what would you say, how you generally react to feedback? Like could you maybe describe any mechanisms or anything you do with it?

P2

Well I think in the beginning, it was like hard because you come in like, you know, you just, you just did a degree and like you're like well, I know things, but then you come to work and like you don't know anything, so accepting that is difficult. And not even like, you know, that you think

that you're the smartest person ever. It's just like you really don't know anything when you, when you join work. You know kind of general skills, but you don't know that much about the company. You don't know deep sector knowledge, that kind of stuff, so accepting that is difficult. So when that's called out, you naturally want to cope with it in some, in like in a bad way, like in a bad way, meaning like, you don't really like listen to it or you don't really internalise it, you just kind of brush that feedback off. But I think as you get more and more into it and you kind of just start to realise that it's actually fine that you don't know things. And even, even my manager, she started to share with me stories about when she was a graduate and like she was in graduate in the same company. So she's shared with me like times when she's like messed up and everything, and that was actually quite nice because it's nice to know that everybody wasn't perfect. They weren't, they didn't have the skills that they have now when they first joined, especially as a graduate. So that was really helpful because it helped me kind of understand that I can get to where she is, I just need to like accept that I don't know things, and then I just need to be open to the feedback that I get. So yeah, once I kind of realised that, and it doesn't take long, you know, you, you just have to, like I said, you just kind of be humble about it. Like once you just know that you don't really know everything about this role, you really need to learn from other people, then like there wasn't really much to deal with in terms of negative feedback. You just kind of take it and you just work on it because again, when people are nice to you and like they tell you very nicely and set the time out to speak to you, then there's no other thing but to take it positively. 'Cause if you take it, like taking it negatively, it would just, there was just, there was no incentive to do so, I think. Like 'cause I guess ultimately you want to stay there, so then you'd rather just focus on the positives and not the negatives.

Researcher

Yeah, really good. Super interesting. And could you maybe think or yeah tell me of a time when feedback shaped how you work?

P2

So because I know that I can ask my team for feedback on the work that I do, I feel like I can take on, so for each task that I do, I can take on a little bit more and more responsibility. And I've seen that my manager also gives me tasks with increasing responsibility, which has been nice. So it's, it's great that I can, because I know that I can always ask them feedback. I always, whenever I say I've done something, I always ask for their review on it, and then they'll tell me what they think about it. I can randomly ask them questions during, whilst I'm working on things, and they'll help, like explain it to me. So I think it, the open culture that we have within the team makes it very easy to continuously ask for feedback, so I'm not too kind of worried.

Researcher

Okay, yeah, what I kind of meant was like the ways the feedback you got shaped how you do your work, like your tasks and stuff?

P2

Oh, sorry, get it. So I definitely feel, like I feel a lot more confident in the tasks I do. Yeah, definitely, definitely increased. Like I said, like the example about my work kind of being given,

just like shown at a senior level, like these kinds of specific details about where my work is going, how it's been, how it's been reacted to gives you a little bit more confidence in your ability to do your job and your ability to contribute to the company, like to their overall goals. Yeah, but I think also what's nice about the place I work in, it's not very competitive. Like it's not as if we're kind of, it's against each other. It's a, we have a very small group of cohort of about nine people, and we're all in different roles and teams. So for me, luckily I don't really have, there's no one to compete with, necessarily. Because yeah, even if like, even if we weren't, like I wasn't in the same role as somebody else, in my previous role, even in that, like because our work was always complimentary, like all the work we do is always complimentary. So it's, it's, it was just easier to, there was no sort of sense of competition, so I think feedback was just always good. It was just meaningful and just makes you feel a bit more secure in your, in your role, secure as a graduate. Yeah, which was just nice because it's been not very, it's not very competitive.

Researcher

Okay, so the way I understand you, you would say that it does give you like some kind of sense of like yeah, you belong where you are, especially because you're like early in your career?

