



Understanding Generation Z's perception of Responsible Leadership: Expectations and Future Implications

Matilde Aylin Giuliana Alfreda Rovai

Dissertation written under the supervision of

professor Andrea Cavicchini

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the
International MSc in Management,
at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 20 March 2025.

Abstract

This thesis investigates the perception of responsible leadership through the lens of Generation Z's values and perspectives. Through this research, we aim to identify the attributes that Generation Z considers essential for a responsible leader and their perceptions of these abilities. A qualitative study was conducted utilizing in-depth interviews with Gen Z individuals to ascertain their expectations of a responsible leader. This study uses a qualitative method to determine the appropriateness of Responsible Leadership among Generation Z and its implications for their relationships. Interviews indicate that Generation Z leaders seek responsible, transparent, and values-oriented leadership, and they consider RL's sustainable economic, social, and environmental results, aligned with the Triple Bottom Line, to be advantageous. Ultimately, when Generation Z enters the workforce, their expectations for leaders to prioritize social responsibility and sustainability will influence leadership paradigms. This research contributes to the literature on leadership and generational cohorts.

Title: Understanding Generation Z's perception of Responsible Leadership: Expectations and Future Implications

Author: Matilde Rovai

Keywords: Generation Z, Responsible Leadership, workplace culture, triple bottom line, Corporate Social Responsibility, managerial styles

Resumo

Esta tese investiga a percepção da liderança responsável através da lente dos valores e perspectivas da Geração Z. Através desta investigação, pretendemos identificar os atributos que a Geração Z considera essenciais para um líder responsável e as suas percepções dessas capacidades. Foi realizado um estudo qualitativo utilizando entrevistas em profundidade com indivíduos da Geração Z para determinar as suas expectativas relativamente a um líder responsável. Este estudo utiliza um método qualitativo para determinar a adequação da Liderança Responsável entre a Geração Z e as suas implicações para as suas relações. As entrevistas indicam que os líderes da Geração Z procuram uma liderança responsável, transparente e orientada para os valores, e consideram vantajosos os resultados económicos, sociais e ambientais sustentáveis da RL, alinhados com o Triple Bottom Line. Em última análise, quando a Geração Z entrar no mercado de trabalho, as suas expectativas de que os líderes dêem prioridade à responsabilidade social e à sustentabilidade influenciarão os paradigmas de liderança. Esta investigação contribui para a literatura sobre liderança e coortes geracionais.

Título: Compreensão da percepção da Geração Z sobre Liderança Responsável: Expectativas e implicações futuras

Autor: Matilde Rovai

Palavras-chave: Geração Z, Liderança Responsável, cultura de trabalho, triple bottom line, Responsabilidade Social das Empresas, estilos de gestão

Acknowledgements

I want to express my deepest gratitude to everyone who have woven threads, big or small, into the tapestry of this dissertation.

First and foremost, a whole-hearted *grazie* goes to my thesis advisor, Prof. Andrea Cavicchini. His endless patience, direct guidance, and availability were instrumental and crucial to the successful elaboration of this work.

To my mother, Serena, and stepfather, Nicola, thank you for being biggest supporters. You have instilled in me the precious gift of endless curiosity, which has been a guiding force through my personal, professional, and academic life. Your endless love, unconditional support, and belief in me have always been an anchor I can rely on

I would also like to thank my incredible friends, who accompanied me during my writing marathons with countless FaceTime calls filled with laughter and encouragement. Your companionship, love, and joyfulness are treasured memories.

I cannot forget Poppy and Lavanda, my dearest kitties, who provided essential comfort, love, and cuddles during moments of stress.

To all the extraordinary women in my life: your strength, perspectives, and acumen have always pushed me to be a better version of myself. Thank you for pushing me to understanding how to be a team player for myself. Especially in moments of self-doubt, the lessons that I have learnt with you all have been essential to the creation of who I am as a person.

At last, my sincerest love and gratitude goes to the city of Lisbon. Your openness allowed me to boldly accept myself and my explore my identity. Your sun always picked me up and gave me peace when I was down, and your waves always provided peace in times of need. You have truly left an indelible mark on my heart.

1.	Introduction	8
1.2	Research Objectives	9
1.3	Research Questions	10
2.	Literature Review	11
2.1	Generation Z: Definition and Values	11
2.2	Gen Z and Sustainability	13
2.3	The Importance of Leadership	14
2.4	Responsible Leadership Characteristics	15
2.5	Leadership and Gen Z	18
3.	Methodology	21
3.1	Data Collection Procedure	22
3.2	Data Analysis	22
4.	Results	24
4.1	Gen Z perception of environmental actions of Responsible Leaders.....	24
4.2	Gen Z perception of social actions by Responsible Leaders.....	25
4.3	Gen Z perception of the economic actions by Responsible Leaders.....	27
5.	Discussion & Long-Term Perspectives.....	28
5.1	Responsible Stakeholder Commitment and Inclusivity	29
5.2	Social Justice and Inclusion	30
5.3	Ethical Decision-Making and Integrity	32
5.4	Empathy and Well-Being	33
5.5	Limitations and Future Research.....	36
6.	Conclusion.....	37
7.	References	39
8.	Appendices	45

List of Abbreviations

CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility

RL – Responsible Leadership

Gen Z – Generation Z

List of Figures

Figure 1 – Table of Gen Z interviewed

Figure 2 – Perceived Qualities of Responsible Leaders

1. Introduction

Generation Z (Gen Z) is defined as the demographic group born after 1995. Following millennials, generation Z refers to the first generation that never grew up in an environment without the internet, which is reported to be the most different generation (Katz et al., 2021). By 2020, it is anticipated that Generation Z (Gen Z) will comprise 2.56 billion individuals worldwide and account for 20% of the workforce with a distinctive set of skills and abilities interactions (Dwidienawati, Syahchari, and Tjahjana, 2021). It is widely recognized that Gen Z is more risk-averse, has lower expectations, is confident, and is demanding in person (Tulgan, 2013). With diverse characteristics, ways of thinking, lifestyles, and beliefs, Gen Z may require a specific sort of leadership to make the work productive. The reality of Generation Z has been significantly influenced by digitalization and technology-related changes, as well as sustainability, among other factors that have also transformed their social interactions. They totally rely on digitalization in practically every part of their lives and are quickly bored; consequently, they expect to have a variety of job roles. Koulopoulos and Keldsen (2014) describe Gen Z as digitally naive and hyper-connected junkies. They are also more risk-averse than previous generations. In the last years and in the post-COVID period, Gen Z has been highly active in advocating a more sustainable environment as well as a more ethical society. This post-millennial generation will be the most diverse and well-educated generation yet (Dimock, 2019) entering now the labor market, with a strong impact on the management as a result of their total presence in the workplace by 2030 in some regions, as in the US (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014). In addition, they introduce new patterns of behavior (Iorgulescu 2016) that will also affect their relationship with the leadership.

Prior literature has intensively analyzed how the Millennials have changed the workplace (Stewart et al., 2017; Thompson & Gregory, 2012), evidencing the challenges they may create for companies (Twenge, 2010; Zemke et al., 2013). Millennials are no longer the new generation to enter the workplace, and consequently, scholars have started to focus their attention on Gen Z, whose research is still limited, and that entering the workplace may pose challenges in relation to their relationship with the leadership at work. Consequently, research has started to analyze their behavior at the workplace and in leadership relations, trying to understand their behavior with the leadership and find ways to effectively manage them.

Gen Z is the one that is bringing to the workplace a different set of values and expectations with respect to prior generations, coming in an age that shaped them differently from even millennials and that affects their relations with their leadership), and an appropriate work-life

balance (Andert, 2011) as also millennials. Generation Z would rather work in open offices and in groups than alone and may prioritize professional development as well as leaders that will satisfy their expectations (Iorgulescu, 2016). Generation Z prioritizes an enjoyable work environment, paid time off, and a workplace where they can make meaningful contributions. Today's organizations must consider the specific traits and behaviors of this generation with respect to the current leadership style to manage this generation in the workplace. It's critical to assess the generation's environment and background in order to understand their beliefs and values. Social media and smartphone usage, stable and secure background, and participation in social justice movements are among the key factors associated with their context (Schroth, 2019).

Consequently, leadership styles may have to be adapted to the values and behaviors of Gen Z impacted by various contemporary phenomena such as digitalization and sustainability by considering that leadership is critical in business and effective management (Kumar and Kaptan, 2007).

1.2 Research Objectives

Considering that leaders have diverse qualities and talents reveals variances in their management and direction approaches, which result in the establishment of various leadership styles. Leadership style attributes have remained consistent over time. However, in the social and management contexts, different leadership styles may be more adapted to a certain environment and related workforce. Research on leadership has shown that it is characterized as a concept with situational features defined differently according to the environment, consequently evidencing an appropriate leadership style resulting from these circumstances (Childs et al., 2022). In the fast-changing technological and sustainable-oriented context, Gen Z entering the workforce (Asree et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2014) may have been influenced by the new context, and consequently, they may have different expectations in the leadership style and their attributes

Prior literature centered on the leader's function in corporate social responsibility (Waldman & Balven, 2014) or on fulfilling stakeholder requirements beyond shareholder profits (Maak & Pless, 2006). Consequently, there is still a need for systematic empirical research to explore the type, background, relationships, and contexts of responsible leadership. Little study has been done to connect the idea of responsible leadership with the requirements and needs of Generation Z. This study aims to clarify if responsible leadership is a suitable leadership

approach for managing Generation Z and which aspects of responsible leadership may be adapted to satisfy the generation's demands. Therefore, the goal of this study is to identify if and how Responsible Leadership is appropriate for Generation Z and their relationship with them. Thus, the subsequent research question is conceptualized:

1.3 Research Questions

How is Responsible Leadership style and its characteristics perceived by Gen Z?

