



GENERATION Z LEADERSHIP IN THE DIGITAL ERA: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF TECHNOLOGY PROFICIENCY AND EMERGING LEADERSHIP PATTERN

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ABSTRACT

The current demographic bonus is dominated by the presence of Generation Z, defined as those born between 1995 and 2012. This generation has grown up in a digital environment characterized by rapid technological and informational advancements, resulting in distinct leadership characteristics and perspectives. This study aims to analyze the leadership potential of Generation Z, identify their key characteristics as leaders in the digital era, and examine the role of technological competence in supporting future leadership. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, utilizing primary data obtained through interviews with four informants who lead their respective work units, as well as secondary data derived from relevant literature reviews. The findings indicate that Generation Z possesses strong leadership potential, with a tendency toward collaborative, supportive, and democratic leadership styles. Moreover, Generation Z demonstrates high adaptability, strong technological skills that facilitate communication and task completion, and a people-oriented approach that emphasizes togetherness in workplace interactions. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of emerging generational leadership patterns and their implications for organizational development in the digital era.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global workforce is undergoing a significant generational shift, with Generation Z projected to account for approximately 27% of the workforce by 2025 (Putri, 2024). In Indonesia, this transition is even more evident, as internal records from a major financial company indicate that nearly 70% of its employees are composed of millennials and Generation Z (Kumaran, 2023). This demographic transformation suggests that Generation Z is not only entering the workforce in large numbers but is also beginning to occupy strategic and leadership positions (Anwar, 2023; Stillman & Stillman, 2018). As organizations navigate an increasingly complex and technology-driven environment, understanding the leadership potential of this generation becomes critically important.

In the digital era, leadership plays a pivotal role in directing organizational performance and ensuring the achievement of strategic objectives. Leadership styles, in particular, influence how leaders make decisions, communicate, and respond to dynamic organizational challenges. Generation Z exhibits distinct characteristics shaped by rapid technological advancement, including strong adaptability, advanced problem-solving skills, and an entrepreneurial mindset oriented toward innovation and meaningful change (Jayatissa, 2023; Lazar et al., 2023). These traits suggest that Generation Z leaders may adopt leadership approaches that differ substantially from those of previous generations, particularly in leveraging digital tools and fostering agile organizational cultures.

Defined broadly as individuals born between 1995 and 2012, Generation Z represents the first cohort to grow up fully immersed in digital technology and the information age (Bencsik et al., 2016; McKee-Ryan, 2021). This background has shaped their leadership tendencies, which emphasize collaboration, flexibility, and social impact. Studies indicate that Generation Z leaders are more likely to utilize social media and

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digital platforms to build networks and enhance teamwork (Hidayat et al., 2023), demonstrate adaptability in responding to rapid organizational and market changes (Norman & Pahlawati, 2024), and prioritize purpose-driven goals that contribute to broader societal outcomes (Purnomo & Sri Pudjiarti, 2024). These attributes align with emerging leadership paradigms that emphasize inclusivity, collaboration, and shared responsibility. Furthermore, projections suggest that Generation Z leadership will prioritize supportive communication, empathy, and psychologically safe work environments (Yilmaz et al., 2024). As leaders, they are expected to focus on employee development through training opportunities, flexible working arrangements, and the creation of positive and inclusive workplace cultures. Such tendencies resonate with contemporary leadership theories, including transformational, servant, and inclusive leadership, which emphasize relational dynamics, employee empowerment, and organizational sustainability (Benmira & Agboola, 2021).

Despite these positive expectations, Generation Z leadership is not without criticism. Several negative stereotypes persist, portraying this generation as overly dependent on technology, less resilient, and more inclined toward job mobility or disengagement when workplace expectations are unmet (Hardiantoro & Hardiyanto, 2023; Humaira et al., 2024). Additionally, the label of the “strawberry generation” reflects perceptions of emotional fragility and differing attitudes toward work and rewards compared to earlier generations (Arniti et al., 2023). These contrasting perspectives highlight the need for a more nuanced and evidence-based understanding of Generation Z’s leadership capabilities. From a theoretical perspective, leadership has evolved from early trait-based approaches, such as the “Great Man” theory, to more complex and relational frameworks, including transformational, collaborative, and complexity leadership theories (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). Contemporary leadership models increasingly emphasize interaction, adaptability, and system-wide thinking, which are particularly relevant in digital and rapidly changing organizational contexts. The alignment between these modern theories and the characteristics of Generation Z suggests that this generation may be well-positioned to embody and advance these emerging leadership paradigms. A key factor influencing Generation Z leadership is technological proficiency. As digital natives, Generation Z demonstrates high levels of competence in utilizing digital tools, social media platforms, and emerging technologies, enabling more efficient communication, remote collaboration, and innovation (Bhalla et al., 2021; Lazar et al., 2023). Their ability to rapidly adapt to technological change further strengthens their capacity to lead in dynamic and complex environments (Mahayosnand & Sabra, 2024). Moreover, the growing presence of Generation Z in the workforce has accelerated organizational digital transformation and contributed to the emergence of flexible work arrangements and the expansion of the freelance economy (Dieguez et al., 2024; Wheatley & Hibbler-Britt, 2019).

