

Management Competencies, Career Attitudes, and Leadership Preferences among Generation Z: A Quantitative Study in Indian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examines management competencies, career attitudes, leadership preferences, and long-term life purpose orientations among Generation Z students in the Indian higher education context. It also explores whether demographic factors influence these dimensions and whether they are interrelated.

Methodology: A quantitative and exploratory research design was adopted. Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire from 478 students enrolled in intermediate, undergraduate, and postgraduate programs across India. Descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA and Chi-square tests were used for data analysis.

Findings: The results indicate that Generation Z students report generally high levels of management competencies, particularly in time management and coordination, while adaptability and balancing personal and academic responsibilities were comparatively lower. Selected career attitudes including work–life balance, financial independence, and career stability, differed significantly across schooling background. Family income and academic stream influenced specific management competencies and career attitudes. In terms of leadership, students showed a strong preference for transformational, servant, and autonomy-supportive leadership styles, whereas authoritarian leadership was least preferred. Leadership preferences were largely consistent across demographic groups; however, long-term life purpose orientations varied significantly with family income, highlighting the role of socio-economic background in shaping students' aspirations.

Practical Implications: The findings suggest that higher education institutions should place greater emphasis on developing adaptability, work–life balance skills, and collaborative competencies, while also considering students' diverse socio-economic backgrounds in employability and leadership development initiatives.

Originality: The study offers a student-centric and context-sensitive perspective by integrating management competencies, career attitudes, and leadership preferences within a single framework in the Indian higher education context.

Keywords: Generation Z, Management Competencies, Career Attitudes, Leadership Preferences, Higher Education.

Introduction

Generation Z moves from college to work life, higher education institutions play a crucial role in preparing them for workplace skills and professional challenges. Generally defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, Generation Z is now entering the workforce from higher

education in large numbers, making it important to understand how they are preparing for academic and professional roles. As they have grown up during rapid technological changes, economic uncertainty and changing social expectations, Generation Z is frequently considered as digitally skilled, adaptable, and entrepreneurial. However, existing research on Generation Z has mixed views, while several studies describe this cohort as entrepreneurial, adaptable, innovative, other studies shows that they prefer structure, stability and clear guidance particularly in learning and career contexts (Schroth, 2019). These different views suggest that broad assumptions about Generation Z may ignore important contextual and developmental factors that influence how they think and behave.

Most of the existing research focus on Generation Z as employees rather than as students, who are still developing management skills, goal setting and leadership preferences. These studies often investigate skills and career priorities separately, which makes it difficult to understand how they together affect student's readiness for work (Jackson, 2016). As a result, there is still limited understanding of how Generation Z students decide what management skills, long-term goals, and leadership styles matter most to them when they transition from college to work.

Management skills such as planning, coordination, decision-making, adaptability plays an important role in academic performance and employability of students. Similarly, goal orientation and long-term career priorities affect student's motivation, persistence, and career decisions, while leadership preferences show what kind of support, involvement, and guidance they expect in the workplace. Employers increasingly emphasize the importance of transferable skills, teamwork, and adaptability in graduates, highlighting the need to examine these competencies at the student stage (OECD, 2019; World Economic Forum, 2020). However, existing research looks at these areas in isolation, which gives incomplete understanding of these aspects among Generation Z students

To address these gaps, the present study adopts a quantitative and exploratory approach to understand how Generation Z students perceive management skills, career goals, leadership preferences, and long-term aspirations. It aims to identify common patterns, strengths and weaknesses and priority areas across these dimensions. The analysis also examines whether demographic factors have any influence on student's competencies and orientations. In doing so, this seeks to develop a clear, context-specific understanding of Generation Z students, which can help colleges and organizations design more effective employability and leadership development initiatives.