In recent years, leaders have recognized that a “changing world” requires a new leadership style that prioritizes societal impact and dedication to the common cause (de Bettignies, 2014). Consequently, this study is conducted to assess if and how Generation Z perceives the characteristics of a responsible leader in relation to their values and behaviors. In relation to the results arising from this research, this study will provide managerial implications to improve and adapt leadership style to Generation Z as well as to fill the gap in the literature with respect to the current analysis of the diverse leadership styles in relation to Gen Z. Results have evidenced how Generation Z positively perceive responsible, long-term, and value-oriented leadership, evidencing sustainable economic, social, and environmental values. In the new Gen Z context, effective leadership has shown the need to incorporate socioeconomic and environmental considerations as well as cultivate a business culture that emphasizes inclusivity and diversity. This ethical framework should be considered while assessing leadership styles and human resource strategies for the younger generation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Generation Z: Definition and Values

The definition of "Generation Z" is not used uniformly. Nevertheless, it is crucial to first define the term "generation" before expanding on the various methods employed to define the term "generation Z." The definition is based on two criteria. First, consider the duration of the lifetime in terms of historical time. The second one is based on common events or experiences. To designate a generation, there must be some social proximity between them regarding events or cultural phenomena (Turner 2015). Both of these variables have shaped different qualities for each generation by sharing an assigned attribute, causing people to present common ways of thinking and beliefs (Rani and Samuel, 2016).

Generation Z refers to those humans who follow Generation Y. Zemke et al. (2000) define these individuals as those born between 1995 and 2010. Dimock (2019) defines generation Z as people born between 1997 and 2012, while other scholars refer to generation Z as those born between 1995 and 2015 (Bassiouni & Hackley, 2014; Koulopoulos & Keldsen, 2014; Tulgan, 2013), differing from Millennials in that they were born and raised in different social and economic environments. However, generation Z is defined not only by demographics and age reference but also by its unique behavioral features (Luttrell and McGrath, 2021; Pueschel, Johnson, & Dhanani, 2020). Generation Z behaves differently than millennials, including in their consumption (Schlossberg, 2016). Research - even if still very limited – has an age cohort that is more educated, technically proficient, imaginative, and creative than Millennials (Priporas et al., 2013).

The extended "incubation" period in top management and economic journals (McGrail, Rickard, and Jones, 2006; Adler and Harzing, 2009) limits current scientific research, hence previous studies on the topic are mainly speculative or taken from short-timing medium/low-level academic articles. Gen Z presents a problem as their behaviors seem different from those of past generations, which might lead to changes in consumer and management behavior (Barclays, 2018; Schlossberg, 2016). This is especially true as they are fiscally conservative and social activists who consider personal fulfillment but are also more attentive to societal consequences (Ab Abdullah, Ismail, & Albani, 2018). Gen Z is said to be unique from millennials in a variety of ways, as their upbringing in a society of safety results in a consequent lack of social, emotional, and intellectual growth and also results in the fear of assuming additional leadership responsibilities in their roles (Schroth, 2019). Simultaneously, their

generation—which is "post-millennials"—is the most varied and educated generation to date based on early benchmarks (Pew Research Centre, 2018). Although Generation Z shares numerous characteristics with the Millennial Generation, they also introduce unique behavioral patterns (Iorgulescu, 2016). The primary objective of this generation is to identify the most suitable professional environment for them in their future workplace (Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015). According to Ernst and Young (2015), they have experienced political, social, technological, and economic transformations that have impacted their values and behaviors. Known as being realists, socially conscious, open-minded, and digital natives (Euromonitor, 2024); since this generation was the first to grow up in a world that was entirely digital, they make significant use of technology and digital gadgets, and they had not to adjust to these things while all previous generations had to (Merriman, 2015). Furthermore, Millennials place a high importance on teamwork, whereas Gen Z rejects teamwork unless it is virtual and prefers individual work (Adecco, 2015; Iorgulescu, 2016). This propensity for virtual communication has, therefore, impacted Gen Z's social, interpersonal, and listening abilities (Tulgan, 2013) in the workplace differently from Millennials. Yet even though there are a few parallels with millennials, Gen Z will cause the largest generational shift in the workplace (Tulgan, 2013).

Gen Z is the most varied generation to date, which may have something to do with this, having grown up in an environment that was more conservative with money, where anti-discrimination laws and globalization are major concerns for them, together with individual standards at the workplace as flexibility and work-life balance Gen Z is the most diverse generation to date, which may be attributed to their upbringing in a more conservative financial environment. They are particularly concerned with globalization and anti-discrimination laws, as well as individual workplace standards such as work-life balance and flexibility (Stuckey, 2016). Z generation is the first real global generation. High-tech is in their blood; they have grown up in an uncertain and complex environment, which determines their viewpoint about work, studying, and the world (Dill, 2015). Gen Zers are the first generation to have totally grown up with digital technology, making them true digital natives. They were born during and grew up alongside technological advancements (Lanier, 2017). At their younger age, they had already been a matter of interest in research in relation to their access to a wide range of digital communication technology, including mobile phones, Wi-Fi, and interactive computer games (Bassiouni and Hackley 2014), limiting effective communication and relations due to their “digital-based” relationship context (Elmore, 2014).

However, Gen Z is differentiated not only for their technological know-how (Nieżurawska, 2023) and affinity but also for their self-confident, multitasking attitude at the workplace (Drenik & Van de Boom, 2022). that is, identifying them with unique values and behaviors at the workplace in their job assignments (Benítez-Márquez et al., 2022). When it comes to on-the-job development, Generation Zers expect their managers to be private mentors who assist subordinates with personal advancement, as Gen Zers are characterized by their self-assurance and ambition (Pataki-Bittó and Kapusy, 2021). They are entrepreneurial (Magano et al., 2020), are not afraid to deviate from the established road, and have a strong desire for social relationships. Nonetheless, Generation Zers are more comfortable communicating through technology and may have socialization challenges. Generation Zers have missed out on learning certain important conversational principles because they usually connect through text messaging (Tulgan, 2013).

However, their being digitally native not only facilitates communication and information gathering but also promotes knowledge growth among young people: 77% of Gen Zers believe that a company's operations should be environmentally friendly and that social responsibility campaigns are effective in attracting young employees (Meehan, 2016).

2.2 Gen Z and Sustainability

Growing up, Gen Z faced economic challenges such as recession and uncertainty (Annis, 2017; Stillman & Stillman, 2017; Tulgan, 2013), which impacted their perspective of the world, in fact. Generation Z is regarded as the first global citizen. This means that they follow the same trends as similar generations around the world. They are also aware and concerned about the occurrence around the world. The internet allows people to stay linked to all of the latest trends and causes throughout the world, including ecological problems. The relevance of sustainability to Gen Z from the diverse 3Bs point of view - at the global level as well as in the workplace - justifies the aim of this study and its objectives in analyzing how responsible leadership is seen and appropriate for Gen Z. Gen Z are generous and concerned about sustainability. They are willing to contribute money and time to the cause. They are also prepared to participate in a cause-related marketing initiative sponsored by a reputable company (Dwidienawati & Gandasari, 2018).

Millennials, or Generation Y, are much more concerned with environmental responsibility than Gen Xers and Baby Boomers, and they are willing to buy and pay more for "green" food and products, as well as from companies involved in sustainability development. (Royne et al.,

2011). Millennials and Generation Z members understand that their purchasing habits have a direct influence on the environment (Smith and Brower, 2012). From a social sustainability standpoint, Gen Z values equality, with 91% of the generation cohort unquestioning that every individual is equal and consequently deserves to be regarded as such: they are the most racially and ethnically diverse generation, and they are deeply committed to social justice (Fry and Parker, 2018). Diversity, equity, and inclusion issues are more important now for them than ever before (Twenge, 2017).

2.3 The Importance of Leadership

Leadership styles have become an important topic of study in the management field, and many researchers consider leadership style an important variable in influencing how members of an organization function (Wu, Tsui, Kinicki, 2010). Throughout its history, the concept of leadership has evolved in tandem with economic, social, and technical advancements, and as a result, the attributes that leaders should possess have altered, with four major perspectives established to explain these shifts. Leadership is the influence that originates when an individual recognizes others as their leaders in pursuit of a shared objective (Silva et al., 2016). Leadership is also defined as the act of inspiring a group of individuals to collaborate in order to accomplish positive objectives (Vroom & Jaago, 2007). It is also defined as an individual who possesses the ability to motivate others, think critically, and effectively manage existing resources to attain organizational objectives (Ward, 2020). The literature describes a variety of leadership styles, incorporating charismatic, situational, transactional, and visionary (Northouse 2016).

