Approaches to Leadership from the Perspective of Generation Z

Andreea Bianca ENE (CONSTANTIN)[1]
Claudiu Nicolae GHINEA[2]
Andreea Simona SĂSEANU[3]

Abstract

Generation Z poses a significant challenge for organizations, as its members express a clear preference for adaptive leaders who are capable of navigating change effectively. This generation, however, is poised to become the leaders of tomorrow. Regardless of generational affiliation, all individuals must possess a high degree of self-awareness to successfully adapt to future demands.

This paper examines the leadership perspectives of Romanian high school students. The motivation behind this research stems from the contemporary relevance of Generation Z's views on leadership.

A quantitative approach was employed, utilizing a structured survey to gather responses from high school students regarding their views on leadership. The objectives of this study include identifying the leadership style favoured by these students and exploring the factors that influence their leadership preferences.

The survey was conducted online in February 2024 using Google Forms, and the data were analysed with Microsoft Excel and SPSS statistical software. I hope that the findings of this research will be valuable to those interested in this topic, particularly PhD students and others seeking a deeper understanding of Generation Z's approach to leadership.

1. General Framework

Generation Z, born and raised in an era defined by rapid technological advancement, has developed an inherent familiarity with technology due to its ubiquitous presence in their formative years. This upbringing provides them with

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[1] Andreea Bianca Ene (Constantin), Doctoral School of Business Administration, Bucharest University of Economics Studies, Bucharest, Romania, enebianca12@stud.ase.ro

[2] Claudiu Nicolae Ghinea, Doctoral School of Business Administration, Bucharest University of Economics Studies, Bucharest, Romania, claudiung@gmail.com

[3] Andreea Simona Săseanu, Bucharest University of Economics Studies, Bucharest, Romania, andreea.saseanu@com.ase.ro

distinctive perspectives on communication, education, work, and life compared to earlier generations (Mason et al., 2022).

Despite the persistence of negative stereotypes portraying Generation Z as inattentive or lacking in motivation (Walters, 2020), contemporary research reveals a contrasting reality. This group is characterized by ambition, creativity, and openness to diversity (Stahl, 2018). Moreover, their substantial influence within digital environments and their adeptness with emerging technologies position them as pivotal contributors to shaping future societal and cultural paradigms.

From an organizational perspective, Generation Z presents both challenges and opportunities. Their expectations for leadership emphasize adaptability, a trait they value and aspire to emulate as they become the leaders of tomorrow. However, effective leadership across all generational groups necessitates a profound sense of self-awareness to navigate the complexities of the future.

This study focuses on the leadership perceptions of Romanian high school students, representing a significant segment of Generation Z. Given the current academic and societal interest in understanding this generation's views on leadership, the research seeks to uncover their preferred leadership styles and the foundational factors influencing these preferences. This inquiry forms the basis of the article, titled Redefining Leadership: Insights from Generation Z. The study's primary objective is to analyse and articulate the leadership perceptions specific to Romanian high school students within this generational group.

2. Literature review

Currently, there are four generations of adults. The first group consists of individuals born between 1922 and 1945, referred to as Traditionalists or the Silent Generation. The second group is made up of Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964. The third group, Generation X, includes individuals born between 1965 and 1977. Next comes Generation Y, popularly known as Millennials, born approximately between 1977 and 1993. Generation Z, the youngest group, consists of individuals born between 1993 and 2005 (Dwidienawati et al., 2021; Turner, 2015).

Although there is some debate about the precise definition of Generation Z, most research and experts generally refer to those born after 1997 as being part of this generation. As Bassiouni and Hackley (2014) state, the generation born between 1995 and 2015 is known as Generation Z. This generation has also been referred to as "iGen," "post-Millennials," and "Gen Zers" (Magano et al., 2020).

Having grown up in a society where digital technology is omnipresent, members of Generation Z are inherently highly skilled technologically and well-versed in social media and mobile technologies (Fister-Gale, 2015).

As Casalengo et al. (2022) state, it seems that Generation Z grew up in a world that is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA), which has made them highly adaptable to change and comfortable with ambiguity.