Literature Review

• Management Skills & Goal Orientation

Management related skills play a crucial role in shaping academic performance and employability among students. Previous research shows that skills like planning, organizing, goal-setting, self-control improve performance in school and work (Lock & Latham, 2002). However, these competencies are not constant among different cultures due to varied reasons like social orientation, motivation, power distance (Hofstede, 2001). And most of the studies on Gen Z are contradicting, as some identify them as independent and digital natives, while others suggests that they need clear structure and guidance to learn effectively (Aksakal & Ulucan, 2024). Despite these insights, much of the existing literature focuses on working populations and leaving behind empirical understanding of how management skills and goal orientations manifest among Generation Z students.

Gen Z possesses distinct knowledge, skills, and abilities compared to the previous generations shaped by early exposure to digital technologies, changing educational environments and social expectations (Young Social Innovators, 2025; Horton International, 2025). Existing research suggests that this Generation z values a range of management skills including foresight, fairness, teamwork, responsibility for mistakes, digital skills, strong communication, emotional intelligence, and empathy (Aksakal & Ulucan, 2024). Overall, these competencies highlight a preference for self-awareness, meaningful interpersonal interactions and ethical engagement, rather than depending on traditional hierarchical control.

Goal orientation is an important component of self-management among students. Goal setting can be defined as the process of achieving specific, measurable, challenging objectives within a defined timeline by leveraging ones individual knowledge, confidence and motivation (Eckhoff & Weiss, 2020). Meta-analytic studies in educational settings finds that student who set clear goals, monitor progress, manages time and breaks larger tasks into small have demonstrated significantly higher academic achievement (Locke & Latham, 2002; Zimmerman 2002). Recent empirical studies further

highlight the importance of structured goal setting environments for Generation Z learners. For example, A study conducted in Korea identified a positive correlation between structured study practice such as 'Study with me' videos and the higher levels of self-motivation and self-regulation among Generation Z students (Kim & Ryoo, 2024). Similarly, a study in New Zealand reports that well-structured goal setting practices significantly improved emotional well-being, enhanced productivity and better management of mental health challenges among young individuals (Penno et al., 2022). In addition, self-regulation and self-management are considered as important components of effective learning and job readiness. Self-regulated learners are able to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning processes, which directly supports their goal achievement and performance (Zimmerman, 2002; Pintrich, 2000). Studies have shown that students with greater self-discipline typically achieve higher grades, show increased motivation, and demonstrate more perseverance when facing difficult work (Zimmerman, 2002). For Generation Z, who operate in fast-changing and digital environments, these self-management skills are increasingly important for sustaining both academic success and long-term career development.

Overall, existing research highlights the importance of management-related skills and goal orientation in shaping student's academic performance as well as their personal development. However, most studies examine these dimensions either independently or within specific educational contexts. As a result, there is limited empirical understanding of how different management skills and goal priorities coexist and are comparatively valued among Generation Z students. This limitation provides the basis for the present study and is discussed further in the research gaps section.

- **Teamwork, Coordination, and Adaptability**

Team work and coordination are widely recognized as essential skills for effective performance in academic and professional settings. Teamwork is a dynamic and complex process in which individuals collaborate to achieve a common goal and it involves cooperation, communication and conflict resolution. Previous research suggests that team dynamics are shaped by both external factors, such as characteristics of an organization, training, contingency situations and internal factors like psychological safety and shared understanding among team members (Bisbey & Salas, 2019). Empirical studies in educational contexts indicate that team-work skill not only improves academic performance in students but also helps in personal development, social growth and freedom of expression (Toshkhodjayeva & Saitkulova, 2025). Although these findings are taken from educational settings, still they emphasized the foundational role of teamwork related skills across developmental stages.

Research by Surugiu et al. (2025) quantifies a subtle view of teamwork among Generation Z, finding that only about a third of Generation Z members see it as more effective, another third actually prefer independent work and the remaining group are adapting flexibly to both contexts. This tendency towards preferring autonomous work describe Generation Z often prefer to oversee their own projects and may be hesitant towards traditional forms of collaboration (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021). Generation Z is described as digitally fluent and comfortable working in technology-driven and remote work environments. This trait helped them to value open communication, inclusive teamwork which further enhances their willingness to participate in collective decision-making. However, the extent to which digital collaboration translates into effective interpersonal teamwork remains context-dependent and varies across educational and organizational settings.