Leadership is a rapidly expanding area of research in management and applied psychology. Leadership scholars have noted that research has made relevant progress in unraveling some of the main complexities associated with leadership (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009), including establishing the widely shared consensus that "positive" leadership styles result in desirable outcomes. Many leadership scholars believe that people become more effective when they engage in positive leadership styles, such as charismatic, empowering, ethical, servant, or transformational leadership, and less effective when they engage in negative leadership styles, such as micro-management or destructive leadership. In particular, the comparative review of the three dominant moral approaches (authentic, ethical, and servant leadership) has indicated that moral leadership behaviors positively affect organization outcomes (Lemoine et al., 2019) and that, inversely, an abusive leadership attitude may generate dysfunctional outcomes with the individual and the team (Tepper et al., 2017).

However, in contrast to this generally recognized and passionately supported paradigm, a rising amount of research has called into question common leadership style classifications and the validity of the data they provide. Severe critics have described much leadership research as intrinsically repetitive (Alvesson, 2020; Alvesson & Einola, 2019) and consequently failing to portray organizational reality or, on conceptual grounds, considering confusing some constructs associated with some leadership styles (Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013; Fischer et al., 2021). Responsible leadership, a category derived from servant leadership, has shown further complexity in relation to their linkage between two distinct research domains: corporate social responsibility and leadership, and in this perspective, integrating both organizational and individual perspectives (Waldman, Balthazard, and Peterson, 2011). However, this study will concentrate on the leadership stream of research in relation to its objectives and research question.

2.4 Responsible Leadership Characteristics

In the last few years, there has been tremendous progress in clarifying the various characteristics of responsible leadership. Nowadays, the concept of "responsible leadership" is recognized in academic literature and organizational management practices. Early on, the Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative (GRLI) emphasized ethically correct and values-based behaviors and actions in the context of understanding the world's interconnectedness in their call for globally responsible leadership: globally responsible leadership is considered the global exercise of ethical, values-based leadership associated to economic, societal progress and sustainable development.

As business leaders are more aware of the possibility of long-term success when striking a balance between profit maximization and social responsibility, responsible leadership has attracted great attention (Waldman and Siegel, 2008). The idea of "Creating Shared Value" supports this point of view by showing how businesses might solve social and environmental problems simultaneously with monetary success, so motivating leaders to create plans matching corporate goals with societal advancement (Porter and Kramer, 2011). Nonetheless, it is hard to study the topic of RL entirely without thinking about people. Alternatively, when looking at RL, the emphasis is on the decisions and behavior of individuals rather than on whether businesses operate responsibly (Waldman and Balven, 2014). Initially, the theories on RL concentrated mostly on the dynamic "supervisor-subordinate" interactions, including servant

leadership, transformational leadership, ethical leadership, and genuine leadership (Siddiqui et al., 2020).

An effective initial framework of responsible leadership has been provided by Doh and Stumpf (2005), which integrates leadership attributes, managerial ethics, stakeholders' perspectives, and corporate social responsibility; in particular, their study emphasized ethical and values-based behaviors and actions as well as the importance of developing positive stakeholder relationships associated to three important dimensions, each of which can be observed through specific individual - or organizational behaviors': values-based leadership; ethical decision making; and quality stakeholder relationships. From this perspective, responsible leadership is defined as a relational and ethical phenomenon that involves social interactions with those affected by leadership and who have a stake in its purpose and vision. This approach broadens the view from leader-subordinate to leader-stakeholder relationships, evolving towards a more comprehensive sense of leadership (Bolden and Gosling, 2006). Leaders' responsibilities include building ethical relationships with stakeholders, as relationships are the core of leadership in the social, relational, and ethical dimensions of responsible leadership to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes (Maak & Pless, 2006). Responsible leadership seeks to align stakeholder demands with the organization's strategic objectives beyond the mere management of opposing interests (Waldman & Siegel, 2008; Waldman *et al.*, 2020) with leaders demonstrating accountability, transparency, and a commitment to the well-being of all stakeholders by considering their interests throughout decision-making (Maak & Pless, 2006). The stakeholders' role was significantly evidenced, advocating for responsible leaders to actively engage with stakeholders outside their organization to achieve a shared business vision (Maak, 2007), together with active societal engagement and change maker role outside the organization (Pless, 2007), ethically correct and values-based behaviors and actions to create social change and sustainable value.

Responsible leadership can be regarded as having understanding and consideration of the repercussions of one's managerial actions for all stakeholders, as well as the application of influence by allowing the stakeholders to participate and engage in an active stakeholder dialogue (Voegtlin, 2011). On top of that, it requires an empathy and values-based ethos for the RL—an innate understanding of oneself, colleagues, companies, communities, the world around us, and how all of these elements interact (Muff, 2013). With this respect, Pearce, Wassenaar, and Manz (2014) examined the influence of the “Shared Leadership Paradigm” on the advancement of RL, advocating that shared leadership embodies the concept that various

social actors within an organization collaboratively contribute to guiding one another towards effective results (Pearce & Conger, 2002), with an influence on the responsible leader role.

The RL commitment evolved beyond the three main business objectives to encompass broader global concerns such as environmental sustainability, human rights, and poverty (Pless & Maak, 2011). The theory of responsible leadership also aims to clarify who is accountable for what in a global economic environment (Voegtlin *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, responsible leadership encompasses not just the pursuit of lucrative decisions for the organization but also the commitment to ethical choices that positively impact the environment and society at large (Cameron, 2011; Voegtlin, 2016; Han *et al.*, 2019). Acting ethically and being accountable are two of the responsibilities that a responsible leader is expected to possess to fulfill their obligations to stakeholders but also to clients, staff, and shareholders (Waldman & Siegel, 2008). However, Stahl and Sully de Luque (2014) emphasized the challenges and different perspectives that certain leaders in international firms have with respect to distinct problems and potentially divergent standards, such as cultural perceptions of bribery, in the execution of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and diverse ethical values.

In summary, the concept of responsible leadership is the one in which leaders are those who take responsibility for the organization's bottom line and shareholders while also taking responsibility for actions on stakeholders (Maak & Pless, 2009; Pless & Maak, 2011; Pless, Maak, & Waldman, 2012; Voegtlin, 2016) but also on a diverse workforce, multicultural customers, environmental concerns, and society at large (Schraa-Liu and Trompenaars, 2006). It impacts culture and fosters ethical decision-making inside groups and organizations. Responsible leadership emphasizes duty, accountability, moral decision-making, and trust; it defines what it means to be responsible in the context of leadership. Accountability, liability, and trustworthiness are not only semantic versions of "responsibility" but rather relational ideas. Furthermore, responsible leadership definition and related evolution have seen the role of the leader to prioritize others' interests and specify to whom leaders are accountable. From this perspective, the role of the RL as a change-maker and as an active member of societal engagement increased in importance, emphasizing their key role in promoting a systemic change toward sustainable development (Quinn and D'Amato, 2008).

Within the sustainable and ethical role of leadership, a specific focus on moral authority has also been addressed, which is related to the duality of internal and external focus. The ultimate measure of success for responsible leaders can be seen as the consideration for the contrast

between long-term value and short-term economic thinking beyond their organizations, embracing long-term socio-environmental concerns beyond short-term profit (Muff, Delacoste, and Dyllick, 2022). In addition, among the many different abilities that a responsible leader ought to have, the most important qualities are those that are associated with moral conduct and social skills (Dassah, 2010). These leaders exemplify role models for their followers; hence, leaders, particularly those in senior positions, also function as sanctioned organizational representatives who can effectively endorse irresponsibility (Ashforth and Anand, 2003).

The explanations shifted to definitions and even reoriented towards a purpose of management education, based on a rethinking of the role of business and an understanding of leadership, with responsible leaders defined as individuals who reconcile their personal or organizational objectives within the context of a broader societal obligation, considering the potential, long-term impact, and indirect implications of their activities (Muff et al. 2013).

The RL evolution shows that in its 3Bs orientation, research has shown that money isn't the only reason a business exists and that a responsible leader can consider profit while maintaining moral standards. Although companies must turn a profit, leaders can manage companies with the intention of contributing to change the world, supporting leaders to maintain a healthy stakeholder culture and create a system where their company will benefit society as a whole (Freeman and Laasch, 2020). In this perspective, sustainability - developed in a more comprehensive approach towards the triple bottom line strategy - which incorporates social, economic, and environmental viewpoints, replacing the single, profit-based bottom line as the dominant leadership function in corporations (Elkington, 2001; Googins, Mirvis, & Rochlin, 2007) - showed the positive influence on responsible leaders in their evolution towards being accountable, responsible, and ethical (Siddiqui et al., 2020). In the end, responsible leadership distinguishes itself from similar leadership theories, such as ethical, transformational, authentic, and servant leadership, by prioritizing the creation of long-term value for all stakeholders and committing to enhanced social and environmental responsibilities (Maak & Pless, 2006; Voegtlin, 2016; Waldman & Siegel, 2008; Han et al., 2019).

2.5 Leadership and Gen Z

Generation Z may have a certain alignment with millennials' leadership preferences, and transformational leadership seemed to be the most preferred style. Generation Z has emphasized the importance of a good attitude toward leadership, and they expect internal growth and development chances (Adecco, 2016). However, Gen Z appears to be distinctive from

millennials in the management context; however, only very limited and mostly speculative research in the field has been developed (Zorn, 2018).

