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Systematic Literature Review: Leadership Styles and Individual Performance of Generation Z in the Global South

Análise Sistemática da Literatura: Estilos de Liderança e Desempenho Individual da Geração Z no Sul Global

Revisión Sistemática de la Literatura: Estilos de Liderazgo y Desempeño Individual de la Generación Z en el Sur Global

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Abstract:
This study presents a comprehensive systematic literature review (SLR) on the impact of leadership styles on the individual performance of Generation Z in Global South organizations. The primary objective was to identify and analyze which management approaches promote positive results or inhibit the productivity of this cohort in emerging economies, considering their cultural and socioeconomic specificities. Following the PRISMA guidelines and the CIMO framework, 25 empirical articles published between 2021 and 2026 were analyzed, selected from high-impact databases. The results indicate that relational styles, notably transformational and authentic leadership, are the most effective for this generation. These styles operate in a two-stage impact model: first influencing direct learning outcomes, such as knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA), and then consolidating measurable work outcomes, such as innovative behavior and retention. In the specific context of the Global South, critical variables such as digital disparities, age discrimination (youngism), and the "brain rot" phenomenon emerge as significant moderators of leadership effectiveness. It is concluded that optimizing Generation Z's performance depends on the active promotion of psychological safety and emotional engagement, requiring leaders to transcend traditional command-and-control models in favor of management centered on human development and personalized mentoring. This work contributes to the literature by filling the gap in studies focused on emerging markets, offering practical guidelines for managers seeking to integrate Generation Z productively and sustainably.

Keywords:
generation z; leadership; individual performance; global south; systematic review.

Resumo:
Este estudo apresenta uma revisão sistemática da literatura (RSL) abrangente sobre o impacto dos estilos de liderança no desempenho individual da Geração Z em organizações situadas no Sul Global. O objetivo principal foi identificar e analisar quais abordagens de gestão promovem resultados positivos ou inibem a produtividade deste grupo de pessoas em economias emergentes, considerando suas particularidades culturais e socioeconômicas. Seguindo rigorosamente as diretrizes PRISMA e o framework CIMO, foram analisados 25 artigos empíricos publicados entre 2021 e 2026, selecionados em bases de dados de alto impacto. Os resultados indicam que estilos relacionais, notadamente a liderança transformacional e a liderança autêntica, são os mais eficazes para esta geração. Tais estilos operam em um modelo de impacto em dois estágios: primeiramente influenciando resultados de aprendizagem direta, como conhecimentos, habilidades e atitudes (CHA), para então consolidar resultados de trabalho mensuráveis, como comportamento inovador e retenção. No contexto específico do Sul Global, variáveis críticas como disparidades digitais, discriminação por idade (youngism) e o fenômeno do brain rot emergem como moderadores significativos da eficácia da liderança. Conclui-se que a otimização do desempenho da Geração Z depende da promoção ativa da segurança psicológica e do engajamento emocional,

exigindo que os líderes transcendam os modelos tradicionais de comando e controle em favor de uma gestão centrada no desenvolvimento humano e na mentoria personalizada. Este trabalho contribui para a literatura ao preencher a lacuna de estudos focados em mercados emergentes, oferecendo diretrizes práticas para gestores que buscam integrar a Geração Z de forma produtiva e sustentável.

Palavras-chave:
geração z; liderança; desempenho individual; sul global; revisão sistemática.