Adaptability is another important managerial skill commonly attributed to Generation Z, given their exposure to rapid technological, social, and global changes. These exposure helped them to develop strong coping mechanisms and resilience at times of uncertainty, and to remain flexible, learn continuously, adjust their skills to meet workplace demands (Madhu, 2025). However, While companies often see adaptability as a way to quickly respond to immediate work demands through flexible roles, Generation Z perceives it as an opportunity to learn new skills, explore different roles and grow over time. This difference can sometimes leads to workplace misunderstandings, even though Generation Z inherently possesses strong adaptability in dynamic environments.

From an employability perspective, management skills such as teamwork, adaptability planning, and self-regulation are widely recognized as critical for workplace readiness. Employers increasingly expect graduates to demonstrate not only technical knowledge but also transferable skills such as problem-solving, collaboration and adaptability to change (Jackson, 2016; Finch et al., 2013). In the context of higher education, these competencies are viewed as essential for supporting student's

transition from academic life to professional roles (Yorke, 2006). This highlights the importance of examining how Generation Z students develop and prioritize these skills before entering the workforce.

- **Leadership Preferences and Expectations of Generation Z**

Leadership preferences reflect the type of guidance, support and interaction that individuals expect from leaders in academic and professional settings. Unlike traditional leadership research, which primarily focuses on the traits and behaviors of those in leadership positions, recent studies have increasingly emphasized follower's expectations and preferences particularly among younger generations (Glikson & Woolley, 2020). Understanding these preferences is especially important for Generation Z, as this cohort is entering the workforce with distinct values shaped by social change, digitalization and evolving work cultures.

Existing research suggests that Generation Z tends to favor leadership styles that are supportive, transparent and inclusive rather than strictly authoritarian approaches. Studies show that Gen Z employees and students value leaders who encourage participation, provide constructive feedback and demonstrate empathy and ethical behavior (Schroth, 2019; Twenge, 2020). This aligns with broader shifts in organizational leadership toward transformational, participative, servant and people-oriented leadership styles.

In addition, Generation Z's strong exposure to digital technologies has influenced their expectations regarding communication and decision-making processes. They tend to prefer leaders who are open to innovation, honest, comfortable with technology and willing to involve team members in problem-solving and idea generation (Glikson & Woolley, 2020). Such preferences reflect their comfort with collaborative and technology-enabled work environments as well as their desire for meaningful engagement rather than top-down control.

However, most of the existing literature on leadership preferences focuses on employees who are already part of organizations with relatively limited attention given to students who are still preparing to enter the workforce. Since students are in a formative stage of developing their professional values and expectations, their leadership preferences may differ from those of experienced employees and may also vary based on educational and socio-economic contexts. There is scanty empirical evidence, particularly in the Indian higher education context, that systematically examines leadership preferences and expectations among Generation Z students before they enter professional roles.

Therefore, examining leadership preferences among Generation Z students alongside management competencies and career orientations is important for developing a more comprehensive understanding of their workplace expectations. Such insights can help educational institutions and organizations design leadership development initiatives and work environments that better align with the values and expectations of the emerging workforce.

Overall, the reviewed literature highlights the importance of management competencies, goal orientation, teamwork, adaptability and leadership preferences in shaping student's academic and career development. However, much of the existing research either focuses on working professionals or examines these dimensions in isolation, with limited attention to students who are still in the process of preparing for their professional lives. Moreover, there is relatively limited empirical evidence from the Indian higher education context that integrates these constructs within a single framework. This underscores the need for a comprehensive, student-centric research study that examines management competencies, career orientations and leadership preferences together, which forms the basis of the present study.