Transformational leadership is thought to be the most popular style among Generation Z (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014). Generation Z has expressed its appreciation of leadership by demonstrating a positive attitude (Universum, 2017) yet expects internal growth opportunities and development (Adecco, 2016). Previous research has argued that they might prefer a leader who has characteristics of being a strong and effective communicator, determining a positive and inclusive culture, showing high levels of emotional intelligence, supporting the team with ongoing mentorship, has an involved and engaged personality; is highly competent; and promotes equality (McGaha's, 2018) assuming their potential preference for a transformational leadership over transactional leadership. As for Gen Z, becoming autonomous in the workplace entails knowing how to make responsible decisions; Gen Z is hesitant to take on additional leadership responsibilities due to a lack of confidence (Schroth, 2019) with respect to millennials (Twenge, 2018) and consequently appreciates a leadership relation based on emotional intelligence. Research has also highlighted that Gen Zers define their ideal leader as having fair and consistent leadership, soft skills, and a kind and open-minded attitude (Grow and Yang, 2018). Among the almost 70 different leadership styles identified by Dinh et al. (2014), transformational leadership is the most stressed and has been one of the only ones examined with servant leadership in terms of the Gen Z response.

As previously anticipated, previous research has assumed that Gen Z might have a strong preference for transformational leadership styles as opposed to transactional leadership (McGaha, 2018); however, no study has analyzed Gen Z's perception of responsible leadership. Research has evidenced that Gen Z believes it is crucial to work for a company that is concerned with sustainability (Dwidienawati et al. 2021) and that in line with their ethical and socially sustainable values, generation Z values mental wellness and expect their employers to do the same and prioritize diversity and inclusiveness (O'Boyle, 2017). Given the interest of Gen Z towards sustainability at the workplace and in the leadership style as well as the context surrounding them, the absence of previous solid research in the field, and the focus on how Generation Z may perceive RL style, this study will use a qualitative empirical research approach and explore the appropriateness of the Responsible Leadership style from the social, environmental and economically responsible approach. In so doing, it will rely on the responsible leadership definition based on the Triple Bottom Line paradigm for a socially, environmentally, and economically responsible leader (Siddiqui et al., 2020) as an essential

theory that supports responsible leadership and broadens the assessment of corporate success to encompass social, environmental, and economic performance (Elkington, 2001). It will rely on the concept that responsible leadership entails the management and reporting of the economic, social, and environmental impacts of businesses, with a focus on enhancing all three dimensions (Maak & Pless, 2006).

The study will aim to analyze if and how the Responsible Leader's approach and actions towards environmental aspects, economic conditions of shareholders, and social effects of the organization on society will be positively significant for Gen Z in a leader as a result, with respect to the literature reviewed, the Siddiqui et al. (2020) 3Bs responsible leadership approach will be used to frame the empirical research.

3. Methodology

The primary issue of this research, which is based on an exploratory model, is the identification and appropriateness of the qualities that a responsible leader should possess from the perspective of the current generation, Gen Z. Consequently, the investigation was conducted using qualitative research design as a result of the exploratory approach of the investigation (Creswell, 2009) and the absence of pre-existing research on the relationship between Gen Z and the RL style. This method was adopted because it gives richer and deeper data for investigating new perspectives, improving initial understanding of a problem, and identifying issues affecting a new specific phenomenon (Healy & Perry, 2000).

This chapter examines the research methodology, including the research design, sample, and data analysis that form the methodological framework for the empirical study. Developed from a qualitative methodology (Pattorn, 2005), the grounded theory approach is the primary approach of this work, which aims to generate unique insights into a topic that has received relatively little investigation, as in the case of Gen Z. In the last few decades, grounded theory has become very popular among management experts. Traditionally, it has been used in fields like sociology and healthcare (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). Using a systematic approach to data collection and analysis, grounded theory generates theories and concepts (Goulding, 2005). In order to build an applied model using a grounded theory-based method, this research used an interview-based exploration technique. Consequently, the focus is more on asking participants in-depth questions about the values and style they perceive as important in their relationship with their leader (Zeithaml et al., 2020).

Given this, the primary objective of this investigation was to determine how leadership style was perceived by Gen Z and also to determine their expectations. The requisite data was gathered through in-person interviews with members of the Z-generation who already have some work experience in order to accomplish these objectives. Two fundamental rules had been established in accordance with the conditional sampling rules: "being born after 1998" and "being born before 2006". Participants who failed to satisfy these prerequisites were excluded from the interviews.

Two fundamental requirements were established in accordance with the conditional sampling rules: "being born after 1998" and "being born before 2006". Those who were unable to meet the prerequisites were excluded from the interviews. Based on existing literature (Burke, 2002), the interview protocol underwent pre-testing for readability and content relevance regarding the

research questions. 10 questions within the interview guide aimed at gathering interviewee perceptions were used.

3.1 Data Collection Procedure

Fifteen Gen Z, identified via convenience sampling methodologies, participated in the interviews. However, the interviewees' consistency was validated by examining their career profiles and corroborating their references. Furthermore, participants had to be recognized themselves as already having had a professional experience in a managerial context. Appendix 1 offers further information regarding the participants and their experiences. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide while allowing for flexibility and open-ended discussion (McCracken, 1988). Participants were notified that the interviews required their spontaneous and candid opinions, emphasizing that there were no correct or incorrect responses and that their answers would be kept anonymous (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Consequently, the interviews started with open-ended inquiries to extract information regarding the participants' familiarity with their view of a responsible leader. Then, utilizing an interview protocol, essential insights regarding the participants' perspectives on the attributes of a responsible leader and their appreciation of the 3Bs of sustainability were documented. During the interviews, no leading questions or any verbal or non-verbal cues that could indicate approval or disapproval of the opinions articulated were shown (McCracken, 1988). Due to opportunistic considerations, the majority of the interviews were conducted via virtual communication platforms like Zoom and Teams, while a limited number were held in person. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

3.2 Data Analysis

The interview sample size was estimated to be adequate for the current study and for qualitative research overall, as it is sufficiently large to provide valuable insights into primary perceptions and trends while remaining in a feasible sampling for effective analysis (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). Additionally, it satisfied the criteria established by Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007), who advocate for sample sizes between fifteen and twenty, as well as De Ruyter and Scholl (1998), indicating that the typical sample sizes range from 15 to 40 respondents.

Thematic analysis has been used to examine the data. Following the methodology proposed by Ryan and Bernard (2003), the collected data was divided into categories for analysis and processed into themes or categories related to the theoretical framework derived from the 3Bs

approach to sustainability. Each question was categorized separately, and responses from all participants were analyzed jointly for each question to reach a more precise analysis of differences and similarities and offer the comparison of information and data from both primary and secondary sources (Saunders et al., 2009).

Figure 1 – Table of Gen Z interviewed

Interview Number	Nationality	Age	Sex	Professional Experience - Years
1	Italy`	21	Male	2
2	Portugal	21	Male	2
3	France	21	Male	3
4	Germany	24	Male	4
5	Dutch	23	Male	3.5
6	Portugal	22	Female	2
7	Italy	24	Female	3
8	Ukraine	22	Female	2
9	Italian	27	Female	1.5
10	Italian	22	Male	1
11	Italian	25	Male	3
12	Italian	26	Male	3
13	Italian	26	Female	2

4. Results

The interviews responses offered a comprehensive analysis of Gen Z perceptions of responsible leadership (RL) in the context of economic sustainability, social justice, and environmental responsibility. By analyzing those responses, it was possible to dive deeper these critical sustainable dimensions and with the values that are associated with responsible leadership, evaluating both existing insights and new responses. The answers reflect a positive perception of responsible leadership combining the social, economic, and environmental components of leadership. Specifically, from the social justice sustainability approach, it is significant to evidence that for Gen Z appears that in leadership social justice, inclusivity and ethical decision-making are intimately connected. The responsible leader is supposed to prioritize the well-being of the workforce as well as in society, advocate for environmental sustainability without compromising an ethical profit-making.

4.1 Gen Z perception of environmental actions of Responsible Leaders

Most of the interviewees were totally agreeing that leaders must prioritize environmental objectives, which should extend beyond simple declarations to the actual implementation of sustainable practices.

A responsible leader communicates the importance of measuring and monitoring the team's goals to reduce the environmental impact of the team's activities, while improving their social impact. A leader cannot significantly shift the company mindset if the goals are not implemented and achieved.

In addition, during the interviews, Gen Z also highlighted that it is essential to ensure that environmentally sustainable objectives are implemented and to this respect, in order to ensure that environmental responsibility is deep-rooted in the corporate culture, the responsible leader should advocate to settle and supervise measurable objectives. Some of the respondents were even really extreme into that by asserting that:

“Promoting sustainability and conscious consumption enhances the company’s reputation and commitment to responsible practices [...] A leader should consistently prioritize the environmental perspective, even if it surpasses profit.”