Generation Z is distinguished by several tendencies, such as a deep interest in technological development, a strong desire for user-friendly experiences, a demand for safety and security, and a tendency to seek quick escapes from the pressures of reality (Mason et al., 2022).

Members of Generation Z view effective leadership as an influential concept that emphasizes authenticity, adaptability, flexibility, and work-life balance (Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015; Laudert, 2018). According to Săseanu and Toma (2019), leadership is not just about leaders; it is a cohesive system, and the key to success lies in balance. This is because it is well known that people are an organization's most valuable resource, and they determine whether a company will succeed or fail. Leaders inspire Generation Z to follow in a way that maximizes technology and supports entrepreneurial thinking (Augas, 2019).

3. Research methodology

This paper is based on identifying the leadership style preferred by this generation, considered key to the future. In this regard, the central question of the research is: "What is Generation Z's perception of leadership?"

I conducted quantitative research using a structured survey to obtain an answer to this question. The survey was applied to high school students, with the following objectives: determining the leadership style adopted by them and identifying the factors influencing their choice of a particular leadership style.

The questionnaire included 15 questions. The first question served to filter relevant responses, as I aimed to collect answers only from those belonging to Generation Z, that is, those born after 1997. The next three questions were identification questions, related to gender, background, and age. The remaining 11 questions were formulated in accordance with the research objectives.

The survey was conducted online in February 2024 using Google Forms, and the data were processed and analysed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS software.

4. Results

After administering the questionnaire, 148 valid responses were obtained from high school students. Analyzing the identification questions revealed that the majority of respondents were female (56.8%), from rural areas (79.1%), and aged between 16 and 18 years (58.1%).
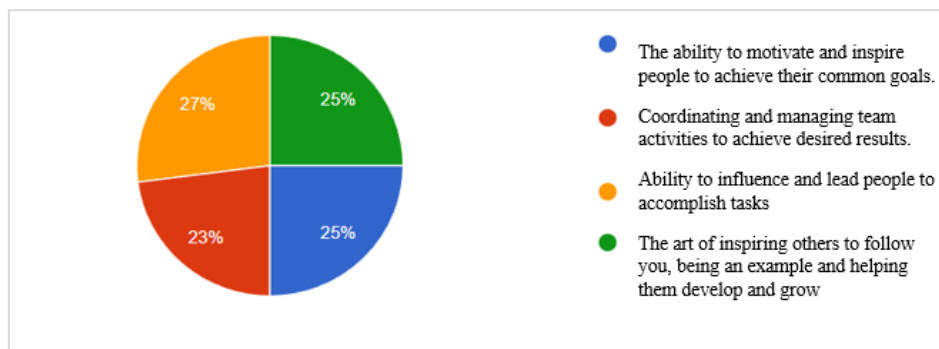

Figure1. The meaning of leadership

As shown in Figure 1, all the proposed definitions of leadership were selected to a similar extent, with the statement "the ability to influence and lead

people to accomplish tasks and objectives effectively" being ranked first (27%). This result aligns with the notion that an effective leader must inspire and motivate others to work collaboratively in achieving their goals. A leader should possess a clear vision and be capable of communicating that vision in a compelling and inspiring manner.
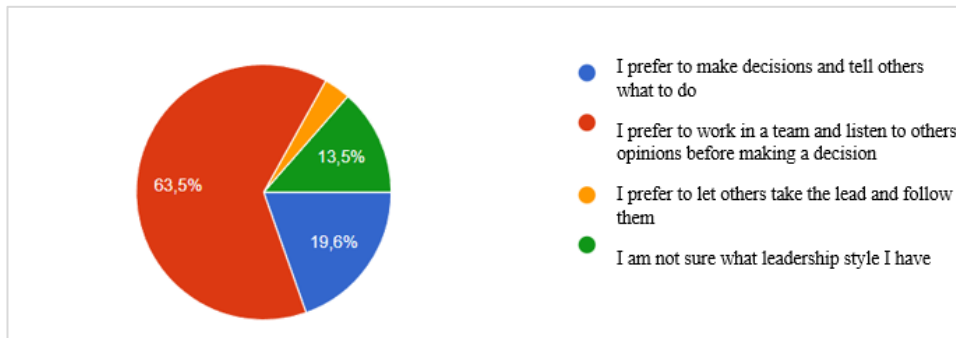