Despite these developments, existing studies have largely focused on general generational characteristics or digital leadership competencies, with limited attention to how technological proficiency specifically shapes the leadership patterns of Generation Z within organizational contexts. This gap indicates the need for a more focused analysis that integrates technological capability with leadership behavior. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the leadership characteristics of Generation Z, particularly in relation to their technological proficiency, and to examine how these competencies influence emerging leadership patterns in the digital era. By doing so, this research seeks to contribute to the development of a more contextualized understanding of Generation Z leadership and its implications for organizational development

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using a narrative inquiry approach to explore and interpret the leadership characteristics of Generation Z. This approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of how individuals construct meaning from their leadership experiences and how these meanings shape their behavior within organizational contexts. Narrative inquiry enables the exploration of participants’ lived experiences, personal values, and leadership identities through the stories they share, allowing for a rich and contextualized interpretation of leadership phenomena (Fadli, 2021).

The study focused on individuals from Generation Z who have experience in leading work units. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on specific criteria: (1) belonging

to Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2012), (2) having current or prior experience in a leadership role within an organization, and (3) actively involved in team coordination or decision-making processes. A total of four participants were included. Although the number of informants is limited, it is considered appropriate for narrative qualitative research, which emphasizes depth, richness, and contextual insight rather than generalizability.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences. The questions focused on leadership style, technological utilization, communication patterns, decision-making processes, and challenges encountered in leading teams. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via online communication platforms. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy of the data. To complement the primary data, a literature review was conducted using recent and relevant scholarly sources on Generation Z leadership and digital competence. This secondary data served to contextualize and support the interpretation of empirical findings.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. The process involved several stages: (1) data familiarization through repeated reading of interview transcripts, (2) initial coding to identify significant statements, (3) categorization of codes into broader themes, and (4) interpretation of themes to construct coherent narratives related to Generation Z leadership. This analytical approach enabled the identification of recurring patterns and key insights regarding the role of technological proficiency in shaping leadership behavior.

To ensure trustworthiness, this study applied several validation strategies. Triangulation was conducted by comparing interview data with findings from the literature. In addition, member checking was performed by sharing summarized findings with participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. The study also maintained an audit trail documenting the research process, thereby enhancing transparency and credibility. Through this systematic methodological approach, the study provides a comprehensive and reliable understanding of Generation Z leadership, particularly in relation to technological proficiency and its influence on leadership practices in contemporary organizational settings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

Gen Z brings new dynamics to the world of work and leadership. They have great potential to be effective leaders, equipped with adaptability, and digital skills. The following is a table of Gen Z characters as leaders summarized from the results of participant interviews and literature searches.

Table 1. Gen Z Character Indicators as Leaders

Keywords	Literature Description	Participant Description	Character Indicators
	Gen Z as leaders often prefer collaborative and supportive approaches to traditional authoritative styles. They emphasize teamwork and are committed to helping their team members succeed, demonstrating strong skills in communication and empathy (Sachs, 2024).	“Embracing my members without discrimination for me to explore their potentials. Always establish communication between members so that the relationship between superiors and subordinates is not so tenuous. Trying to understand the problems of members in the work unit so that problems at home are not brought to work. Be fair to all members.” (Interviewee 3) “A democratic type of leadership that can solve problems with musyarawah and pay attention to factors that can be developed and innovated according to the potential and needs of the work unit.” (Interviewee 3).	Collaborative, supportive and democratic leadership styles.