Responsible leaders are expected to prioritize environmental responsibility. The results demonstrate a significant belief that environmental issues should have priority over short-term profit, particularly strategic alliances and supply chains. Having a leader who sets positive examples and creative measurable targets regarding sustainability shows the importance of transparency for Gen Z regarding environmental policy. Additionally, the refutation of greenwashing and search for creative solutions denotes a rejection for “cosmetic acts” in favor of real significant environmental initiatives. This goes, hand in hand, with the higher societal demand for companies and leaders to show significant transformation instead of only projecting environmental consciousness. Furthermore, Gen Z respondents evidenced the preference and the need of a top-down approach in which a leader should initiate the promotion of sustainable practices within the organization and subsequently extend these values to the external community, including the positive impact that it can also have on other communities as those of consumers. Through those actions and in particular innovative one, it was also evidenced how leaders create innovative environmental protection meaningful initiatives, rather than mere greenwashing.

A responsible leader is aware that greenwashing is a prevalent issue in the context of sustainability. Consequently, they are able to identify and prevent it by providing evidence and guarantees.... Tangible actions toward sustainability attract top talent and improve long-term profitability.

The respondents’ preference for integrity is evidenced by the top-down approach of promoting sustainability within the organization prior to its extension to external stakeholders. This approach ensures that environmental responsibility is embedded in the corporate culture and not only as a marketing strategy for consumers.

4.2 Gen Z perception of social actions by Responsible Leaders

Generation Z evidence the close relation incorporating the role of the RL in social sustainability in the field of technology corporation. In the interviews it was evidenced how in those field of corporations, diversity in recruitment but also product inclusivity is not always a priority for leaders as it should be.

“Social justice must be advocated for by leaders at all levels.... Diversity and inclusiveness have to be seen these days [...] Minority matters!”

In particular, in the interviews Generation Z signal the importance of social actions towards diverse communities, such as LGBT+ individuals as well as women. Gen Z strong demand for social justice in this regard highlight that Gen Z consider social justice in DEI critical in RL. In the interviews, there is a specific call for leader who actively promotes diversity, and inclusion establishes an environment in which employees feel appreciated and supported in contrast with what it happens often currently. A leader is expected to manage initiatives and policies that promote diversity and inclusion in order to cultivate a diverse workforce

However, Gen Z also recognizes that it is fundamental that leaders adopt a clear ethical approach to cultivate positive relationships with stakeholders and also among employees. Gen Z unambiguously express the need of a cooperative environment at work indicating an appreciation of a participatory leadership style.

Moreover, the notion of well-being at work appears crucial, indicating the essential aspect of working in a comfortable and motivating environment. Regarding this, the leader's behaviour is seen as having an impactful role in creating a collaborative and positive environment. As team effectiveness is directly linked to motivation (therefore the well-being of each member), the well-being of team members should be the first concern for a responsible leader.

The well-being of team members should be the primary concern of a responsible leader. Team effectiveness is directly linked to motivation, which is rooted in the well-being of each member.

However, Gen Z focus on the well-being at work is not only associated to the workplace and group dynamics but also related to a larger mental health concern, in which leaders are held accountable for creating low stress working environment to avoid mental issues tress related as burnout. However, well-being is not just vital for the organization inside a firm; respondents pointed out that a responsible leader should be personally and professionally active in the well-being of society, such as volunteering or supporting humanitarian activities.

A responsible leader is not responsible if they are not personally and professionally invested in the welfare of society in some capacity.

4.3 Gen Z perception of the economic actions by Responsible Leaders

The respondents are strongly opposed to the notion that leadership should be exclusively concerned with economic results. A leader must make decisions that are not only financially sensible but also ethically responsible. Social justice and environmental protection should not be put at stake in the name of economic growth.

The company will be plagued by a slew of ethical issues if a leader exclusively prioritizes economic profit.

Gen Z argue that it is essential for leaders to ponder the impact of economic strategies on the diverse stakeholders, with a more specific attention towards the most marginalized communities -from employees to consumers, internally and externally - to prevent any individual from being disadvantaged. The emphasis is placed on the development of a sustainable profit strategy, which implies that economic objectives must be in accordance with sustainability and even there should not possibly profit strategy if there is no sustainability. From an economic standpoint, the responses suggest that profit and responsibility must be aligned. A Responsible Leader must not prioritize profit at the expense of ethics, with a specific analysis of the impact derived by economic decisions on all stakeholders and shareholders.

“Leaders must consider the influence of their decisions on all individuals, not only the company's [...]. A friendly and healthy working environment is much needed these days!”

The respondents' claim for sustainable profit strategies signals that Gen Z are expecting that a corporation achieve long-term success only if developed with ethical, social, and environmental responsibilities at its core. This tends to indicate a strong conviction in a conscious kind of capitalism, in which financial success is associated to responsible behaviour. Furthermore, Gen Z is expecting leaders to establish sustainable certifications inside their organizations to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability but also promote sustainability awareness through internal and external education for workers and customers.

The leader should consistently allocate resources to the promotion of education for both their employees and consumers. The emphasis on sustainable education emphasizes the idea that a responsible leader must not only make ethical judgments but also teach others—both internally and externally—about sustainability practices. Gen Z view is consistent with the idea that

responsible leadership should be an ongoing process of learning and training to develop also more responsible leaders for the future.

The RL is engaged with the company in promoting sustainable awareness in education. They must raise awareness in their human resources and then contribute to the education of consumers through dedicated projects.

All in all, Gen Z's perception of responsible leadership goes beyond a responsible and transparent approach on the present but also an innovative responsible leader that in a more advocate position is focusing on integrating the interests of employees, marginalized communities, and environment defense within the company's growth strategy.

5. Discussion & Long-Term Perspectives

Previous research has evidenced that Generation Z behave and have different expectations in management (Barclays, 2018; Schlossberg, 2016) as also the findings of this research have evidenced from leadership perspective. Previous studies were limited to test if transformative leadership was appropriate with Gen Z that showed affirmative results and emphasized their appreciation of empathy, growth, and values-driven action (McGaha, 2018). However, this study is showing that Gen z is not only considering those values as relevant for their leadership of choice but also specific additional values and style association to the responsible leadership orientation that they would positively perceive as appropriate in the workplace. A major component of responsible leadership is its emphasis on sustainability, both in terms of environmental effect and long-term economic viability. According to the concept of Creating Shared benefit (Porter and Kramer 2011), companies could gain economic benefit by undertaking social issues—such as environmental ones—instead of understanding them as side projects. Responsible leadership should, according to academics like Maak and Pless (2009), reach further than fleeting financial objectives and be comprised into more far-reaching sustainability projects including environmental, social, and economic elements. Sustainability, as defined by corporate responsibility and leadership ethics, is the management of resources in such a manner that the planet's boundaries are respected, and societal requirements are met. Responsible leadership frameworks highlight the need of aligning an organization's commercial strategy with long-term sustainability goals, ensuring that environmental and social obligations are balanced with financial success (Voegtlin, 2011). The results of the interview showed that

sustainability was a pragmatic leadership concept rather than only a catchphrase. Interviewees underlined how resource efficiency, green projects, and social responsibility should be natural elements of any leadership style and often spoke on the importance of environmentally conscious leadership. In tandem with the claims made by Porter and Kramer (2011) and Maak and Pless (2009) on shared value creation, they stressed that responsible leaders give long-term environmental sustainability top priority above short-term profitability. Furthermore, several participants acknowledged the rising relevance of environmental sustainability in today's global economy, emphasizing the demand on businesses to align their operations with societal and environmental goals. This shift in priority is consistent with the RL framework, which sees leadership as a driving factor behind systemic change toward a more sustainable society.

5.1 Responsible Stakeholder Commitment and Inclusivity

In the last years, had started to be seen a relational and ethical phenomenon in which leaders are responsible not just to shareholders but also to society, employees, and other stakeholders (Doh & Stumpf, 2005). The notion of responsible leadership had evolved to accentuate stakeholder participation - from simply leader to subordinate -, ethical decision-making, and the creation of long-term value over profit (Maak & Pless, 2006). Research studies had evidenced how responsible leaders were required to take a holistic approach, integrating societal development and economic growth as interconnected goals into the notion, in line with Porter and Kramer's (2011) concept of Creating Shared Value (CSV). However, RL aims further to integrate corporate social responsibility (CSR) with ethical decision-making focusing on a values-based leadership notion integrating the leader, transparency, accountability, and a long-term engagement for a societal well-being (Waldman and Siegel, 2008),

The interview findings show that the ideas of responsible leadership are strongly embedded in the participants' values and confirm the hypothesis of a positive perception by Gen Z of a RL. Yet, specifically with respect to how the characteristics of RL are perceived, data from the interviews emphasize that ethics and sustainability in decision-making and not only in values is highly considered, evidencing stakeholder interests' importance - rather than just profits. In this perspective, data confirm to going beyond the leader-subordinate interaction to include the connection with stakeholders; this approach to RL is in line with the concept that the leader endeavours are to have empathy, but also ethical awareness, in an enlarged comprehensive path towards sustainability (Voegtlin, 2011; Maak, 2007). Generation Z also argued that a responsible leader must actively be engaged with various stakeholders internally but also

externally on a social level. They emphasized that RL requires developing strong connections with workers, consumers, the community, and even rivals, all of which are consistent with the stakeholder-centric vision of leadership presented in the research. Numerous answers confirmed Voegtlin's (2011) perspective on RL, explaining how leaders must participate in active conversation with stakeholders to hear their concerns and balance opposing interests. The ethical behaviour cited in the interviews shows to be consistent with the RL framework, which assumes that actions should benefit not just the business but also the larger societal good. Findings are strongly consistent with the literature, highlighting that responsible leadership must be sincerely dedicated to sustainability in all its manifestations. This dedication extends beyond business profits to public welfare, echoing the research work of Porter & Kramer (2011) and Voegtlin (2011), which emphasizes long-term value creation. Generation Z (Gen Z) is a population formed as a result of the digital revolution and societal globalization. As digital natives, they have grown up in an increasingly linked world, raising their awareness of concerns such as social justice, environmental sustainability, and corporate accountability (Tulgan, 2013; Fry & Parker, 2018).