Figure 2. The leadership style of the respondents

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of high school students' leadership styles. It is evident that 64% of respondents prefer to work in teams and consider others' opinions before making decisions. This result is encouraging, as teamwork enhances efficiency and productivity, particularly when considering others' perspectives and striving to achieve common goals.
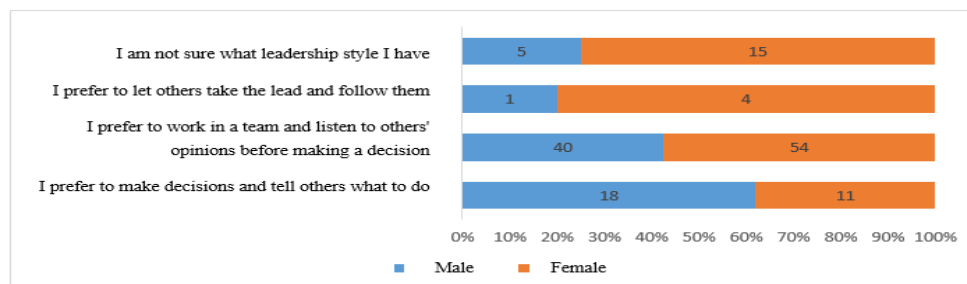

Figure 3. The relationship between gender and the style of leadership preferred

Figure 3 shows a breakdown of leadership preferences by gender. It appears that girls are more likely to prefer being led, likely because they report uncertainty regarding their own leadership style. Additionally, girls tend to favour working in teams and listening to others' opinions, in contrast to boys, who prefer making decisions and directing others. When examining the data across both genders, it becomes clear that both girls and boys prefer to collaborate and consider others' viewpoints, as this option received the highest number of responses.
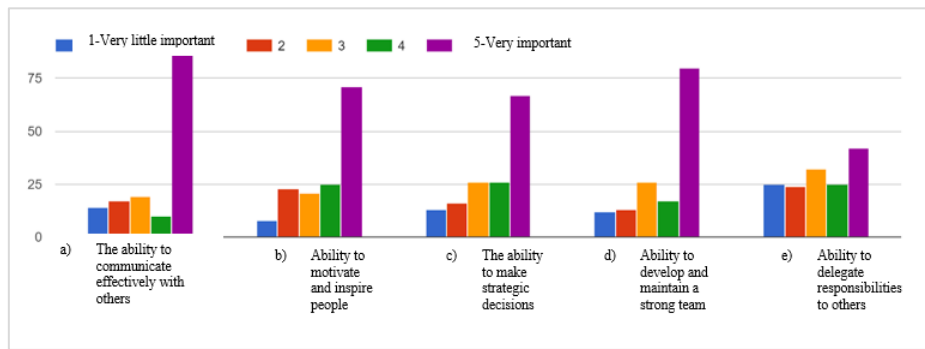
Figure 4. The distribution of the scores given to the skills of a successful leader

As shown in Figure 4, most respondents consider all the listed skills to be important, with the highest score awarded to the ability to communicate effectively with others. In second place is the ability to develop and maintain a strong team, followed by the ability to motivate and inspire people, as well as the ability to make strategic decisions. The ability to delegate responsibilities to others ranks last.