Scope

The scope of the present study is limited to examining management competencies, career attitudes, and leadership preferences among Generation Z students in India. The study focuses on students who are currently pursuing intermediate, undergraduate, and postgraduate education across different academic streams.

The study specifically covers key dimensions such as planning, coordination, decision-making, adaptability, goal orientation, long-term career priorities, and leadership style preferences. It also considers selected demographic variables, including age, gender, education level, academic stream, schooling background, and family income level, to understand their influence on students' competencies and orientations. The scope of the study is confined to student's self-reported

perceptions collected at a single point in time. The findings are intended to provide insights into students' preparedness for future work environments and leadership expectations, within the context of higher education in India.

Research Gaps

- **Limited student-centric research on Generation Z workplace readiness:** Existing research on Generation Z mostly focuses on employees who are already part of the workforce examining their engagement, expectations and performance in organizational settings. However there is limited empirical research that examines Generation Z from the student perspective particularly during the transition from academic to professional roles. As a result there is a lack of understanding of how management competencies, career goals and leadership expectations develop before workforce entry.
- **Very few studies on Integrated Analysis:** Most existing studies examine management skills, career aspirations or leadership preferences often in isolation. However these dimensions are closely interconnected in shaping students readiness for work. There is limited empirical research that integrates management competencies, goal orientation, and leadership preferences within a single framework among Generation Z students.
- **Scanty studies that explicitly examine the competencies among different age groups:** Studies frequently generalize Generation Z treating their competencies and career orientations as stable. However, students are in a developmental stage where management skills, goals and leadership expectations are still evolving. There is limited research that explicitly examines how these competencies vary across age groups within Generation Z, particularly among students.
- **Neglect of Socio-Economic and Educational Background:** Many studies on Generation Z emphasize generational characteristics while overlooking the influence of socio-economic and educational background. However factors such as family income, schooling background and education can significantly shape students competencies and expectations. There is limited empirical evidence examining how contextual and demographic factors influence management competencies and leadership preferences among Generation Z students.
- **Lack of empirical evidence on leadership expectations before employment:** Leadership research traditionally focuses on leadership styles of managers and leaders within organizations. However, there is limited empirical research examining leadership preferences and expectations among Generation Z students who have not yet entered the workforce. Understanding these expectations is critical for relooking leadership styles.
- **Limited quantitative evidence from the Indian higher education context:** A significant portion of Generation Z research is conducted in western contexts which differ in socio-economic structure and educational systems. However there is limited large-sample quantitative research from India examining Generation Z students competencies, career priorities, and leadership expectations. This creates a contextual gap in understanding workplace readiness in developing economies like India.

Objectives

- To study the perceived levels of **management competencies** among Generation Z students.
- *To analyze goal orientation and long-term career priorities of Generation Z students*
- To examine whether selected demographic factors (family income and education stream) influence management competencies and career attitudes among Generation Z students.
- To explore the **leadership preferences** and long-term life purpose orientations of Generation Z students for future workplace environments.
- **To examine the interrelationship between management competencies, career attitudes, and leadership preferences among Generation Z students.**

Hypotheses

- H1: There are statistically significant differences in perceived management competencies among Generation Z students across selected demographic variables

- H2: There are statistically significant differences in career attitudes and long-term career priorities of Generation Z students across schooling background.
- H3: There is a statistically significant association between academic stream type and family income level with management competencies and career attitudes among Generation Z students.
- H4: Leadership preferences and long-term life purpose orientations of Generation Z students differ significantly across selected demographic variables.
- H5: Leadership style preferences are significantly associated with management competencies and career attitudes among Generation Z students.

Research Methodology

• Data Collection and Sample

Data for the present study were collected using a structured online questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The survey instrument included items measuring management competencies, career attitudes and leadership preferences along with questions related to demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education level, academic stream, schooling background, and family income level.

The questionnaire was distributed online through academic networks, student groups and social media platforms to reach Generation Z students from different parts of India. Participation was voluntary and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire.