The interviews' emphasis on ethics, sustainability, and social effect is consistent with the current trend in RL literature toward stakeholder-inclusive and values-driven leadership. Both the interviews and the scholarly debates emphasize the need of responsibility and openness in leadership, as well as ensuring that ethical standards underlie all decision-making processes. Scholarly work on RL stresses ethical stakeholder interactions, as well as the value of diversity and inclusiveness. Leaders who understand their moral commitments and emphasize fostering an inclusive atmosphere are seen to be more effective at delivering long-term value (Maak and Pless, 2006) not only for internal but also external communities as also marginalized or socially disadvantaged communities when present in company partnerships. According to Gen Z a responsible leader should integrate the interests and needs of the diverse stakeholders and be reflected in the decision-making and actions of leaders as defined in literature with respect to responsible leadership values (Waldman and Balven, 2014).

5.2 Social Justice and Inclusion

The interview results repeatedly evidenced the importance of social justice and an inclusive form of leadership as critical components of RL, consistent with previous research considering RL as a continuous process of empathy and moral reasoning with the aim of better recognize the needs of those marginalized communities (Voegtlin, 2011). Many participants emphasized

that diversity meant not simply employing people from various backgrounds but also fostering a workplace that stressed equity and fairness. The interviewees emphasized that today's leaders must grasp intersectionality—the linked nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender—and ensure that their policies, and decisions reflect this understanding as well as their actions support social justice, equality, and human rights confirming previous theories (Maak & Pless, 2006). However, the respondents stated that leaders must address mental health and community participation, which aligns with the emphasis in RL literature on fostering trusting, collaborative, and socially responsible cultures and establishing a balance between profit maximization and social responsibility (Waldman and Siegel, 2008) internally and externally. A noteworthy amount of the findings showed the importance of leaders setting a positive example – in line with Gen Z ideals – by supporting employee well-being, recognizing cultural diversity, and creating inclusive workplaces. Both academic discussions and interviews emphasize that leaders should actively pursue fair opportunities for all stakeholders, particularly underrepresented groups, beyond usual corporate boundaries. Regarding this, findings confirm but also reinforce the academic literature's emphasis on inclusion and social justice for Gen Z with respect to a positive perception of a responsible leader characteristics. According to research on Generation Z's leadership preferences, the young are looking for leaders that can be emotionally aware, inclusive, and devoted to social and environmental concerns (Schroth, 2019). This orientation appears to be consistent with the RL framework, which emphasizes ethical decision-making, stakeholder involvement, and sustainability as core values related to this leadership style. In this perspective, the empirical interviews confirmed that Generation Z's leadership preferences are becoming more aligned with the ideals of responsible leadership.

Interviewees indicated a clear preference for leaders who were able to show emotional intelligence, empathy, and dedication to development (both personal and professional). They portrayed their ideal leaders and value-driven, honest, and socially responsible. In fact, the essential qualities of transformative and responsible leadership are embodied in these characteristics, as also defined in academic literature. Adding onto this, the respondents' focus regarding sustainability and ethical leadership encourages the concept that Gen Z, when selecting jobs, is more inclined to prioritize firms which are socially responsible

5.3 Ethical Decision-Making and Integrity

Over the past decades, the notion of Responsible Leadership (RL) has evolved, with researchers emphasizing the importance of ethical decision-making, sustainability, and stakeholder involvement in leadership practices. According to Maak and Pless (2006), responsible leadership is defined as an ethical and relational approach to leadership, going beyond typical leader-subordinate exchanges, enabling a larger duty to society, employees, shareholders, and the environment. This all-inclusive view of leadership emphasizes on creating long-term value through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), stakeholder involvement, and ethical decision-making. The interview data showed that leaders already see ethics, sustainability, and stakeholder involvement and critical components of responsible leadership. Many interviewees also emphasized that today's managers need to have a long-term outlook which balances profit maximization and a commitment to social and environmental sustainability. These replies are consistent with Voegtlin (2011), who emphasizes that leaders should focus on producing shared value that helps both their companies and society as a whole. Several respondents stressed the significance of leaders engaging ethically with stakeholders, highlighting the need of creating trust and transparency—principles that Doh and Stumpf (2005) identify as key to RL. This perspective associated to the relation between company performance and social evolution is consistent with the RL framework's related to value creation through ethical relationships and long-term societal advantage (Maak & Pless, 2006). Leaders are perceived as responsible not simply for their company's performance, but also for their contribution to the greater good in society, and in this way mirroring Porter and Kramer's (2011) notion of Creating Shared Value (CSV).

The findings support the RL literature by suggesting that current leadership is progressively seen related to moral and social enterprise, with leaders expected to make decisions that promote ethical conduct, stakeholder inclusion, and sustainability. One of the most specific characteristics of RL in academic literature is its prominence on social justice, diversity, and inclusiveness. Scholars propose that ethical leaders should acknowledge their moral responsibility to the diverse stakeholder groups and actively try to create fair conditions for all individuals, principally for those from marginalized contexts (Maak & Pless, 2006). Diversity and inclusiveness are seen as crucial components of RL as they secure that many views and viewpoints are adopted in decision-making, hence increasing leadership's ethical duty (Voegtlin, 2011). The interviews suggest that Gen Z cohort recognize the relevance of social justice and inclusivity, which makes it consistent with the RL framework's focus on the ethical

stakeholder relations. Many respondents evidenced that leaders should not only inspire diverse teams, but also actively promote inclusive cultures in which people of all diverse backgrounds feel welcomed and respected. These findings are consistent with Maak and Pless (2006), who suggest that today's leaders must consider the concerns of underrepresented individuals while prioritizing social justice.

5.4 Empathy and Well-Being

The interviews evidenced a critical theme in the research: the importance of intersectionality associated to the interrelated nature of social identities integrating race, gender, and class. Interviewees highlighted how responsible leaders should have a specific awareness of these dynamics and consequently ensuring that their leadership includes justice, equity, and inclusion. This supports Waldman and Siegel's (2008) notion that ethical leadership involves balancing competing stakeholder interests and creating an environment that fosters social fairness. Furthermore, participants emphasized that modern leaders should prioritize mental health and well-being, emphasizing the broader social responsibility that RL requires, as highlighted by Maak (2007), who argued that ethical leadership should include ensuring the well-being of employees and society. Thus, the interview findings provide significant support for the RL literature, particularly its emphasis on social justice and inclusive leadership. These findings support scholarly conceptions of leadership as a factor for encouraging diversity and resolving socioeconomic injustices (O'Boyle, 2017). A major premise of RL is the concept of sustainability, which includes both environmental sustainability and long-term economic viability. Porter and Kramer (2011) assumed that companies should focus on enabling shared value by addressing social concerns such as environmental damage, rather than not perceiving these issues as integrated to the business model. In fact, RL literature stressed how leaders should emphasize sustainable business practices by incorporating social and environmental concerns into decision-making and company strategic plans (Voegtlin, 2011; Maak & Pless, 2009). The interview results firmly demonstrated that the role of sustainability is not only positioned as an ethical requirement, hence a strategic objective for today's leaders. Many respondents underlined the critical integration of environmental sustainability in today's leaders style, going beyond regulatory compliance towards proactive participation in green activities. Interview results indicate that nowadays leaders should prioritize sustainability in their decision-making processes and in so doing they could integrate long-term value by providing effective solutions to societal and environmental issues in line with the notion of shared value (Porter and Kramer's, 2011) in which company success is defined as intertwined with social