Resumen:
Este estudio presenta una revisión sistemática de la literatura (RSL) exhaustiva sobre el impacto de los estilos de liderazgo en el desempeño individual de la Generación Z en organizaciones situadas en el Sur Global. El objetivo principal fue identificar y analizar qué enfoques de gestión promueven resultados positivos o inhiben la productividad de este grupo de personas en economías emergentes, considerando sus particularidades culturales y socioeconómicas. Siguiendo rigurosamente las directrices PRISMA y el marco CIMO, se analizaron 25 artículos empíricos publicados entre 2021 y 2026, seleccionados en bases de datos de alto impacto. Los resultados indican que los estilos relacionales, especialmente el liderazgo transformacional y el liderazgo auténtico, son los más eficaces para esta generación. Estos estilos operan en un modelo de impacto de dos etapas: primero influyen en resultados de aprendizaje directo, como conocimientos, habilidades y actitudes (CHA), y después consolidan resultados laborales mensurables, como el comportamiento innovador y la retención. En el contexto específico del Sur Global, variables críticas como las disparidades digitales, la discriminación por edad (youngism) y el fenómeno del brain rot surgen como moderadores significativos de la eficacia del liderazgo. Se concluye que la optimización del desempeño de la Generación Z depende de la promoción activa de la seguridad psicológica y del compromiso emocional, lo que exige que los líderes trasciendan los modelos tradicionales de mando y control en favor de una gestión centrada en el desarrollo humano y la mentoría personalizada. Este trabajo contribuye a la literatura al cubrir la brecha de estudios enfocados en mercados emergentes y ofrece directrices prácticas para gestores que buscan integrar a la Generación Z de forma productiva y sostenible.

Palabras clave:
generación z; liderazgo; desempeño individual; sur global; revisión sistemática.

1. Introduction

The rise of Generation Z, comprising individuals born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, represents an unprecedented strategic challenge for contemporary organizations worldwide (Doan; Wu, 2025; Pham et al., 2024; Toboso-Gómez et al., 2025). This group is estimated to account for approximately 27% of the global workforce by the end of 2025, bringing a new configuration of values, expectations, and digital competencies that contrasts with previous generations (Doan; Wu, 2025; Pham et al., 2024). Characterized by deep digital immersion and an intrinsic search for purpose, ethics, and sustainability, this group introduces ideals and working methods that challenge the effectiveness of traditional management

models developed in the twentieth century (Vieira; Costa; Santos, 2024). However, the scientific literature on the integration of this generation remains fragmented and, crucially, concentrated in geographical contexts limited to the Global North, neglecting the distinct realities faced by organizations in emerging economies (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022; Toboso-Gómez et al., 2025).

Leadership effectiveness emerges as the central mechanism influencing the individual performance of this generation, often operating through a two-stage impact model (Doan; Wu, 2025). In this process, leadership style first affects direct learning outcomes by modifying knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA), such as intrinsic motivation, psychological capital, and trust, and only then consolidates measurable work outcomes such as productivity, innovative behavior, and retention (Doan; Wu, 2025; Sigaeva et al., 2022). Preliminary studies indicate that relational styles, such as transformational and authentic leadership, are the most effective in meeting Generation Z's needs for autonomy and competence, fostering an environment in which innovation can flourish (Ababneh; Alnawas, 2022; Doan; Wu, 2025; Katsaros, 2025).

The need for a review focused specifically on the Global South becomes imperative given the concentration of research in developed markets (Toboso-Gómez et al., 2025). This gap is problematic because the characterization of Generation Z as “digital natives” is not universal; in the Global South, significant socioeconomic disparities persist, with approximately one third of the population still offline or with limited access to cutting-edge technologies (Toboso-Gómez et al., 2025). Furthermore, leaders in these regions face unique challenges, such as brain rot, which corresponds to mental exhaustion caused by excessive consumption of low-quality digital content, and youngism, a form of age discrimination that devalues the contributions of younger professionals (Hulus; Michaelidou, 2025; Yousef et al., 2025). These factors directly affect mental health and willingness to work, requiring more empathetic and technically prepared leadership (Hulus; Michaelidou, 2025; Yousef et al., 2025).

In this context, interest in studying the topic emerges through the following question: Which leadership styles have caused positive and/or negative individual performance in employment-based work performed by Generation Z in the Global South?

This question seeks not only to catalog styles, but also to understand cause-and-effect dynamics in diverse work environments.

The objectives pursued in this research are presented below. The main objective of this review is to identify, analyze, and synthesize the leadership styles that affect the individual

performance of employed Generation Z workers in organizations located in the Global South. To achieve this purpose, the following specific objectives were defined: a) map the leadership styles most frequently studied in relation to Generation Z in the Global South; b) identify the mediating and moderating mechanisms that influence the relationship between leadership and performance; c) distinguish styles that promote positive performance from those that result in negative impact or disengagement; and d) propose practical implications and strategic recommendations for managers operating in emerging economies.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section presents the theoretical foundations that support the analysis of Generation Z's individual performance and the influence of leadership styles. The discussion is organized around generational characteristics, the evolution of leadership models, and the two-stage impact model of individual performance.