A total of 562 responses were initially received. After screening the data for incomplete, inconsistent, and invalid responses, 478 usable responses were retained for final analysis. The collected data were coded and analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques to address the objectives of the study.

• Sampling Technique

The study employed a non-probability convenience sampling technique to collect data from Generation Z students across different parts of India. This approach was adopted due to the accessibility of respondents through online platforms and academic networks. The survey link was shared with students enrolled in intermediate, undergraduate and postgraduate programs, and participants were encouraged to forward the questionnaire to their peers, which also reflects elements of snowball sampling.

Although this sampling method does not allow for full randomization, it is commonly used in educational and behavioral research where the target population is geographically dispersed. This approach enabled the researcher to obtain a diverse and sufficiently large sample within the available time and resource constraints. The final sample of 478 valid responses was considered adequate for the statistical analyses conducted in this study.

Results

• Demographic Characteristics

The sample predominantly comprised students aged 18–21 years (51.3%) and 22–25 years (42.7%). Female respondents constituted 56.5% of the sample and males accounted for 43.1%. In terms of education level, the majority were undergraduate (47.3%) and postgraduate students (46.0%), with a small proportion from intermediate and other categories. Most respondents were from management and engineering streams (60.3%), followed by non-professional streams (39.5%). With respect to schooling background, 44.6% were from urban areas, 34.1% from rural areas, and 21.3% from semi-urban areas. In terms of family income, the majority of respondents (71.3%) reported a family income of less than ₹5 lakhs per annum, followed by ₹5–10 lakhs (15.3%), ₹10–15 lakhs (7.5%), ₹15–20 lakhs (4.2%), and above ₹20 lakhs (1.7%).

• Descriptive Statistics of Management Competencies among Generation Z Students (N = 478)

Descriptive statistics were computed to examine the overall levels of management competencies among Generation Z students. Measures of central tendency, dispersion, and

distribution characteristics were analyzed to understand students perceived strengths and weaknesses and to assess the suitability of the data for further inferential analysis.

Management Competency	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max	Skewness (SE)	Kurtosis (SE)
Sets clear goals before starting any task	3.95	4	0.83	1	5	-0.87 (0.11)	1.51 (0.22)
Breaks large tasks into smaller, manageable steps	3.91	4	0.82	1	5	-0.85 (0.11)	1.28 (0.22)
Keeps study/work materials and schedules well-organized	3.9	4	0.79	1	5	-0.68 (0.11)	0.88 (0.22)
Gives importance to time management	4.14	4	0.81	1	5	-1.22 (0.11)	2.48 (0.22)
Believes coordination with others to achieve group tasks	4.11	4	0.77	1	5	-1.22 (0.11)	2.99 (0.22)
Prefers working in teams and sharing responsibilities	3.96	4	0.82	1	5	-0.99 (0.11)	1.78 (0.22)
Evaluates different options before making decisions	4.01	4	0.79	1	5	-0.90 (0.11)	1.73 (0.22)
Stays calm and finds solutions in challenging situations	4.01	4	0.8	1	5	-0.74 (0.11)	0.76 (0.22)
Adapts quickly when plans or situations change	3.73	4	0.82	1	5	-0.64 (0.11)	0.68 (0.22)
Balances personal interests with academic/work responsibilities effectively	3.75	4	0.87	1	5	-0.77 (0.11)	0.89 (0.22)

Table 8.2 shows the mean scores for management competencies. The scores ranging from 3.73 to 4.14 indicate a generally high level of perceived competence among Generation Z students. The highest-rated competencies were time management and coordination with others. In contrast, adaptability to change and balancing personal interests with responsibilities were rated lower. The skewness and kurtosis values were within standard limits, confirming the data was suitable for parametric tests like independent samples t-tests and ANOVA.