Keywords	Literature Description	Participant Description	Character Indicators
Keywords	<p>Collaborative, supportive, cooperation, helping members, communication, empathy. They value foresight, management ability, and strong communication skills, which are essential for setting clear goals and leading teams to achieve them (Aksakal & Ulucan, 2024). Generation Z tends to favor transformational leadership, which involves inspiring and motivating others to achieve shared goals. This style is characterized by the ability to guide and direct groups effectively (Dewi et al., 2023).</p>	<p>Helping, tolerant, communication, fair, democratic, problem solving, deliberation, innovative. "A good leader is a leader who is able to direct, provide comfort and security, is able to solve problems without causing other problems and can develop existing potential." (Interviewee 4) "Start thinking about company profits as well as member welfare. So that organizational goals can be achieved." (Interviewee 3)</p>	Adaptive ability
Keywords	<p>Management ability, communication skills, clarity of purpose, inspiration, motivation, common goals, directing the group. Growing up in a digital world, Gen Z leaders are adept at using technology to enhance collaboration and communication. They are comfortable with social media and digital platforms, which they utilize to network and inspire action (Hidayat et al., 2023).</p>	<p>Achievement of organizational goals. "I have more established technology and information capabilities." (Interviewee 3). "Using technology tools that are now more advanced and also using professional experts so that team development can be on target." (Interviewee 3). "The advantage I have is better knowledge of work support tools." (Interviewee 2). "Being technologically literate makes everything easier, online communication, and can implement a work from anywhere system." (Interviewee 1).</p>	Technological proficiency for ease of communication and work tasks.
Keywords	<p>Technology proficiency, social media, digital platform. Generation Z prefers to manage their team with a people-oriented approach when they are in a leadership position. From their perspective, leaders must understand and value their employees. Leaders who know the expectations of their work team will contribute to the organization (Yilmaz et al., 2024).</p>	<p>Technological literacy, cutting-edge technological knowledge advantage, online communication, work from anywhere. "I see myself as a leader who is able to nurture members on a family basis and solve problems through the middle path and be able to provide innovations that can be realized together." (Interviewee 4). "Flexible in time management, the most important thing is to work according to the timeline that we have agreed together" (Interviewee 1).</p>	People-oriented approach with the principle of togetherness.

Keywords	Literature Description	Participant Description	Character Indicators
Keywords	People-oriented approach, respect, contribution to the organization.	Family principle, togetherness, mutual agreement.	

Sources: Research Data, 2025

The findings reveal that Generation Z demonstrates distinctive leadership characteristics that align with contemporary organizational demands, particularly in terms of collaboration, adaptability, technological proficiency, and a people-oriented approach. These characteristics are not only consistent with prior studies but also provide empirical nuance through participants' lived experiences. First, Generation Z leaders exhibit a strong tendency toward collaborative, supportive, and democratic leadership styles. This is reflected in participants' emphasis on inclusivity and open communication. As expressed by one informant, *"Embracing my members without discrimination... and always establishing communication so that the relationship between leaders and members is not distant"* (Interviewee 3). This finding supports (Sachs, 2024) who highlights that Gen Z leaders prioritize teamwork, empathy, and mutual support. From a theoretical perspective, this pattern resonates with participative leadership theory, where decision-making is shared to enhance engagement and trust. However, unlike traditional participative models, Gen Z leadership appears more relational and informal, suggesting a shift toward more fluid organizational hierarchies.

Second, the study identifies high adaptive capacity as a core leadership attribute. Participants described leaders as individuals who are able to *"direct, provide comfort, and solve problems without creating new ones"* (Interviewee 4). This aligns with transformational leadership theory (Dewi et al., 2023), particularly in terms of inspiring and guiding teams toward shared goals. Compared to previous studies, this research highlights that adaptability in Gen Z is closely linked to their exposure to rapid technological change, making them more responsive to uncertainty. Nevertheless, this adaptability may also lead to challenges, such as inconsistency in decision-making or difficulty maintaining long-term strategic focus.

Third, technological proficiency emerges as a defining feature of Gen Z leadership. Participants emphasized their ability to leverage digital tools for communication and task efficiency, such as *"Being technologically literate makes everything easier... and enables work from anywhere"* (Interviewee 1). This finding is consistent with (Hidayat et al., 2023) who argue that digital competence enhances collaboration and innovation. From a digital leadership perspective, Gen Z leaders function as facilitators of technology-driven work systems. However, overreliance on technology may reduce face-to-face interaction quality and create dependency on digital platforms, which can become a limitation in certain organizational contexts.

Fourth, a strong people-oriented approach characterizes Gen Z leadership. Participants emphasized values such as togetherness, flexibility, and mutual understanding, as reflected in statements like *"solving problems through the middle path and nurturing members on a family basis"* (Interviewee 4). This aligns with (Yilmaz et al., 2024) who highlight the importance of relational leadership in modern organizations. Compared to earlier generations, Gen Z places greater emphasis on emotional connection and work-life balance. However, this approach may also pose challenges, particularly in maintaining authority, enforcing discipline, and making difficult decisions in high-pressure situations.