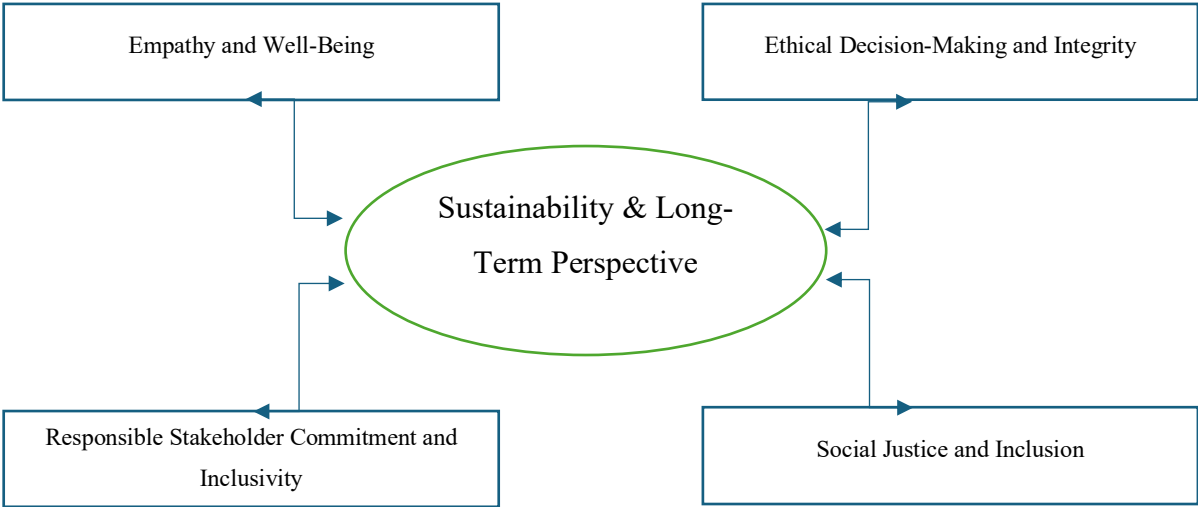
development. Interviewees also stated that organizations that fail to embrace sustainability risk falling behind in an increasingly environmentally sensitive global market. These thoughts align with the literature's demand for leaders to embrace sustainable practices that benefit both the company and society. It is also significant to evidence that despite the similarities that some literature has considered occurring between generation Z and millennials, respondents mentioned that the younger generational cohort they belong to is more motivated to call for a realistic and clear company engagement in sustainability. Generation Z (born 1997-2012), that literature has mainly evidenced as a diverse generational cohort from previous for their being totally digitally savvy and quite unique in their communication (Tulgan, 2013; Fry & Parker, 2018) is appearing as a socially conscious generation with a strong desire for ethical leadership, social justice, and sustainability from the data collected. Besides confirming Gen Z's leadership preferences consistency with the transformational leadership style – focusing on empathy, and values-based decision-making amongst other characteristics (McGaha, 2018) – empirical results also corroborate that Gen Z positively value emotional intelligence, and leaders that accentuate well-being over only profit growth (Schroth, 2019).

Interviewees from this age showed a strong need for leaders that not just prioritize financial achievement but also a model of leadership that has an ethical behaviour and interpersonal skills (Dassah, 2010), confirming they exemplify role models for their followers, also sanctioning who would endorse irresponsibility (Ashforth and Anand, 2003) without displaying a dedication to social responsibility, sustainability, and diversity. Many respondents stated that they are drawn to firms that match with their beliefs and social issues, which is consistent with Schroth's (2019) results on Gen Z leadership ideals. The interview findings are coherent with the literature on responsible leadership, indicating that ethical conduct, sustainability, social justice, and stakeholder involvement are becoming more important components of leadership practices confirming studies related to their values (Dwidienawati et al. 2021; O'Boyle, 2017). Furthermore, the findings reinforce the notion that Generation Z looks for leaders who exemplify these values—those who prioritize long-term social benefit over short-term advantages and display a commitment to inclusive leadership and empathy confirming literature overview of a responsible leader (Muff, Delacoste, and Dyllick, 2022). The study shows that RL characteristics and Gen Z leadership preferences are closely related, with both prioritizing a leadership model that integrates ethical decision-making, stakeholder inclusion, and sustainability. In addition, interviews extend literature by showing how Gen Z positively perceive a leader that is committed to create a pleasant and inclusive culture that encourage

employee well-being and collaborative partnerships, evidencing a RL framework's emphasis on empathy, trust, and social impact in an integrated responsible leadership approach.

The interviews present a comprehensive picture of how responsible leadership is positively perceived in its characteristics by Gen Z and it shows its integration of highly ethical outcomes for the benefit of greater societal and environmental needs. In this perspective, a new Integrated Responsible Leadership (IRL) model in compliance with “Gen Z” sought-for characteristics of responsible leadership could be considered as appropriate for an effective relationship with this new generation cohort – fig. 2. By following the principles outlined in the IRL model, leaders might develop a more ethical, inclusive, and sustainable company culture while effectively meeting the rising demands of stakeholders, particularly the younger generation.

Figure 2 – Perceived Qualities of a Responsible Leader



These components - derived from the interviews analyzed and discussed hereby - appear to be linked, and leaders that demonstrate to Gen Z to be engaged in all of them are positively perceived to be responsible leaders. Below, we go over each dimension in detail. The Integrated Responsible Leadership (IRL) Model could give a holistic framework for modern leaders not simply to be positively perceived by Gen Z but to effectively manage them through a specific emphasis on ethics, engagement with stakeholders, sustainability promotion but also in displaying empathy, and advocating for social justice. This model not only aligns with

Generation Z values, but it also builds on the core principles of Responsible Leadership as previously discussed in the literature, providing a more integrated approach to leadership that balances profit with social responsibility, environmental sustainability, and individual well-being.

5.5 Limitations and Future Research

The present research work has some clear limitations, that originate from its explorative nature. The sample of respondents to the interviews is made of European young professionals and at the early stages of their career. First of all, this may lead to a cultural bias, as it may expect that a different cultural background shapes expectations differently, e.g. by suggesting a grater disposition to accept hierarchies and to comply with the values of previous generations. A comparative study of generation Z from different cultural contexts may be useful to better understand possible variations in the attitudes, as discussed in this paper.

Furthermore, expectations and perceptions may be biased by the lack of experience and the difficulty in fully grasping the whole range of possibilities in implementing responsible leadership in a business context. In the future it will be important to assess how the actual realization of responsible strategy (including their outcomes in term of business performance) is evaluated by generation Z workers.

6. Conclusion

According to the interviews, Generation Z leaders desire a responsible, honest, and values-driven leadership and have a positive perception of the sustainable economic, social and environmental outcomes that a RL implies in line with the TBL approach (Enkington, 2011; Siqquidi et al, 2020). Finally, when Generation Z enters the workforce and expects that its leaders embrace the ideals of social responsibility and sustainability in all aspects of their job, these concepts will undoubtedly define the future of leadership. Furthermore, the interview findings' emphasis on mental health, work-life balance, and emotional well-being supports the transformational leadership ideal of empathy and emotional intelligence, both of which are increasingly acknowledged as vital for effective leadership. The interviews provide a complete picture of responsible leadership as a revolutionary and highly ethical strategy that aligns leadership practices with larger societal and environmental requirements. "I want a leader who I could take as an example." This emphasizes the aspirational nature of RLs, implying that personal integrity and values are important.

Responsible Leaders need a comprehensive strategy that seamlessly incorporates environmental, social, and economic policy. RL must smoothly combine environmental, social, and economic initiatives with a fundamental role in promoting a systemic change towards sustainable development as well as anticipated in previous literature (Quinn and D'Amato, 2008).

Stakeholders demand RLs to demonstrate authenticity, openness, and demonstrable results. RLs should foster corporate cultures that prioritize sustainability and diversity, encouraging workers to participate to these objectives. Stakeholders expect RLs to exhibit authenticity, transparency, and measurable outcomes. A cultural organizational shift in leaders' mindsets appears to be required, with RLs considering corporate cultures that value sustainability and inclusivity and allow employees to contribute to these aims. However, Gen Z demonstrates that this is not just desired, but that they want responsible leaders to put it into action realistically, demonstrating that a sustainable vision is essential, as well as viable outcomes. The interviews paint a comprehensive picture of responsible leadership as a new and highly ethical approach that in the perception of Gen Z has to integrate leadership practices with broader societal and environmental needs confirming and extending previous studies and showing to be positively perceived by Gen Z. Those results enhance how Gen Z appears to be distinctive from millennials in the leadership and management context enriching the only very limited and mostly speculative research in the field developed until now. (Zorn, 2018).

This study should consequently be considered when evaluating leadership styles but also HR practices to implement in corporations to effectively recruit, motivate and manage the new generation Z cohort that is entering the workforce and its specificity with respect to the previous or ongoing ones present at work.

7. References

- Abdullah, A., Ismail, M. M., & Albani, A. (2018). At-risk Generation Z: Values, talents and challenges. *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 8(7), 373-378.
- Adecco. (2016). *Generation Z: The workforce of the future*. Adecco Group.
- Adler, N. J., & Harzing, A. W. (2009). When knowledge wins: Transcending the sense and nonsense of academic rankings. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 8(1), 72-95.
- Al-Asfour, A., & Lettau, L. (2014). Strategies for leadership styles for multi-generational workforce. *Journal of Leadership, Accountability & Ethics*, 11(2).
- Alvesson, M. (2020). Upbeat leadership: A recipe for—or against—“successful” leadership studies. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 31(6), 101439.
- Andert, D. (2011). Alternating leadership as a proactive organizational intervention: Addressing the needs of the Baby Boomers, Generation Xers and Millennials. *Journal of Leadership, Accountability, and Ethics*, 8(4), 67-83.
- Annis, J. (2017, March 20). Gen Z is willing to trade hard work for job security. *Reno Gazette Journal*. <https://www.rgj.com/story/money/business/2017/03/20/annis-gen-z-willing-trade-hard-work-job-security/99431454/>
- Araslı, H., Altınay, L., & Arıcı, H. E. (2020). Seasonal employee leadership in the hospitality industry: A scale development. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 32(6), 2195–2215.
- Ashforth, B. E., & Anand, V. (2003). The normalization of corruption in organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 25, 1–52.
- Asree, S., Zain, M., & Razalli, M. R. (2010). Influence of leadership competency and organizational culture on responsiveness and performance of firms. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 22(4), 500-516.
- Avolio, B. J., Walumbwa, F. O., & Weber, T. J. (2009). Leadership: Current theories, research, and future directions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60(1), 421-449.
- Barclays. (2018). *Gen Z: Step aside Millennials*.
<https://www.investmentbank.barclays.com/our-insights/generation-z.html>