2.1 Generation Z: Characteristics and Expectations at Work

Generation Z, also known as digital natives or post-millennials, comprises individuals born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s (Doan; Wu, 2025; Pham et al., 2024). This group grew up in an environment marked by ubiquitous connectivity, which shaped its perceptions of communication, learning, and work. Unlike previous generations, Generation Z values authenticity and social purpose and seeks employers aligned with these values (Vieira; Costa; Santos, 2024; Deloitte, 2025). In organizational settings, this generation seeks flexibility, continuous feedback, and opportunities for accelerated development (Vieira; Costa; Santos, 2024). Digital immersion since childhood has resulted in innate technological fluency, but also in a preference for concise, visual communication and an expectation of instant gratification. Its members are frequently described as pragmatic, realistic, and strongly committed to social justice, which is reflected in their demands for inclusive and purpose-driven workplaces (Deloitte, 2025).

However, the notion of “digital nativeness” must be examined cautiously in the context of the Global South. As highlighted by Toboso-Gómez et al. (2025), significant socioeconomic disparities persist in regions such as Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia, where access to technology is unequal. This digital inequality creates a heterogeneous Generation Z in which technological proficiency may vary drastically according to socioeconomic background, imposing additional challenges on leaders who must manage teams with different levels of digital literacy. In addition, Generation Z in the Global South

may face challenges related to economic and social instability, which can influence work priorities and expectations and make its members more focused on security and stability than their counterparts in developed economies.

2.2 Leadership in the Twenty-First Century: From Hierarchy to Connection

The transition to the knowledge economy and Generation Z's entry into the labor market have forced a reassessment of traditional leadership models. The command-and-control model, based on rigid hierarchies and direct supervision, has proven ineffective in motivating young people who value autonomy and participation in decision-making (Katsaros, 2025). By contrast, relational leadership styles that prioritize human development and psychological safety have emerged (Ababneh; Alnawas, 2022). Contemporary leadership requires the ability to inspire, develop, and empower employees, adapting to individual needs and promoting a collaborative and innovative work environment. The leader's role as facilitator and mentor, rather than mere supervisor, becomes crucial to Generation Z engagement.

Transformational leadership, characterized by idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, stands out as one of the most promising styles for engaging Generation Z (Jasmine; Utomo, 2024). Transformational leaders inspire followers to transcend personal interests for the greater good of the organization, fostering creativity and innovation. In parallel, authentic leadership, based on the leader's transparency, ethics, and self-awareness, resonates with Generation Z's search for organizational integrity (Sigaeva et al., 2022). Authentic leaders build trust through honesty and consistency between their values and actions, qualities highly valued by a generation that distrusts institutions and hierarchies. These styles not only guide technical work but also establish an emotional connection that serves as the basis for sustainable performance, promoting a sense of belonging and purpose.

Another relevant style is empowering leadership, which focuses on delegating authority and responsibility to employees while encouraging self-efficacy and autonomy (Zhang; Wang, 2025). For Generation Z, which actively seeks opportunities for development and impact, empowerment can be a strong motivator. However, this empowerment must be accompanied by adequate organizational support so that autonomy does not become overload or anxiety, especially in contexts where resources are limited.

2.3 The Two-Stage Impact Model of Individual Performance

Individual performance is not a direct and immediate result of leadership style, but rather the product of a process mediated by psychological states and learning. Doan and Wu (2025) propose a two-stage impact model that explains this dynamic. In the first stage, leader behavior influences followers' direct learning outcomes, encompassing changes in knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA). This stage includes strengthening intrinsic motivation, psychological capital (hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism), and interpersonal trust. Generation Z, with its desire for learning and development, responds positively to leaders who invest in its growth by offering constructive feedback and training opportunities.

