| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Generation Z versus Zillennial: Deliberating the Reflexive Leadership Context within the Organizational Transformation of Saudi Arabia

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| ABSTRACT

The Vision 2030-driven transformation of Saudi Arabia places unique challenges upon organizational structures and leadership, particularly for generational relationships in the workplace. This study review addresses the context of professional profiles of Generation Z (Gen Z) and the Zillennials in Saudi Arabia, and the extent to which they influence organizational transformation in pursuit of national goals. The generations, which are known for their technological acumen, innovation, and emphasis on diversity and inclusiveness, present both challenges and opportunities to organizational leadership. Therefore, the purpose of this study review is to ascertain the extent to which Gen Z and Zillennials are leading organizational transformation, their expected organizational cultures, and how these trends will potentially shape Saudi Arabian organizations. Through a qualitative synthesis of literature and case studies, the study explores the influence of Gen Z and Zillennial values and work ethic in the organization, emphasizing the transforming business landscape in the Saudi Arabian context. By studying evidence utilizing scientific methods that include document analysis and interviewing executives of transforming organizations, such as healthcare and technology, which are heavily influenced by the country's Vision 2030, it is possible to gain an insider perspective on the extent to which the new generation is reshaping the business context. The study review found that while strong evidence regarding generational differences is not available, emerging evidence shows that differences between generations have a significant influence in spheres like organizational design, marketing, branding, and corporate culture. As a result, the study review shows that Gen Z and Zillennials appreciate inclusive cultures, adaptive work settings, and technological integration. However, while their technological prowess and innovation affinity drive performance, conflict with older generations, particularly Generation X and Baby Boomer colleagues, can create misunderstandings around work ethos and leadership. This intergenerational conflict illustrates the need for leadership and mentoring styles to have organizational flexibility. The study review further indicates the need to understand generational fluidity and intersectionality because there is tremendous variation in professional behavior depending on regional and cultural factors. The study review reinforces that developing the leadership of Zillennials, through targeted mentorship and generational collaboration, is crucial to realizing Saudi Vision 2030 strategic objectives. Organizations can tap into the talent of older and younger employees and drive effective national and business transformation agendas by creating an enabling environment that encourages collaboration among different generations. The study implies that an adapted strategy to manage generational diversity will be essential to shaping the future of work in Saudi Arabia.

| KEYWORDS

Generation Z, Zillennials, organizational transformation, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

Introductory Overview

Every organization comprises a mix of different generations of workers who have different experiences depending on the times they grew up. Specifically, the experiences of different generations in their respective times have shaped them into people with unique features that define their preferences and expectations at the workplace. Indeed, these diverse profiles offer numerous benefits to the organization, but also place exceptional demands on the organizations itself to provide an environment where all generations can thrive in the workplace. Like other generations, the Zillennials and Generation Z (Gen Z) impact the organizational context based on socio-historical influence and notable events that directly affect them. Despite the lack of empirical research about generational categorization, key differences exist between people born during different time periods, with smooth interaction between these cohorts vital in promoting and attaining national transformation in Saudi Arabia.

Nature of Professional Identity

The professional identities of varying generations do not stand in isolation but overlap due to the shared experiences, cultural shifts, and technological advancements that blur the differences between them. Although the Millennials and Gen Z have discrete features, overlapping areas and collective values exist. According to Wandhe (2024) and Kwiecińska et al. (2023), the Millennials and Gen Z prioritize fair practices, innovativeness, reliability, order, peculiar development, individuality, inclusion, and diversity. They also strongly desire sustainable practices, mental health, and wellness, directly swaying their specialized identities. In addition, the social and cultural context, the digital divide, and work expectations all contribute to new dynamics that affect their professional life. Like their counterparts in other parts of the world, Gen Z and Millennials in Saudi Arabia are well-informed about technology due to their technological experience, which influences how they work and interact with others (Muthuswamy, 2023). Thus, the shared experiences cause an overlap between the professional identities of the two generations.

Generational Definitions within the Organizational Setting

Employees possess different features and beliefs based on the time they were brought up. In an organizational setting, Millennials, or Generation Y (Gen Y), refers to a cohort of employees born between 1981 and 1996 (Sahni, 2021). This group of employees has distinct traits such as excellent team orientation, technology-savviness, high esteem in their abilities, and preference for personal attention. Despite being less tolerant of stress, they have an extraordinary ability to multitask, transform their place of work, and create a new environment to suit their preferences. Contrarily, as illustrated in Table I, Gen Z comprises an employee cohort born between 1997 and the mid-2010s (Akram, 2024; Abed, 2024). They are the second-youngest generational cohort between Generation Alpha and Millennials. Within the job market, this generation demonstrates key features such as higher adaptability, tech-savviness, digital literacy, and significant problem-solving skills. As a result, unlike older generations, they view technology as an avenue for interacting with the world, even in the workplace.