P2

For sure. Although this job isn't kind of what I want to do in the long-run, but either like, it's like it's a great first job, but it's not something, like in a year or two's time, I think I'll look for another job, but I already kind of made peace with that. It does as like, I was thinking about this yesterday, as I kind of get better at this, I'm like as I get more kind of feedback and just like the culture itself is great, I feel like more and more like I want to stay. But yeah, I think to some extent, yeah, of course, it makes, it makes you feel like you belong where you are, like you're doing the right thing, essentially, and that I'm on the right track.

Researcher

Yeah, I was actually going to ask you in what ways it may have impacted your future, like career direction or where you like see yourself?

P2

Yeah. I actually recently thought about what I want to do in like the next five to ten years, and I don't really want to work in like a company in like ten years' time, I wouldn't want to be like still in like a corporate kind of environment. I wouldn't want that, I want like my own kind of thing 'cause it takes ages to kind of make anything, like anywhere near as much as you'd want to make, so yeah. And I would like to move to another country, like all these different things that I'm thinking of in the next five years. I'm taking this opportunity now to learn as much as I can because the job that I have is a great job that opens the doors to a lot of different other career paths. And the work-life-balance is great, so I can do other things in the side, so I can study, I'm studying for the CFA, I run a tutoring business, like I can do all these other things as well. Very flexible working culture. But you're right, I think the feedback and just the way people interact with me does make me want to stay for longer, and if I wasn't very kind of held down on what I want to pick, on the path that I want to take, I would, I could see myself staying here for a while.

Researcher

Cool, and yeah, get that, super nice to have that flexibility. And so in what ways would you say has it shifted how you see yourself professionally, maybe as a person and professional, like whatever comes to mind?

P2

Oh, yeah. So I always saw myself as somebody that wouldn't be very good at the corporate life. Just the kind of 9-5 like routine, like literally my work is just done on this laptop and like that's it, I never really saw myself as that kind of person. Not that that's bad, but increasingly realising more that I can do it. I think also just the fact, if I look back on how much I've learned, even just in the last three months, in the beginning, I've literally, when I was, when one of my teammates was showing me the type of works that they do, so we do a lot of like market sizing. And when she was showing me one of the market sizing models, frameworks that she does, I told her like 'There isn't a way that I can do this. This looks so complicated.' I was literally thinking like gosh, hell no. She was showing me all the different Excel forms that you have to use, coding. I was telling her like 'Nope, can't do it.' I was really scared in the beginning, but the way they've helped me kind of do things chunk by chunk, so I don't do the whole thing, but I have done certain parts of it, kind of building up, to eventually maybe a couple months' time doing my own case. So I just think through feedback you just realise how much you actually can learn. I think that's really useful because at uni, you don't really know until you actually graduated how much you've learned. I don't think for me, I never actually reflected on how much I've actually learned at uni until like at the end you're like wow, I have so much more knowledge now, but at work it's nice because you can actually see the progress that you've made. 'Cause before you would take two days to do a task, now I can do it in two hours kind of thing. Like, you know, just simple things. And that's helped me feel as if you can kind of learn anything that you want, that you put your mind to and spend time doing. So that's where feedback has also been helpful because if I didn't get the constant feedback, well also if I didn't ask for the feedback continuously, then I wouldn't have been able to learn as much as I could have. And yeah, in that sense, I think it shaped my idea of like a person who can learn quickly and adapt quite quickly, and the only barriers are really just like your mental barriers at that point. And so feedback has been a learning journey, like through it I saw my self-esteem and skills, and as a person, that I'm made for the corporate world, no matter where my future takes me.

Researcher

Yeah, thanks for sharing that, really interesting. I think I also told you in the beginning that I'm also interested in how it like connects to generations. So I was wondering like how do you think your experience of feedback compares to others of your age, thinking of your friends maybe?