In the second stage, these learning gains and positive psychological states translate into measurable work outcomes. These outcomes include task performance, innovative behavior, organizational citizenship, and retention intention (Sigaeva et al., 2022). For Generation Z, the perception that the leader supports personal and professional growth is the fundamental trigger for discretionary effort, resulting in performance above the expected average. Psychological safety, promoted by empathetic and transparent leadership, is a key factor enabling Generation Z members to feel comfortable experimenting, making mistakes, and learning, which is essential for innovation and the development of new skills.

2.4 Systemic Barriers: Youngism and Brain Rot

An innovative aspect of this review is the inclusion of critical variables that specifically affect Generation Z performance in the Global South. Youngism, or age discrimination against young people, manifests itself in stereotypes that label Generation Z professionals as “lazy,” “disloyal,” or “emotionally fragile” (Hulus; Michaelidou, 2025). This discrimination undermines psychological safety and may lead to early disengagement, reduced self-confidence, and a lower intention to remain in the organization. In workplaces where youngism is prevalent, Generation Z may feel undervalued and demotivated, directly affecting productivity and well-being.

Another emerging phenomenon is brain rot, characterized by cognitive exhaustion and a reduced ability to concentrate due to excessive consumption of fragmented, low-quality digital content (Yousef et al., 2025). In the workplace, brain rot appears as difficulty performing tasks that require prolonged focus (deep work), requiring leaders to act not only as task managers but also as mentors in mental health and digital hygiene.

Understanding these barriers is essential for leadership to act preventively and correctively, promoting digital well-being practices and encouraging the conscious use of technology to optimize Generation Z performance and mental health. Failure to address these phenomena may lead to lower productivity, increased stress, and higher turnover among young professionals.

3. Materials and Methods

This systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol guidelines to ensure transparency and reproducibility in the research process (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA provides a 27-item checklist and a four-phase flowchart (identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion), which were rigorously followed in selecting the studies.

In addition, the CIMO framework (Context, Intervention, Mechanisms, and Outcomes) was used to guide data extraction and qualitative synthesis, allowing an in-depth understanding of how leadership interventions generate results in specific contexts. CIMO is particularly useful in systematic reviews that seek to understand causal relationships and the processes underlying the phenomena studied, providing a robust structure for analyzing complex interventions (Denyer; Tranfield; Van Aken, 2008).

3.1 Search Strategy and Descriptors

Data were collected from four electronic databases of global and regional academic relevance: Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and SciELO. These databases were selected to ensure international coverage and the inclusion of studies focused on the Global South, especially through SciELO, thereby providing a diverse and representative perspective. The descriptors were selected from controlled terms (MeSH, DeCS) and keywords recurrent in the literature and organized into three main axes to maximize search sensitivity:

a) Generation Z: "Generation Z" OR "Gen Z" OR "digital natives" OR "post-millennials".

b) Leadership: "leadership style" OR "authentic leadership" OR "transformational leadership" OR "empowering leadership" OR "servant leadership" OR "resonant leadership" OR "inclusive leadership" OR "digital leadership" OR "green leadership" OR "paternalistic leadership" OR "laissez-faire leadership" OR "autocratic leadership" OR "ethical leadership" OR "humble leadership" OR "eco-leadership";

c) Individual performance: "individual performance" OR "task performance" OR "work performance" OR "job performance" OR "employee performance" OR "innovative behavior"

OR "work engagement" OR "job satisfaction" OR "sustainable employability" OR "thriving at work" OR "organizational citizenship behavior" OR "counterproductive work behavior".
d) Global South: "Global South" OR "developing countries" OR "emerging economies" OR "Asia" OR "Africa" OR "Latin America" OR "Middle East" (with specific country terms such as "Indonesia", "India", "China", "Jordan", "Vietnam", "Mexico", "United Arab Emirates", "Saudi Arabia", "South Africa", etc.).

The main search string was built by combining the descriptors with Boolean operators (AND, OR) to refine the results: ("generation Z" OR "gen Z") AND (leadership) AND ("global south" OR "developing countr*") AND (performance OR productivity OR engagement).