The overall average of the responses is approximately 3.75, with an average standard deviation of 1.37. This suggests that the data points are relatively close to the mean, with most values falling within 1.37 units of the average. Since the standard deviation is smaller than the range of the data (which is 4), it indicates that the data points are not widely spread, and the distribution of responses is likely tightly clustered around the mean.
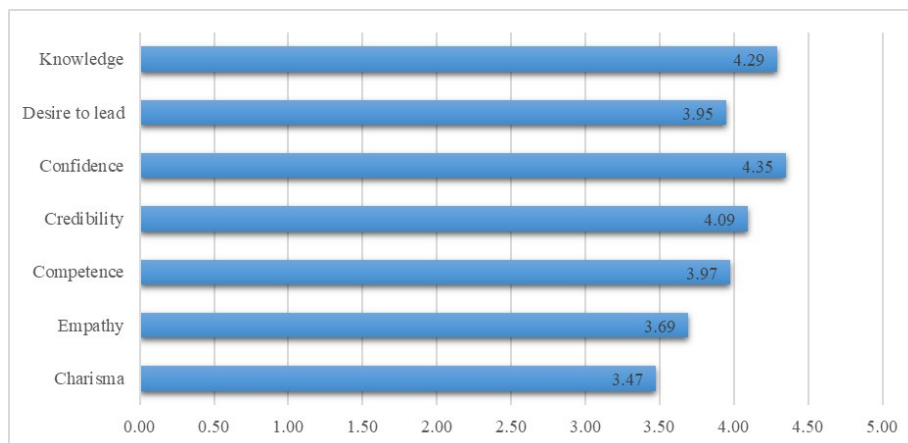

**Figure 5. The graphic representation of the mean scores given
to the qualities of a successful leader**

Regarding the important qualities that a successful leader must possess, based on the responses from young people, I calculated and analysed the average scores in Figure 5. The average score is approximately 4. The qualities ranked in order of importance are: confidence (4.35), knowledge in the field (4.29), credibility

(4.09), competence (3.97), desire to lead (3.94), empathy (3.68), and finally, charisma (3.47).

The standard deviation of 1.29 is relatively moderate, which suggests that the data points are not excessively dispersed from the mean. This indicates that most of the responses are relatively close to the average, reflecting a somewhat homogeneous dataset.
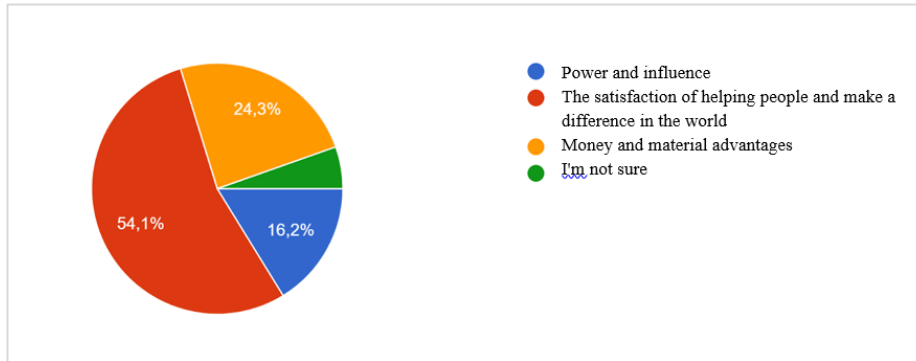

Figure 6. The distribution of motivations to become a leader

When asked about what motivates them the most to become a leader, 54.1% of high school students indicated that the satisfaction of helping others and making a difference in the world is their primary motivation. Following this, 24.3% are motivated by financial rewards and material advantages, while 16.2% aspire to leadership roles for power and influence.

I believe that leaders who are driven by the desire to help others and make a positive difference in the world are essential in guiding us toward a better future. These leaders are motivated by a genuine desire to serve their community and are ready to take concrete actions to bring about positive change in the world.
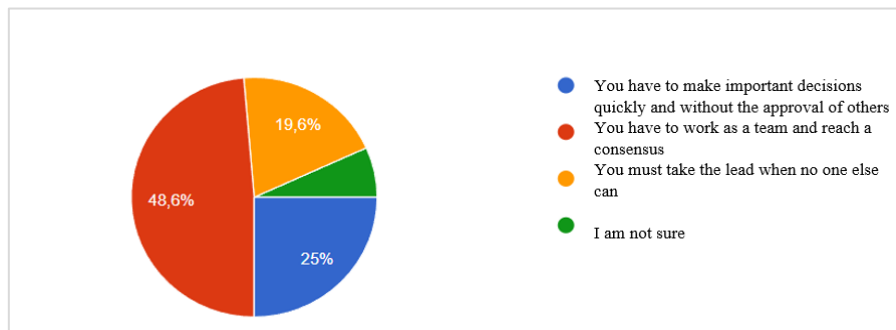

Figure 7. The distribution of situations in which the students can be interested to lead

Figure 7 presents the distribution of situations in which high school students expressed interest in taking on leadership roles. It was found that 48.6% of them prefer to work in teams and reach a consensus. This is a positive trend, as

collaborative leadership practices are often successful in fostering creativity, innovation, and building strong teams.