H1: There are statistically significant differences in perceived management competencies among Generation Z students across selected demographic variables

Results of Independent Sample t-test and One-Way ANOVA for Management Competencies across Demographic Variables

Competency	Gender (t-test)	Age	Family	Education	Schooling Background
			Income		
Set clear goals	0.243	0.668	0.29	0.773	0.542
Break large tasks	0.412	0.313	0.056	0.161	0.041
Keeps materials organized	0.181	0.07	0.431	0.095	0.369
Gives importance to time management	0.254	0.274	0.073	0.16	0.84
Believes coordination with others	0.031	0.178	0.143	0.093	0.189
Prefers working in teams	0.55	0.168	0.012	0.061	0.169
Evaluates options before decisions	0.246	0.472	0.229	0.116	0.047
Stays calm in challenges	0.176	0.521	0.818	0.195	0.948

Adapts quickly to change	0.315	0.512	0.546	0.654	0.057
Balances personal interests	0.765	0.171	0.024	0.068	0.634

Table 8.2.1 presents the results of independent sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA examining differences in management competencies across selected demographic variables.

The results indicate that management competencies among Generation Z students are largely similar across age, education level and schooling background, reflecting a generally consistent competency profile. However, statistically significant differences were observed for a few specific competencies across certain demographic variables. Gender differences were found in beliefs related to coordination with others, while family income level influenced preferences for teamwork and the ability to balance personal interests with academic or work responsibilities. In addition, schooling background was associated with differences in task breakdown and decision-making approaches. These findings suggest that although Generation Z students share common management strengths, selected competencies are shaped by contextual and socio-economic factors.

H2: There are statistically significant differences in career attitudes and long-term career priorities of Generation Z students across schooling background.

One-way ANOVA (Welch's) was conducted to examine differences in career attitudes and long-term career priorities of Generation Z students based on schooling background. The results showed that schooling background did not significantly influence having well-defined career goals ($F = 0.774$, $p = 0.462$), interest in entrepreneurship ($F = 0.339$, $p = 0.713$), desire to create social or environmental impact through work ($F = 2.631$, $p = 0.074$) or long-term life purpose ($F = 0.192$, $p = 0.825$).

However, statistically significant differences were observed for valuing work-life balance ($F = 3.168$, $p = 0.044$), prioritization of financial independence ($F = 8.759$, $p < .001$), and preference for career stability and security ($F = 7.909$, $p < .001$). These findings indicate that while Generation Z students share similar long-term aspirations regardless of schooling background, specific career priorities are significantly shaped by their schooling experiences.

H3: There is a statistically significant association between academic stream type and family income level with management competencies and career attitudes among Generation Z students.

To analyze how selected demographic factors influence management competencies and career attitudes among Generation Z students, Chi-square tests of independence were conducted by examining the associations between academic stream type (professional vs. non-professional) and family income level with managerial and career-related variables. Post-hoc analysis was performed using standardized residuals wherever statistically significant associations were observed.

Academic Stream

The Chi-square analysis revealed that most managerial competencies and career attitudes did not differ significantly across academic stream type ($p > .05$) indicating similar orientations among students from professional and non-professional backgrounds. However, statistically significant associations were identified for selected career-related variables.

A significant association was observed between academic stream and having well-defined career goals ($\chi^2(4) = 9.66$, $p = .047$). Post-hoc analysis indicated that students from professional streams were over-represented in the neutral response category, whereas students from non-professional streams were over-represented in the strongly agree category, suggesting greater expressed clarity regarding career goals among non-professional stream students.

In addition, academic stream was significantly associated with preference for stability and security in career choices ($\chi^2(4) = 10.00$, $p = .040$). Post-hoc examination revealed that professional stream students were over-represented in the strongly agree category, while non-professional stream students were more frequently represented in the agree category, indicating a stronger inclination toward career stability among professional stream students. No statistically significant association was found between academic stream and work-life balance orientation, financial independence, entrepreneurial interest, social or environmental impact orientation or primary long-term life purpose ($p > .05$).

Family Income Level

Chi-square analysis further demonstrated that family income level was significantly associated with selected managerial competencies, while no significant associations were observed for most other competencies and career attitude variables.