The search period was restricted to 2021-2026 to capture the most recent scientific output and post-pandemic trends that may have significantly influenced work and leadership dynamics.

3.2 Inclusion and Selection Criteria

The inclusion criteria defined for this review were rigorously applied to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected studies: (i) original empirical studies presenting collection and analysis of primary data; (ii) an explicit focus on the positive or negative impact of leadership on Generation Z's individual performance; (iii) a geographical context restricted to countries or regions classified as the Global South, ensuring the cultural and socioeconomic specificity of the analysis; (iv) articles published in peer-reviewed journals; and (v) publications in Portuguese, English, or Spanish to facilitate understanding and synthesis of the results. Purely theoretical studies, literature reviews published before 2021, theses and dissertations not published in journals, book chapters, conference proceedings, and articles focused exclusively on the Global North were excluded, as were studies that did not present empirical data or did not centrally address Generation Z or the Global South.

The selection process began with the identification of 108 records in the databases. After 59 duplicates were removed using Zotero as a reference-management tool, 49 articles remained for screening by title, keywords, and abstract. Of these, 32 were selected for full-text reading, during which the eligibility criteria were applied in greater detail. In addition to human review, the selected articles underwent language and grammar analysis with the aid of AI tools, specifically NotebookLM, Perplexity, and Manus. At the end of the eligibility analysis, 25 articles were included in the qualitative synthesis.

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) checklist for cross-sectional and qualitative studies (Gao; Niu; Yu, 2025), ensuring that only research with high methodological rigor was considered in the final synthesis. This systematic process minimized bias and increased the reliability of the review results.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the 25 selected articles reveals a complex and multifaceted panorama of Generation Z management in the Global South. The results show that the performance of this group is highly sensitive to the organizational climate, the quality of interpersonal relationships established with immediate leaders, and the perception of support and recognition. The following discussion explores these findings in greater depth, categorizing them according to the CIMO framework and examining the nuances of the Global South context.

4.1 CIMO Synthesis of Leadership Styles

Application of the CIMO framework enabled the systematization of evidence found in the empirical studies, highlighting the interconnections among leadership styles, the mechanisms they activate, and the outcomes generated. Table 1 summarizes the main leadership interventions and their respective mechanisms of influence and outcomes based on the studies included in the review.

Table 1 - Evidence Found in the Empirical Studies

Leadership Style	Context (Global South)	Mechanism of Influence	Outcomes (Results)
Authentic Leadership	Hospitality (Jordan)	Emotional Engagement and Trust	Increased task performance and discretionary effort (Ababneh; Alnawas, 2022)
Transformational Leadership	Creative Industry (Indonesia)	Inspiration and Individualized Consideration	Reduced turnover and increased commitment (Jasmine; Utomo, 2024)
Empowering Leadership	Mining (Indonesia) and Technology (China)	Self-Efficacy and Perceived Autonomy	Dual: innovative behavior (+) or cognitive exhaustion (-) (Zhang; Wang, 2025)
Inclusive Leadership	Services (Brazil)	Psychological Safety and Belonging	Increased satisfaction and intrinsic motivation (Vieira; Costa; Santos, 2024)
Humble Leadership	Public Sector (China)	Leader's Intellectual Humility	Thriving at work and creativity (Gao; Niu; Yu, 2025)

Source: Prepared by the author (2026)

4.2 The Mediating Role

A recurrent and highly relevant finding in the analyzed studies is the central role of psychological safety as a mediator of Generation Z performance and well-being. For this generation, the perception that it is safe to take interpersonal risks, express divergent ideas, ask questions, and even make mistakes without fear of retaliation or humiliation distinguishes effective from ineffective leadership. In the Global South, where hierarchies tend to be more rigid and organizational culture may be more risk-averse, leadership capable of dismantling power barriers and promoting active listening and mutual respect achieves significantly higher levels of emotional engagement (Ababneh; Alnawas, 2022). Emotional engagement, in turn, is a direct precursor of intrinsic motivation and discretionary effort, leading to superior performance and a stronger intention to remain in the organization. Leaders who demonstrate empathy, offer support, and create an environment in which employees feel valued and understood can foster this psychological safety, which is fundamental for Generation Z to thrive in the workplace.