Table I:

A synopsis of different generations between 1945 and 2025 that includes respective ages as of 2025

[Adapted from Parry & Urwin, P (2021) & McCrindle, M (2024)]

Categories	Years of Birth	Age in Years by 2025
Generation Beta	2025-2039	Newborn
Generation Alpha	2010-2024	01 – 15 yrs
Generation Z	1995-2009	16 – 30 yrs
Generation Y (Millennials)	1980-1994	31 – 45 yrs
Generation X	1965-1979	46 – 60 yrs
Generation Baby Boomers	1945-1964	61 – 80 yrs

Organizational Profiles of Millennial and Gen Z Make-Up

Organizations with a higher percentage of Millennials tend to adopt cultures of voice, where employers listen to employees, facilitate the sharing of ideas, and encourage innovation. This cohort of employees values supervisors who depend on them to

implement business duties, make them feel part of the company, and give them essential assignments (Rahman & Parvin, 2023). Millennials understand the importance of equality and diversity, making many organizations maintain a friendly culture and develop policies against discrimination. Like Millennials, Gen Z prefers flexible work arrangements, supportive work culture, professional growth, and fair compensation (CXO Staff, 2024; Shaeri, 2023). As a result, the regional organizations are fostering an environment that resonates with the values of Millennials and Gen Z.

Importance of Considering the Zillennial Concept

Evidence on the Concept of Zillennial

The Zillennial generation, a term used to describe Millennials and Gen Z, has become an incredibly critical demographic in the business world. According to Suresh (2022), these generations continue to fill different organizational roles and lead in creating an employee profile of all the firms in the modern era. This cohort of generations comprises a talented workforce that can multitask and better understand technology. Indeed, Zillennials' behavior and values are a product of technological influence since they witnessed outstanding technological advancements and changes during their formative years (Fields, 2021). As a result, they value teamwork and activities that sanction creativity, a culture that supports flexibility and creates a sense of empowerment and autonomy.

At the workplace, Zillennials offer technological skills vital for corporate growth, bring about innovative and fresh thinking, and demonstrate a passion for learning. Zillennials' knowledge and skills enhance the organizational perceived value, which is the foundation of the organizational operations (Rahmayanti et al., 2021). Indeed, perceived value is the factor behind corporate success due to its effects on customer satisfaction and retention. Business stakeholders view this generation as an essential group of employees whose technical knowledge generates a wide range of benefits to the firm since it is not an innate skill found in older generations (Moffett et al., 2023). The availability of these skills and other values linked to these generations make them highly productive, energetic, and independent when undertaking their duties. Their commitment to exploring the potential of new technological advancement allows them to influence organizational operations and business processes (Luttrell & McGrath, 2021). Their confidence in underlying abilities has significantly contributed to the immense growth of this generation at different organizational levels.

The Fluidity of Interactions with Millennials

Rapid modernization and traditional values directly influence the interaction between Saudi Arabian Zillennials and other generations, including their relationship with cultural shifts, technology, and social norms. The Saudi Arabian 2030 economic vision, which triggered economic transformation and emphasized technology, entrepreneurship, and diversification, has made Zillennials important stakeholders in facilitating this shift (*Saudi Vision 2030, 2025*).

A key aspect of Vision 2030, the Health Sector Transformation Program, seeks to facilitate access to healthcare services, improve quality and efficiency of healthcare services, promote prevention of health risks, and enhance traffic safety (Health Sector Transformation Program, 2025). This program focuses on implementing digital health solutions and cutting-edge technologies, collaboration between public and private entities, and promoting health-conscious behaviors. The Zillennial generation can play a significant role in realizing this vision. As digital natives, they demonstrate proficiency in adopting and advocating for digital health tools such as telemedicine and health applications. Their entrepreneurial spirit aligns well with the program's goals of innovation and diversification in healthcare, while their cultural understanding helps integrate modern solutions with traditional values. Zillennials' emphasis on mental health aids in normalizing its incorporation into healthcare systems, supporting preventive care objectives. Their active presence on social media platforms amplifies health awareness initiatives, promoting healthier lifestyles and inclusiveness.