- Barnes & Noble College Insights. (2018, October 11). *Conversations with Gen Z: Values & beliefs*. <https://next.bncollege.com/gen-z-students-values-beliefs/>
- Bassiouni, D. H., & Hackley, C. (2014). Generation Z children's adaptation to digital consumer culture: A critical literature review. *Journal of Customer Behaviour, 13*(2), 113–133.
- Bell, E., Bryman, A., & Harley, B. (2022). *Business research methods*. Oxford University Press.
- Benítez-Márquez, M. D., Sánchez-Teba, E. M., Bermúdez-González, G., & Núñez-Rydman, E. S. (2022). Generation Z within the workforce and in the workplace: A bibliometric analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 736820.
- Bolden, R., & Gosling, J. (2006). Leadership competencies: Time to change the tune? *Leadership, 2*(2), 147–163.
- Burke, R. (2002). Hybrid recommender systems: Survey and experiments. *User Modeling and User-Adapted Interaction, 12*, 331-370.
- Cameron, K. (2011). Responsible leadership as virtuous leadership. *Journal of Business Ethics, 98*(Suppl 1), 25-35.
- Childs, M., Turner, T., Sneed, C., & Berry, A. (2022). A contingency theory approach to understanding small retail business continuity during COVID-19. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, 50*(3), 216-230.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Dassah, M. (2010). Responsible leaders: Attributes and roles in a multi-challenged global business environment and implications for leadership development. *The Next Generation Responsible Leaders, 30-37*.
- Dill, K. (2015, November 6). 7 things employers should know about the Gen Z workforce. *Forbes Magazine*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathryndill/2015/11/06/7-things-employers-should-know-about-the-gen-z-workforce/>

Dimock, M. (2019, January 17). Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>

Dinh, J. E., Lord, R. G., Gardner, W. L., Meuser, J. D., Liden, R. C., & Hu, J. (2014). Leadership theory and research in the new millennium: Current theoretical trends and changing perspectives. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *25*(1), 36-62.

Doh, J. P., & Stumpf, S. A. (2005). Towards a framework of responsible leadership and governance. *Handbook on responsible leadership and governance in global business*, 3-18.

Drenik, G., & VandeBoom, J. (2022, December 22). Why Gen-Z is our next wave of business owners. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/garydrenik/2022/12/22/why-gen-z-is-our-next-wave-of-business-owners/>

Drucker, P. (2012). *The practice of management*. Routledge.

Dwidienawati, D., & Gandasari, D. (2018). Understanding Indonesia's Generation Z. *International Journal of Engineering & Technology*, *7*(3), 245-253.

Dwidienawati, D., Abdinagoro, S. B., Gandasari, D., & Tjahjana, D. (2021). Do Generation Y and Z really concern about environmental issues? *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, *729*(1).

Dwidienawati, D., Syahchari, D. H., & Tjahjana, D. (2021, August). Effective leadership style for Generation Z. *Proceedings of the 4th European International Conference on Industrial Engineering and Operations Management, Rome, Italy*.

Einola, K., & Alvesson, M. (2019). The making and unmaking of teams. *Human Relations*, *72*(12), 1891-1919.

Elkington, J. (2001). The triple bottom line for 21st-century business. In *The Earthscan Reader in Business and Sustainable Development* (pp. 136, 20-43).

Elmore, T. (2014). 7 characteristics that distinguish Generation Z. *Growing Leaders*. <https://growingleaders.com/podcast/seven-characteristics-that-distinguish-generation-z/>

Euromonitor. (2024). *Future of consumption: Unlocking Gen Z behaviour*. <https://www.euromonitor.com/article/future-of-consumption-unlocking-gen-z-behaviour>

- Fischer, T., Tian, A. W., Lee, A., & Hughes, D. J. (2021). Abusive supervision: A systematic review and fundamental rethink. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 32(6), 101540.
- Freeman, R. E., & Laasch, O. (2020). From management sucks to responsible management rocks! In *Research Handbook of Responsible Management* (pp. 113-120). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Garriga, E., & Melé, D. (2004). Corporate social responsibility theories: Mapping the territory. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 53, 51–71.
- Googins, B. K., Mirvis, P. H., & Rochlin, S. A. (2007). Leading next-generation companies. In *Beyond Good Company: Next Generation Corporate Citizenship* (pp. 129-146).
- Goulding, C. (2005). Grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology: A comparative analysis of three qualitative strategies for marketing research. *European Journal of Marketing*, 39(3/4), 294–308.
- Grow, J. M., & Yang, S. (2018). Generation-Z enters the advertising workplace: Expectations through a gendered lens. *Journal of Advertising Education*, 22(1), 7-22.
- Han, Z., Wang, Q., & Yan, X. (2019). How responsible leadership motivates employees to engage in organizational citizenship behavior for the environment: A double-mediation model. *Sustainability*, 11(3), 605.
- Healy, M., & Perry, C. (2000). Comprehensive criteria to judge validity and reliability of qualitative research within the realism paradigm. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 3(3), 118–126.
- Iorgulescu, M. C. (2016). Generation Z and its perception of work. *Cross-Cultural Management Journal*, 18(1), 47-54.
- Twenge, J. M. (2017). *iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy, and completely unprepared for adulthood*. Atria Books.
- Katz, R., Ogilvie, S., Shaw, J., & Woodhead, L. (2021). *Gen Z, explained: The art of living in a digital age*. University of Chicago Press.
- Koulopoulos, T., & Keldsen, D. (2014). *The six forces shaping the future of business: The Gen Z effect*. Bibliomotion Inc.

- Küpers, W. M. (2013). Embodied inter-practices of leadership: Phenomenological perspectives on relational and responsive leading and following. *Leadership, 9*(3), 335-357.
- Lanier, K. (2017). 5 things HR professionals need to know about Generation Z. *Strategic HR Review, 16*(6), 288-290.
- Last, A. (2014). 5 reasons Generation Z could be the ones to save us. *Sustainable Brands*. https://www.sustainablebrands.com/news_and_views/stakeholder_trends_insights/andy_last/5_reasons_generation_z_could_be_ones_save_us
- Lemoine, G. J., Hartnell, C. A., & Leroy, H. (2019). Taking stock of moral approaches to leadership: An integrative review of ethical, authentic, and servant leadership. *Academy of Management Annals, 13*(1), 148-187.
- Lukianoff, G., & Haidt, J. (2019). *The coddling of the American mind: How good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure*. Penguin.
- Luttrell, R., & McGrath, K. (2021). *Gen Z: The superhero generation*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Maak, T. (2007). Responsible leadership, stakeholder engagement, and the emergence of social capital. *Journal of Business Ethics, 74*, 329-343.
- Maak, T., & Pless, N. M. (2009). Business leaders as citizens of the world: Advancing humanism on a global scale. *Journal of Business Ethics, 88*(3), 537–550.
- McWilliams, A., & Siegel, D. S. (2011). Creating and capturing value, strategic corporate social responsibility, resource-based theory, and sustainable competitive advantage. *Journal of Management, 37*, 1480–1495.
- Northouse, P. G. (2016). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (7th ed.). Sage.
- Pew Research Center. (2018, April 11). Millennials are the largest generation in the U.S. labor force. *Pew Research Center*. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/11/millennials-largest-generation-us-labor-force/>
- Porter, M., & Kramer, M. (2011). Creating shared value. *Harvard Business Review, 89*(1/2), 62-77.

Schroth, H. (2019). Are you ready for Gen Z in the workplace? *California Management Review*, 61(3), 5-18.

Voegtlin, C. (2016). What does it mean to be responsible? Addressing the missing responsibility dimension in ethical leadership research. *Leadership*, 12(5), 581–608.

Yukl, G., Mahsud, R., Prussia, G., & Hassan, S. (2019). Effectiveness of broad and specific leadership behaviors. *Personnel Review*, 48(3), 774-783.

Zeithaml, V. A., Jaworski, B. J., Kohli, A. K., Tuli, K. R., Ulaga, W., & Zaltman, G. (2020). A theories-in-use approach to building marketing theory. *Journal of Marketing*, 84(1), 32–51.

Zemke, R., Raines, C., & Filipczak, B. (2013). Generations at work: Managing the clash of Boomers, Gen Xers, and Gen Yers in the workplace. Amacom.

Zorn, R. (2017). Coming in 2017: A new generation of graduate students – The generation Z. *College & University*, 92(1), 61-63.

8. Appendices

As the document holding all interviews exceeds 30 pages, it can be viewed through this link (as convened with Master's Thesis Affairs):

https://ucppt-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/s-mrovai_ucp_pt/Ecu0QEafTx1PqsbdDEZs834B6ySRgqWYbB3Kb3X88YQ8PQ?e=j03ULY