It is also noteworthy that a significant portion of respondents (25%) are interested in leadership when they are required to make critical decisions quickly and independently. This indicates that many young people possess a strong sense of independence and initiative and are not afraid to take risks when necessary.

Furthermore, the fact that a considerable minority of high school students (19.6%) are motivated to take charge when no one else is willing highlights the need for additional training and leadership opportunities in various academic settings. Allowing students to assume leadership roles can be an excellent way to boost their self-confidence, help them acquire new skills, and foster a sense of ownership and involvement in the school community.

Overall, high school students demonstrate a diverse range of leadership-related interests and motivations, suggesting that there are opportunities to leverage these interests to foster growth and change within the academic environment.
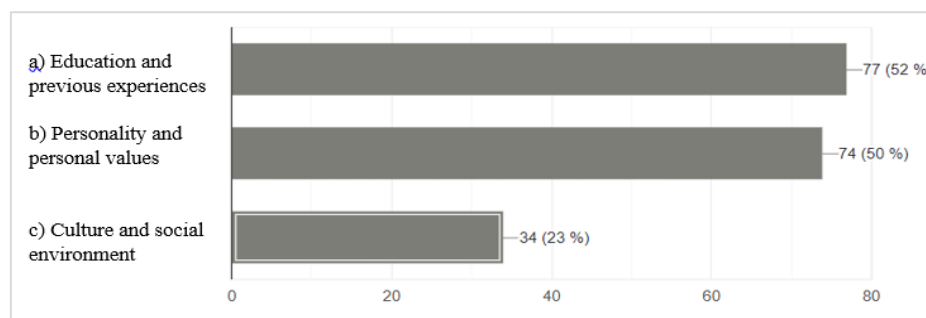

Figure 8. The representation of the influencing factors regarding the leadership style

Addressing the question regarding the factors that influence leadership style, Figure 8 illustrates that 52% of respondents believe that education and prior experiences are the most important factors. Additionally, 50% of respondents feel that personality and personal values have a decisive influence on leadership style.

This finding is logical, as a leader's education and experiences often shape their approach to leadership, while their personality and values can significantly affect how they engage with their team and make decisions.

It is somewhat surprising that only 23% of respondents consider culture and the social environment to have an impact on leadership style. These factors can, in fact, play a crucial role in shaping a leader's behaviour within an organization or community. Cultural differences, for instance, can affect communication styles and decision-making processes, while the social environment can influence team dynamics and the overall organizational culture.
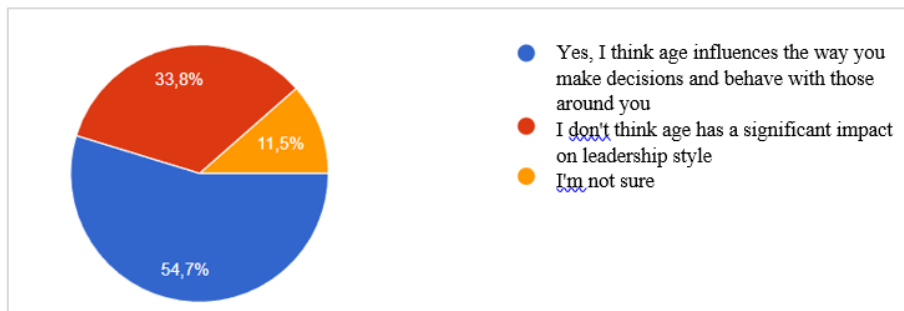
Figure 9. The distribution of answers regarding age influence of leadership style

As shown in Figure 9, 54.7% of respondents believe that age influences the way decisions are made, while 33.8% do not think that age has a significant impact on leadership style. Additionally, 11.5% are uncertain about this issue.