A significant association was found between family income level and keeping study/work materials and schedules well-organized ($\chi^2(16) = 30.9, p = .014$). Post-hoc analysis showed that students from lower income groups (less than 5L) were over-represented in the agree category, whereas students from higher income groups (above 20L) were over-represented in neutral and strongly disagree categories.

Family income level also showed a strong association with belief in coordination with others to achieve group tasks ($\chi^2(16) = 41.3, p < .001$). Post-hoc results indicated that students from middle income groups (10L–15L) were over-represented in the strongly agree category, while students from higher income groups were over-represented in disagreement categories.

Similarly, a significant association was observed between family income level and preference for working in teams and sharing responsibilities ($\chi^2(16) = 49.8, p < .001$). Post-hoc analysis revealed that students from lower income backgrounds were more likely to agree with teamwork and shared responsibility, whereas students from higher income groups were more frequently represented in neutral or disagreement categories.

H4: Leadership preferences and long-term life purpose orientations of Generation Z students differ significantly across selected demographic variables.

Descriptive analysis indicated that Generation Z students showed a strong preference for transformational leadership (inspires a vision and motivates change; 34.9%), followed by servant leadership (shows care, empathy, and a people-first approach; 19.0%) and laissez-faire leadership (provides freedom with minimal direction; 13.8%). In contrast, autocratic leadership (authority-driven and strictly directive) was the least preferred style (3.3%). Overall, these findings suggest a clear inclination among Generation Z students toward supportive, participative, and autonomy-oriented leadership approaches rather than control-based or authoritarian styles.

With respect to long-term life purpose, the most frequently reported goals were achieving happiness and work–life balance (22.2%) and building wealth or financial security (22.2%), followed by starting and growing a business (13.4%) and continuous learning and self-improvement (12.3%). Goals related to social impact (3.3%) and spiritual growth (6.9%) were comparatively less prioritized, suggesting a stronger emphasis on personal well-being, financial stability, and career development among the respondents.

Chi-square tests were conducted to examine whether leadership preferences and life purpose orientations of Generation Z students differed across demographic factors. The results indicated that family income level had a significant influence on student's long-term life purpose, whereas leadership style preferences did not vary significantly across demographic groups.

A significant relationship was found between students' family income and their primary long-term goal or life purpose ($\chi^2(40) = 90.6, p < .001$). Post-hoc comparisons revealed distinct patterns: lower-income students more frequently prioritized building wealth and financial security (less than 5L), middle-income students (5L–10L) emphasized social impact and learning, and higher-income students focused more on happiness, work–life balance and career advancement. These results suggest that socioeconomic background meaningfully shapes long-term goal orientation.

In contrast, no statistically significant association **was observed between** family income level and leadership style preference ($p = .059$), suggesting that preferred leadership styles among Generation Z students remain relatively consistent regardless of socioeconomic background. Similarly, leadership preferences did not differ significantly across other demographic variables such as age, gender, education, academic stream, or schooling background ($p > .05$). Ultimately, the results suggest that while Gen Z's views on leadership are consistent, their life purposes are clearly influenced by family income underscoring how socioeconomic conditions affect long-term goal formation.

H5: Leadership style preferences are significantly associated with management competencies and career attitudes among Generation Z students.

Chi-square analysis was conducted to examine the association between leadership style preferences and selected management competencies as well as career attitudes among Generation Z students. The results indicated that leadership style preference did not show a statistically significant association with any of the examined management competencies ($p > .05$).

Similarly, no significant association was observed between leadership style preferences and career attitude variables, including preferences for work–life balance, financial independence, career stability, entrepreneurship, and long-term life goals ($p > .05$). This indicates that, although Generation Z students demonstrate distinct patterns in management skills and career orientations, these factors do not appear to directly influence their preferred leadership styles at the student stage.

Since leadership preference was measured as a categorical variable and management competencies and career attitudes were assessed using Likert-scale responses, chi-square tests of association were employed to examine the interrelationships among these variables. Correlation analysis was not used as leadership preference does not represent a continuous or ordinal scale.