P2

For sure, there's a connection, yeah. So actually I think even if I compare like again, between our graduate cohort, so I have a couple of friends, three of them, they work in a different team. And it's just very interesting how even just that the feedback culture changes by team, that this team, that their, their advisory groups that are not like consulting, they book on client projects, essentially. Their feedback is very, I don't think it's very like healthy. It's the culture, not really like

great. It's just like they do a graduate presentation every couple of months, so kind of to show off, like to show that they understand a certain type of model, that they can present well to clients, essentially. And they get like, they get a score based on how well they did the presentation and how well they understood the model that they're working with. But I don't think it's necessarily like constructive, like they just get a score of five, like they get three and a half, so they just lacked in these areas, those areas, but I don't think it's necessarily constructive. Like, I've like, I heard about the, I have like, I've known about the scores for like over a couple of months and they, they score about the same every single time. So to me, it's like, and then they, the incentive to perform well in these presentations decreases because they don't really know what they need to do. There's no kind of incentive for them to perform. So in that sense, I think generational, like comparing across kind of like the same age group, I think it's, we respond very much to our surroundings, for sure. But especially as a new-joiners thing, you're just very much, so whatever team you've been kind of putting up first, I think that's very, that shapes you a lot. The person that managed you within your very first job, I think shapes a lot about your view on work, how you view, feedback. And now I wouldn't be able to be with a manager who doesn't give any kind of constant feedback because we don't know anything else. Like this is our only reference point. Like that's it. Like after that, I would always want a manager who's like my current manager, if not better. And I'm sure my other teammates, they don't know what it's like to have a manager that gives you feedback, but I also don't know if they feel like they need to have feedback more. They don't, they don't seek it out, so I'm guessing they would just be happy continuing as they do, but I don't know if that necessarily will make them happier in their job medium to long-run. So yeah, very much just shaped by who you are with first, who like your first mentor is.

Researcher

Yeah, oh, for sure. And you said something about like your generation responding strongly to surroundings, could you say a bit more about that, why do you think that is?

P2

Of course. So it's because, I think we're very much, we're like kind of the age of influence. Like we have a lot of, we are influenced by everything, like, you know, online and in-person, whatever it is. And I think we always, I think we have a constant need to keep bettering our own selves, like to kind of, picking up flaws in ourselves and trying to make it better. And because we have so much influence everywhere, we kind of take ideas from other people and blah blah, we kind of try and fix ourselves in that way, so I think that's where it comes from. I'm not sure, but I think maybe just the need that because we, there's, there's, there's things that we know that we're not so good at or that we're good at. And when we see that this person's really good at this skill, I'm going to try to like learn from them, or just kind of mimic them in some sense, you know, just try and copy what they do and then put it out there to get the same good feedback they get. Being like influenced and looking, like comparing what other people are like doing.

Researcher

Yeah, yeah.

P2

And like, not even like, it's not, I don't think it's always competitive, but yeah, I think you just always compare what other people are doing to what you're doing because you're just kind of grown up doing that. I think most of your young adult life has been doing that, at uni, always doing that. Uni is like huge imposter syndrome. You are always checking, like I hope I can keep up and you literally never want to fail, so you're constantly comparing your grades and performance and stuff and feedback you get to keep up or be better than everyone else. Also online like just showing the best side of yourself and putting yourself out there, showing off all the cool vibey things you are doing but never when you feel shit. So yeah, I've noticed that's just kind of continuing into work life. You try to get better and better and show off what you can do. And yeah, tying that back to feedback, I'd say that negative makes you aware of these things that you like maybe don't want to be seen, and yet they came through and were noticeable. So yeah, a little shatter to yourself, what you thought you were doing right.

Researcher

Super interesting. So there's like all these things from your social surroundings and your upbringing and you said also online. Could you tell me a bit more about what you meant by that?