Millennials and Gen Z have incredible entrepreneurial skills that align with this vision. According to Luttrell and McGrath (2021), Zillennials have an enhanced ability to think outside the box in the workplace and embrace their entrepreneurial spirit at an early age. Other than following the traditional career paths, Zillennials embrace taking advantage of their entrepreneurial skills and technology to compete with existing firms. They also seek careers in technology, start-ups, and media, making them pursue careers in new sectors like innovation, entertainment, digital media, and tech. As a result, their uniqueness creates fluid interrelations with the past generations, who are used to conformist career trajectories.

In addition, they also establish positive relations with the older generations to ensure a balance between modernity and native values. Although they remain influential compared to Generation X (Gen X) regarding gender, freedom, and human rights, they also strive to adhere to cultural expectations and religious values. For instance, Ocktavia et al. (2024) note that Gen Z seeks to create a personal style by combining the latest fashion trends with Islamic values. Specifically, they use different styles, bold colors, and accessories to express their personality and identity through Muslim fashion. Although the older generations might possess

conservative views, Zillennials interact with them fluidly to navigate the delicate balance between embracing modernity and respecting traditional and religious values.

However, some managers and business shareholders tend to misinterpret Zillennials' values and intentions, leading to strained relationships. Despite being stereotyped as an entitled and overly dependent generation, Zillennials have positive qualities like confidence and optimism, allowing them to look for purpose and meaning above that found in material gain (Easton & Steyn, 2022). Using their skills, knowledge, and values, they diligently perform their duties, question the organizational leadership without fear, and take risks to bring change. Nevertheless, it causes a strained relationship with the members of the previous generations, like Baby Boomers and Gen X, who define them as more entitled to higher perks every time Zillennial fights for equal pay for similar work (Dameria et al., 2022). As a result, this caused a relationship conflict between the older generations and the digital generation in the workplace.

Influence of Mentoring in the Workplace

Workplace mentoring programs are strategic interventions to develop talent and ensure the acquisition of significant skills by the young workforce. Organizations with a young workforce adopt modern mentoring methods such as group, remote, reverse, and anonymous mentoring, which enhances talent management and fosters better intergenerational relationships at the workplace (Saxena, 2023). The mentorship programs enhance employees' adaptation to emerging trends, embrace new technologies, and update knowledge. According to Browne (2021), reverse mentoring closes the generational gap in the workplace and the differences in social values, expertise, and understanding between the generations. Through mentorship programs, different generations can exchange insights, which benefits knowledge-based organizations. For corporate frontrunners with generative learning instincts, reverse mentorship builds a private learning space to replicate, absorb, and test ideas without external intrusion. Mentorship generates a wide range of personal, collective, and organizational benefits.

Moreover, workplace mentoring programs help improve organizational information and technology skills and boost employee's confidence and motivation. The growth of the Zillennial workforce has enhanced the integration of technology in mentorship, giving rise to new approaches like virtual mentorship, e-mentoring, and AI-driven mentoring systems. According to Choudhary et al. (2024), these modern techniques facilitate enhanced interaction between the mentees and mentors regarding geographical locations, logistical barriers, or time zones and foster flexibility. The integration triggers asynchronous communication, personalized experiences, increased scalability, and the ability to track mentees' progress over time. The need to mentor Zillennials has led to widespread technology adoption to ensure shorter feedback cycles, higher flexibility, and improved interactions.

Availability of Empirical Research on Generational Categories

Despite the widespread acceptance of the characteristics of different generations and their unique features and abilities stemming from different experiences, there is a lack of scientific validation or rigorous empirical research about these concepts. Although classified as Baby Boomers, Millennials, Gen Z, and Zillennials, there is little solid empirical evidence supporting the generationally-based differences. According to Rudolph et al. (2020), although generational classification is very popular, there is no clear empirical proof or theory explaining why such discrepancies should exist. Indeed, despite the ubiquity, the existing literature argues that all the attention given to the generations and generational differences is "much ado about nothing". Indeed, according to a 2020 consensus published by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, the categorization of employees into generational labels like Millennials, Gen Z, and Baby Boomers to define their behaviors and needs lacks scientific backing and should not influence workplace decisions (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020). That is to say, there are many questions surrounding the theoretical assumptions that support generational research. There is little empirical research and theoretical basis for the generational classification.