4.3 Specific Challenges: Youngism, Brain Rot, and Digital Exclusion in the Global South

Discussion of the results shows that leaders in the Global South face barriers and challenges that are less prominent or manifested differently in the Global North.

Youngism, or age discrimination against young people, manifests itself in stereotypes that label Generation Z professionals as “lazy,” “disloyal,” or “emotionally fragile” (Hulus; Michaelidou, 2025). This often subtle discrimination undermines psychological safety and self-confidence and may lead to early disengagement, reduced motivation, and, in extreme cases, burnout. In workplaces where youngism is prevalent, Generation Z may feel undervalued and demotivated, directly affecting productivity and well-being. Leaders must be aware of these biases and actively combat them by promoting a culture that values generational diversity.

At the same time, brain rot emerges as a negative moderating variable, especially relevant in a context of high connectivity and digital information consumption. It is characterized by cognitive exhaustion and a reduced ability to concentrate due to excessive consumption of fragmented, low-quality digital content (Yousef et al., 2025). According to the authors, brain rot directly affects Generation Z's ability to perform tasks requiring

prolonged focus (deep work) and critical thinking. In the workplace, this may manifest as difficulty maintaining attention, procrastination, and lower-quality deliverables. Leaders who support time management, encourage breaks, promote digital hygiene, and provide tools for organizing information help mitigate the effects of brain rot, preserving employees' analytical capacity and productivity. Failure to address these phenomena may lead to lower productivity, increased stress, and higher turnover among young professionals.

Furthermore, although digital exclusion is not unique to the Global South, it reaches more significant proportions in these regions. As noted above, the characterization of Generation Z as “digital natives” is not universal, and a considerable portion of this population still faces limited or precarious access to technology (Toboso-Gómez et al., 2025). This creates a heterogeneous workforce in which some Generation Z members may lack the expected digital skills or may struggle to adapt to highly digitized work environments. Leaders must be prepared to offer appropriate training and support, ensuring that all team members have the tools and knowledge needed to perform their roles effectively, so that digital exclusion does not become a barrier to development and performance.

4.4 Critical Analysis of Negative Styles: Command and Control

Consistent with the global literature on leadership and motivation, studies conducted in Mexico, the United Arab Emirates, and Brazil confirm that autocratic leadership styles or styles based strictly on reward-and-punishment transactions are rejected by Generation Z (Ruiz-Vázquez; Rodríguez-González; Trujillo-Reyes, 2024; Al Amiri; Daradkeh; Al Kaabi, 2019). Such styles, grounded in a command-and-control approach, are perceived as limiting autonomy and creativity and create a demotivating work environment. Their direct result is silent disengagement (quiet quitting), in which employees do only the minimum necessary to retain their jobs without investing discretionary effort or passion in their tasks. This leads to poor performance in tasks requiring creativity, innovation, and proactivity, characteristics highly valued by Generation Z. This generation seeks leaders who trust its abilities, involve its members in decisions, and provide an environment in which they can express ideas and contribute meaningfully. The persistence of command-and-control models in the Global South may limit the full use of this generation's potential.

Final Considerations

Effective leadership for Generation Z in the Global South depends on a transition from traditional hierarchical models to approaches centered on human development and

personalized mentoring. This systematic literature review demonstrated that the individual performance of this specific group is mediated by psychological states activated by relational leadership, notably transformational and authentic leadership.

The main conclusions of this study indicate that positive performance is mediated almost universally by emotional engagement and psychological safety. In the specific context of the Global South, leaders must be attentive to systemic barriers such as youngism and brain rot, which can compromise employees' mental health and productivity. The leader's ability to act as a mentor and facilitator of healthy technology use emerges as a critical competence for contemporary management.

Practical Implications: Managers operating in emerging economies should prioritize personalized mentoring and continuous feedback, mitigating generational prejudice and offering technical and emotional support to prevent overload resulting from autonomy. Creating a safe environment for innovation is a competitive advantage for organizations seeking to attract and retain Generation Z talent.

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