Overall, while the findings confirm that Generation Z possesses strong potential as future leaders—characterized by collaboration, adaptability, technological competence, and human-centered values—this study also identifies several critical challenges. These include potential overdependence on technology, difficulties in balancing flexibility with organizational control, and the need to strengthen strategic and long-term decision-making capabilities. By integrating empirical findings with existing leadership theories, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Generation Z leadership, highlighting both its transformative potential and its practical limitations within contemporary organizational settings.

Discussion

Gen Z has a number of natural strengths that could make them great leaders in the future. First, their digital skills are excellent. They are experts in using various technologies, such as social media, collaboration tools and other digital platforms. These skills allow them to communicate effectively, manage work tasks efficiently and innovate. They quickly adapt to new technologies and are able to integrate them into their

way of working. In accordance with the results of Anggoro's study (Anggoro, 2021) which confirms that employees who are skilled in utilizing various technologies, such as social networks, collaborative tools, and other digital platforms, can support companies in maintaining competitiveness and innovation.

Second, gen Z is usually very collaborative. They have grown up in an atmosphere that supports cooperation and information sharing, are accustomed to team methods and value multiple points of view. These characteristics are very important in the digital era that increasingly emphasizes collaboration. Their ability to collaborate in diverse teams and utilize the strengths of each member is key to the completion of complex and interrelated work tasks. In line with the results of Novitasari's study (Novitasari et al., 2024) that the success of completing complex work tasks depends on the ability of various team members to work together and utilize their respective advantages.

Third, gen Z has excellent adaptability. They have seen rapid technological changes and learned to adjust to ever-changing circumstances. This ability is crucial in today's dynamic and competitive world of work, where fast learning and adaptability are critical success factors. In line with Mahayosnand & Sabra's statement (Mahayosnand & Sabra, 2024) that gen Z has a strong ability to adapt to new technologies, which is important in the ever-changing digital world (Mahayosnand & Sabra, 2024). In addition, they tend to be more flexible and accept change better than previous generations.

Fourth, gen Z generally has effective communication skills in the digital world. They can deliver messages through various digital platforms and understand the nuances of online communication. With this ability, they can reach a larger audience and build close relationships virtually. They are also good at utilizing various digital media to convey messages well. This supports Yilmaz's opinion (Yilmaz et al., 2024) that generation Z leaders will prioritize supportive, empathetic and unselfish communication within their organizations. Gen Z leaders will emphasize creating a friendly, fun, and inclusive work environment for their teams (Yilmaz et al., 2024).

While Generation Z brings new perspectives and demands to the workplace, they also present unique challenges that require adaptation from work organizations. First, while Generation Z's technological prowess provides various benefits, the high levels of anxiety and depression among them can be a barrier to workplace interactions, hence the need for a workplace that supports and prioritizes mental health (Mahayosnand & Sabra, 2024). Second, gen Z utilizes technology as a facilitator of work tasks, but this also requires a collaborative work environment (Jancourt, 2020). Organizations need to create world-class human resources who are professional, have integrity, are public-oriented, have a high service culture, and have a global outlook through easy access to education, training, and globally integrated learning.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Generation Z possesses strong potential to emerge as effective leaders in the digital era, characterized by technological proficiency, adaptability, collaborative orientation, and a people-centered approach. These findings reinforce the shift in leadership paradigms from hierarchical and authority-based models toward more participative, flexible, and relational leadership styles. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to leadership literature by integrating generational characteristics with digital leadership and participative leadership frameworks. It highlights that technological competence is not merely a supporting skill but a central dimension shaping leadership behavior and decision-making patterns among Generation Z. Furthermore, the findings extend existing discussions by emphasizing the interplay between digital capability and human-centered leadership values in contemporary organizational contexts. From a practical standpoint, the results imply that organizations need to adapt their management strategies to effectively engage and develop Generation Z leaders. This includes creating digitally integrated work environments, fostering collaborative cultures, and implementing flexible work policies that support both productivity and employee well-being. In addition, organizations should invest in continuous skill development programs that balance technological expertise with strategic and interpersonal competencies. However, this study has several limitations. The small number of participants (four informants) limits the generalizability of the findings, and the focus on a specific context may not fully represent the diversity of Generation Z across different sectors or cultural settings. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve larger and more diverse samples, as well as to conduct comparative studies across industries or regions. Further studies may also explore additional

variables, such as organizational culture, leadership effectiveness, or intergenerational dynamics, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Generation Z leadership in the evolving digital landscape.

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