Additionally, there are many discrepancies in the available studies about generational differences. Parry and Urwin (2021) note that the available studies lack consistency in the values and characteristics linked to generational categories and cut-off points. This critique relies on the inability of these studies to empirically distinguish age, the period, age, and generational effects of different cohorts. Regardless of the increased concerns, however, there is still persistent use of generational labels such as Generation Alpha, Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X to define people born in a specific period and their behaviors and attitudes.

However, the limited scientific and theoretical evidence does not diminish the influence of these definitions in different spheres like organizational design, marketing, branding, and corporate culture. Arslan et al. (2022) note that generational differences in organizations bring about diversity in perspectives, directly influencing strategic, team, and operational management dynamics. Generational classification also impacts the understanding of consumer behavior and demographic trends. Social media platforms have been leading in promoting the acceptance of the social classification of generations and consideration within the organizational context. They quickly spread information about the broad categorization of people based on their time of birth.

Hence, despite lacking scientific proof, social media platforms produce visually appealing content that amplifies generational categories.

Generational Categorization and Potential Bias

Generational categorization promotes broad generalization of people based on their time of birth, which increases the risk of bias as they overlook the cohort's diverse and nuanced experiences. By evaluating Millennials' autonomy, teamwork, security, and flexibility, Pastorelli (2022) concluded that there is a more significant bias in the current perceptions of generations. Generational categorization generates stereotypes and prejudices in organizational processes like recruitment and management. For instance, while exploring the impact of generational categorization in human resource management, Parry and Urwin (2021) found that the characteristics ascribed to different generations could lead to stereotypical decisions. Using generational beliefs as heuristics results in decisions potentially based on the stereotypical understanding of a specific generation's attitudes, values, and expectations other than actual features. In the context of multidimensional teams, the dynamics and perceived features of these generational cohorts foster stereotypes and biases, potentially resulting in an affective conflict characterized by emotional discord, tension, and personal animosity (Wang & Duan, 2025). Generational adversity gives rise to out-group and in-group dynamics, potentially leading to unfairness and conflicts. Therefore, although the modern focus is on diversity, equality, and inclusivity, the generational approach is a step backward as it promotes inequality and exclusivity.

Dividing generations based on their birth year fails to account for intersectionality, which acknowledges the diverse aspects of personal identity. These categorizations fail to recognize that people's unique experiences influence their values and personality. Every person in each generation experiences often overlooked categories like occupational status, age, educational access, and phenotype, which affect their experiences, perceptions, and ways of approaching the world (Council et al., 2020). Therefore, excluding intersectionality across generations could negatively influence people's drive to promote equality, diversity, and inclusivity.

Impact of Cultural Differences on Generations

Global, regional, and local cultures significantly shape generations' values, experiences, and behaviors. Although Millennials and Gen Z might share similar experiences due to global trends, the specific cultural context of a generation influences their behavior differently across the world. While exploring traveling behaviors among Millennials, Pérez-Tapia et al. (2022) found significant differences between their features, a product of cultural differences. According to this study review, despite being open to different cultures and technologically intelligent, Zillennials presented different personality traits and values as a result of cultural influence. The various cultural contexts influence how Millennials and Gen Z view work ethics, authority, collaboration, and communication. Van Rossem (2018) also argues that cultural and regional differences shape a person's value system and how they behave in the workplace. People's experience with social and historical events in their respective cultures influence their life perspectives. Hence, the regional differences are evident in how staff relate with their managers and coworkers, expectations on work-life balance, and career progression.

For example, Saudi Arabian cultural values make Millennials and Gen Z in the region different from those in individualistic cultures. As collectivist cultures with strict adherence to traditional norms and Islamic values, Millennials and Gen Z have unique features that differentiate them from employees of the same generational cohort in other countries. For instance, due to cultural values that stress the importance of family, Millennials and Gen Z in Saudi Arabia have to ensure the well-being of their families while also pursuing personal growth (Rahaimy, 2024). The family values also guide this generation's career choices and performance. The local culture directly influences Zillennials' values and beliefs, making them more loyal to their superiors, demonstrating deference to authority and seniority, and working organizationally. While talking to news reporters, Layan, a 21-year-old student, argued that "As much as I want to pursue something unique, like graphic design, I still have to consider my family's expectations" (Rahaimy, 2024, para.4). They strive to promote their professional identities and values while also maintaining their heritage.