P2

I think, you know, like obviously social media in general has made it a lot more visible to what people are doing. You know, everybody's growing up trying to make their Instagram look good, like as perfect as it can be, you know, like all these kinds of things. So I think the kind of external validation, I think is a lot bigger in our generation just because that's kind of how we've grown up, like having that especially online. And I think we want to know that we're doing well. I think we're also a very ambitious generation too. Because yeah, like, well, yeah, like a lot, like same, like for me, my parents, they came to the UK in like 1999. And we set up, they set up a good life here. It's like now in terms of like I can do, kind of basically do whatever I want, like I don't really have any limits. I don't really have any responsibilities. I'm in a financially stable home, I can go do what I want to do. I don't need to take care of anyone or anything like that. You know, so I think, I think that's the case for a lot of people in our generation that they feel like the sky is the limit. So I think we're very ambitious in that sense, but also expectations are a lot higher. Well we look around, look out a lot more and think about oh, this person's doing that, this other person's doing that. Constant comparison and this, for me, has made me feel like I constantly have to reach higher, like for the stars. And then obviously social media, just online. The internet just made that a lot more visible.

Researcher

And how would you like connect that back to feedback?

P2

Well at work you also look for exactly that external validation you get there, so that gives you a lot more understanding and visibility on how you're doing. So then if you know from an external person how you're, how you are literally doing, and because you can't really get that truthfully from other people necessarily. So if you know that from your manager, how you are doing personally,

then you know more about yourself, you have more information about yourself, and then you can use that, again, that whole process of kind of, I suppose, looking out. You just know more information about yourself. Now you can, you know that you're better at this skill, not so good at this skill. Naturally, then I would try and understand who can I look at to kind of build up the skill that I'm not so good at. So ultimately using that information to adjust and adapt your behaviour right now and on the spot, yes, I need it immediately to be able to work with it. Or like now that I know that I'm good at this skill, maybe I can go looking into this type of job more. Like, you know, it's just, it just helps you kind of feel more comfortable in like who you are as a person when you, when you start to look outside.

Researcher

Yeah, that's so interesting. And now thinking about maybe senior colleagues, how do you think your generation sees or handles feedback compared to them?

P2

I feel like senior colleagues, so to take like my, let's take my manager that gives me feedback, she's not like, she's not super senior. She's like three kind of ranks above me, and from like an MD level, she's about three, four ranks below an MD level. I'd say she's like either late 20s or early 30s, around that age. Yeah, she's like, no kids or anything. She just lives with her fiancé, yeah. So I think she's pretty open to that from her manager. I know that for sure, but she's just the type of person like personality wise that's very like responsive to feedback. She's always looking for feedback. But if I see somebody more senior than her, somebody like senior director, like one rank below MD, or even the MD itself, I think they're just very, they're very secure in their knowledge because they've been working in, like a lot of them have been working in the company for like 15-20 years, so they're like very secure in like what they know. They naturally feel as if what they say is like the right thing. You know just because they're like big, big people in the company and they have a real big standing. So I do think there's definitely, there's definitely a relationship between how many years you've been working in a certain, I think, how many years you've been working in a certain like role. Not even just like working in, working in general, I think being at the company itself because I do notice that somebody at the same level, senior director level, he, one person he joined like last year in May, and somebody who's been working at (company's name removed for anonymity) for the past 20 years. I think the person who's been working at (company's name removed for anonymity) for 20 years, they're a lot more comfortable sharing their ideas and speaking up than the same level of new-joiner. So I do think that being in the company so long definitely reflects on how secure you feel, and how you ultimately see and feel and respond to feedback as well. You get it?

Researcher

Yeah, but please feel free to go into detail if you have any other points?

P2

So it's like 'I've been here for so long, I know what I'm doing.' It's very like the nature of the business that I work in, it's very much, we have a lot of like products, and because like a lot of different types of clients. So when somebody's been in the company for a long time, they know