In my opinion, age can have both positive and negative effects on leadership. Older leaders may possess greater wisdom and insight due to their extensive experience, but they may also be more resistant to change or more entrenched in their methods. On the other hand, younger leaders may bring fresh perspectives and innovative ideas, but they could lack the depth of knowledge and expertise that comes with experience.

Figure 10. The distribution of respondents regarding model leaders

To illustrate the distribution of model leaders, I generated a word cloud in Figure 10 to highlight the most preferred leaders of the present time. Elon Musk ranks first, selected by 33.8% of young people, followed by Barack Obama in second place with 18.9%, and Beyoncé in third place with 12.8%. Elon Musk's popularity is not surprising, given his achievements in technology and entrepreneurship. Barack Obama's second-place position reflects his enduring influence on younger generations, particularly in the realms of politics and social issues. The fact that Beyoncé is among the top three underscores her significant impact in the entertainment industry and her passionate advocacy for numerous causes. This list highlights the diverse areas in which individuals can have a profound influence on and inspire younger generations
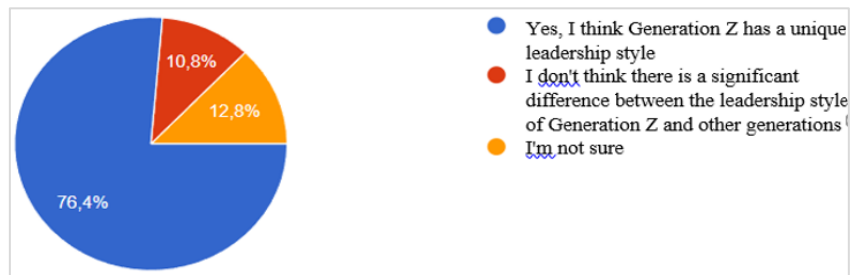
Figure 11. The respondents' perceptions about Generation Z leadership styles

As shown in Figure 11, 76.4% of respondents believe that Generation Z has a unique leadership style, while 10.8% do not perceive a significant difference between the leadership style of Generation Z and that of other generations. Additionally, 12.8% were unsure about their response. In my opinion, it is evident that leadership style cannot be the same across all generations, as there are always differing perceptions. From my perspective, this diversity of viewpoints represents a positive factor for change and development.

Figure 12. The distribution of advices for someone who wants to be a leader

When asked what advice they would give to someone aspiring to become a leader, 46.6% of high school students stated that it is important to be decisive and not allow others to influence decisions. On the other hand, 25% of respondents mentioned that it is essential to listen to and consider the opinions of others, while 21.6% emphasized the importance of learning to delegate responsibilities and helping others develop their leadership skills.

5. Conclusions

This study analysed 148 valid responses from high school students. Most respondents were girls, from rural areas, aged 16 to 18 years. When defining leadership, students highlighted the importance of the ability to influence and lead others effectively. The majority prefer teamwork and value the opinions of others before making decisions.

Key leadership qualities include communication, team-building, motivation, and strategic decision-making. The most important qualities identified were confidence, knowledge, credibility, competence, desire to lead, empathy, and charisma.

Regarding motivation to become a leader, the majority were driven by the satisfaction of helping others and making a difference. Collaborative leadership is favoured, as it fosters creativity and strong teams. A significant proportion also values independence in decision-making, indicating a sense of initiative.

Most respondents believe education and prior experience shape leadership, while age also plays a role, with older leaders offering wisdom and younger leaders bringing fresh perspectives.

Elon Musk, Barack Obama, and Beyoncé are the top model leaders, reflecting their influence in technology, politics, and entertainment.

Generation Z has a unique leadership style, shaped by diverse perceptions that encourage positive change. The preferred leadership style is democratic and participative, valuing communication, collaboration, and inclusivity. This research aims to contribute to a better understanding of Generation Z's leadership perspectives.

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