Although they belong to the same generational cohort, Gen Z and Gen Y in countries with individualistic cultures tend to show different values and beliefs. Pérez-Tapia et al. (2022) define national and regional culture as a substantial force influencing individual behavior and beliefs. Culture, which comprises shared values, beliefs, and norms, helps differentiate one group. Western Zillennials focus more on personal achievement, identity, and independence than the collective groups (Reisenwitz, 2021). Indeed, they focus more on career advancement, personal goals, and interests. These features make them more likely to pursue careers that meet their interests and passions other than familial or societal expectations. Besides, they are more assertive, practice open communication with their superiors, and question authority without fear. The differences in values and behavior of Gen Z and Millennials in collectivistic and individualistic cultures demonstrate the influence of culture on personal traits and beliefs.

Generational Differences

Despite the lack of scientific and theoretical proof, significant differences exist between people of different ages, influenced by societal and cultural factors. There is a clear generational shift in how Gen Z, Millennials, and Zillennials approach work and life. Gabrielova and Buchko (2021) note that organizations are more likely to experience generational conflicts as people from different generations have different attitudes toward authority, values, and behavior. Besides, these generational cohorts lack an understanding of the generational differences, which directly influence working relationships and communication patterns. Indeed, the changes are even more intense in the case of national transformations like the 2030 Saudi Arabian vision that seeks to modernize society and the local economy. The vision, launched in 2016, brought about a story of transformation rooted in the country's strategic advantages and cultural heritage to attain an innovative and diversified economy (Saudi Vision 2030, 2025). Zillennials are, therefore, navigating the rapidly dynamic changing landscape that will influence their roles and identities in the country's future.

Notably, the provisions and objectives of Vision 2030 align with Zillennials' knowledge, skills, and abilities. Unlike the previous generations, which have limited technological understanding and skills, Millennials and Gen Z have an enhanced sense of technological engagement. They also understand the importance of justice, equality, and cultural values and beliefs. Saudi Arabian Millennials and Gen Z have a greater understanding of technology and innovation, which places them at the forefront of the country's effort to attain a rapidly growing technological ecosystem. Growing during technological evolution has made Zillennials naturally adaptable and tech-savvy, making them digitally literate (Akram, 2024). The values and beliefs of this generation closely align with the solid targets. Ultimately, Zillennials are using their skill, knowledge, and values to support the transformation journey of the Saudi Arabian markets. They blend their global experience and perspective with their cultural heritage to attain the vision.

Concluding Remarks - Importance of Strengthening Zillennial Leadership

As the young generations become deeply embedded in national sectors and business organizations, they will continue to lead in promoting regional and state growth and transformation. In the coming years, Zillennials will host three different events, the 2027 Asia Soccer Cup, the 2030 Riyadh Expo, and the FIFA World Cup in 2034, events that are of national importance to Saudi Arabia (AFC Congress, 2023; Saudi Arabia FIFA World Cup *2034:* Vision & Legacy, 2024). To successfully handle and manage these events, Zillennials need training to strengthen their leadership skills in critical areas. As leaders, the Zillennial generation shows different values, beliefs, attitudes, and professional aspirations than other generations. According to Gabrielova and Buchko (2021), Zillennial managers are flexible, collaborative, balanced, casual, and transparent. They take pride in their behaviors and decisions, have idealistic confidence, and have enhanced personal scrutiny. These features enable them to manage employees of these generational cohorts.

However, despite the presentation of these desirable leadership skills, Zillennials need to improve their leadership capabilities to lead and manage these high-profile national events. Managing national events requires reputational and public relations management, likely influencing the country's transition and attainment of Vision 2030. Zillennials must develop cross-cultural, diplomatic, multilingual, and public relations skills to manage the events effectively. Karimova et al. (2024) state that cross-cultural competence is vital in the modern interconnected world as it promotes acceptable, respectful, and appreciation of different traditions, customs, and perspectives. Although Millennials and Gen Z appreciate diversity, managing these events, which will have culturally diverse teams, requires them to enhance their skills and become culturally competent leaders. Attaining competence in leading culturally diverse groups, teams, and events will foster a global mindset and comprehensive understanding of the world among these young leaders.

Furthermore, Zillennials must strengthen their leadership skills to manage these events and attain the set goals effectively. Millennials and the subsequent generations need to understand the event's goals, mission, and rules. These leaders should also attain project management skills to manage the events' teams, budgets, and logistics while preparing for unseen challenges (Folarin, 2021). With their digital nativity, they must integrate technology into everyday operations to undertake different activities. By acquiring these skills, Millennial and Gen Z leaders can elevate their leadership and management of organizational and national events.

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