about all the different types of products we've had, or that we've had previously, the types of clients that we have, they've had their personal relationships with them, et cetera. So they feel like they, and very rightly so, they have a lot of insight about the journey the company's been on. They've also probably worked in different roles in the company too, so they have an understanding of the various teams and how they work as well within the company too. So compared to somebody who's a new-joiner, a lot of the new-joiners, a lot of people have previous experience in banking, so they come out from banks and they come work at (company's name removed for anonymity). So they have a lot of industry knowledge, but not necessarily company knowledge. So you do notice that people who have more company knowledge, they speak a lot more in meetings. They discuss a lot more, they do try and push that point a lot, compared to somebody who's got more industry knowledge who will speak, but like it's more targeted. It's like at the right time, and then if there's any feedback on the point, they kind of say like 'Okay, fair enough.' And new-joiners are a bit more like stepping back maybe a bit. I mean, it just depends on the person. Some people are quite, they really try and push that point, and some people are like 'Okay, fair enough, people have been at the company for ages.' It just depends on the person. But yeah, I think we have to kind of group it, then yeah, I'd say new-joiners typically do step back a little bit more.

Researcher

Makes sense. Ah, time is running out. I feel like we could speak about this for ages.

P2

Yeah, I'm so sorry, I'd really love to chat longer, but I have a meeting with my manager, actually.

Researcher

Okay, then maybe just like wrapping things up a bit, what place, if any, does feedback have in these early stages of your career?

P2

I didn't realise this before, like I kind of only realised in the past couple of months how important your first job is, your first manager, your first working environment because that pretty much sets the stage and sets the scene for the rest of your young working career, I think. Obviously after a while it changes and it adapts, but the skills you learn, the way you learn, you need to learn it properly. So if you, I think it's definitely down to both yourself as a person, how you are, like are you okay with just kind of working? I know a lot of my graduate colleagues, they just kind of, they don't really ask for feedback, they just kind of go. I think not to toot my own horn, but I do think I kind of strive just to kind of like to always be better, and like I do think I have the ability to have the forethought of asking for feedback and need, like understanding the importance of feedback. I'm like I have a friend, she just like doesn't really care, she just like works and that works for her, so it's cool. But it's important to me to have a good relationship with my manager, to make sure that I know that I'm doing okay and what I need to do to build my skills. Yeah, so it's very important in terms of shaping my early career, but it has to be done in the right way because I think your early work and career, especially your first job, is very formative for you. The rest of your kind of early career itself for the next couple like five years will be quite formative. I wouldn't

say it's going to make or break necessarily, but it does definitely impact the way I see myself in the corporate world.

Researcher

Get it. And if you had the chance to like redesign how feedback is given in your organisation, what would you change? Or is there like anything you would want to change at all?

P2

I think, for me, I think they should have more feedback sessions. It'd be nice to also have more bigger feedback sessions on like how, like I'd want like our MD to give us more feedback on how our strategy team is doing in general, just so that we all, that it's communicated to everybody what we all need to do, what we all need to work better at. And then, you know, maybe then our managers sit us down and be like 'Okay, we've had this discussion with our MD, it'd be a good idea to think about what that means for your role and what it means for our smaller team.' I think I'd also, on the other side, I'd want there to be a bit more informality between people. I think especially kind of post-COVID, I think there's a lot more formal barriers because people work from home. It's not as easy to socialise. People moved away from the city now, you know, because they don't need to come in as much. So having more informal time, socialising time, to get to know and understand people, I think that would change a lot of things because instead of, you would just kind of understand how they are as people and you'd be, you'd find it easier to receive and give feedback to them because you're just a lot closer to them than previously. And not saying you have to be best friends, but you just, you know them a little more in their personal life, you know them better.

Researcher

Perfect. Thanks for that (participant's name removed for anonymity). And is there anything else I missed where you're like this is important to share about my experience of feedback? Anything you'd like to add?

P2

No, I think that, yeah, I think all the questions you asked, I've got it out.

Researcher

Amazing. Then that was it actually, thanks so much for your time and if I need clarification on anything I'll just text you, if that's fine?

P2

Of course.

Researcher

And just fyi, if you change your mind about anything you've shared and would like me not to mention it in my dissertation, like just feel free to contact me within the next two days.

P2

Will do so. Well that was such a lovely conversation with you, (researcher's name removed for anonymity), thanks so much for that. And have a nice weekend.

Researcher

And you, (participant's name removed for anonymity), thanks, bye-bye.