Discussion

This study examined management competencies, goal orientation and leadership preferences among Generation Z students, with a focus on demographic differences. Overall, the findings suggest that Generation Z students report high levels of core management competencies, particularly in areas such as time management, coordination, and decision-making. This supports earlier research indicating that Gen Z students are confident in self-management and organizational skills, likely due to their exposure to structured education and digital environments (Aksakal & Ulucan, 2024; Zimmerman, 2002). However, comparatively lower scores for adaptability and balancing personal and academic or work responsibilities indicate that managing change and maintaining balance remain challenging areas for this cohort.

The analysis found that for most competencies, there were no significant differences based on age, gender, education level or academic major. This indicates a relatively uniform skill profile among Generation Z students, consistent with research highlighting how common generational experiences shape similar perceptions of abilities (Twenge, 2020). However, significant differences appeared for certain competencies particularly organization, coordination, and teamwork based on family income and type of schooling. Post hoc analysis revealed that students from lower-income backgrounds reported stronger organizational habits and a greater preference for teamwork, underscoring how socio-economic factors can influence collaborative and self-management skills.

In terms of goal orientation and career attitudes, the findings show that Generation Z students generally prioritize career growth, financial independence, and stability reflecting a pragmatic outlook in uncertain economic conditions (Schroth, 2019). Significant associations with schooling background and family income suggest that career priorities are shaped not only by generational identity but also by student's socio-economic and educational contexts, supporting earlier work on the contextual nature of career development (Jackson, 2016).

With regard to leadership preferences and life purpose orientations, the findings indicate a clear distinction between generational consistency and socio-economic influence. A significant association was observed between family income and student's long-term life goals, showing that socio-economic background shapes how Generation Z students define success and prioritize future aspirations, with lower-income students emphasizing financial security and higher-income students placing greater importance on well-being and career fulfilment. In contrast, leadership style preferences showed largely consistent patterns across demographic groups, suggesting a shared generational view of desirable leadership characterized by a preference for visionary, empathetic, and autonomy-supportive styles and a low preference for authoritarian approaches. At the same time, a significant relationship between career growth orientation and leadership style preference indicates that students who strongly prioritize career advancement tend to favor more visionary and change-oriented leadership styles, aligning with prior research (Glikson & Woolley, 2020; Schroth, 2019). Notably, these results suggest that while leadership expectations appear to be relatively stable within Generation Z, life goals and career priorities are more strongly shaped by socioeconomic context.

Overall, the findings emphasize that while Generation Z students share many common characteristics, their competencies, priorities, and expectations are also shaped by socio-economic and

educational contexts. This underscores the importance of adopting a student-centric and context-sensitive approach in higher education and early career development initiatives.

Conclusion

This study provides an integrated view of management competencies, goal orientation and leadership preferences among Generation Z students in the Indian higher education context. The findings indicate that students generally perceive themselves as competent in key management skills, while showing comparatively lower confidence in adaptability and in balancing personal and academic or work responsibilities.

Although many competencies and attitudes were consistent across demographic groups, significant differences were observed with respect to family income and schooling background, particularly in areas related to organization, teamwork, coordination and selected career priorities. These results highlight the continuing importance of socio-economic and educational contexts in shaping student's skills, values, and aspirations.

The study also shows that student's long-term life goals vary significantly across income groups, whereas leadership style preferences exhibit limited associations with competencies and career attitudes, suggesting that leadership expectations may still be forming at the student stage. Taken together, these findings contribute to the literature by offering a student-focused and context-sensitive understanding of Generation Z's readiness for the transition from college to work.

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that higher education institutions should place greater emphasis on developing adaptability, work-life balance skills and collaborative competencies taking their diverse socioeconomic backgrounds into account. Future research may build on this work through longitudinal and mixed-method approaches to better understand how these competencies, goals, and leadership preferences evolve as students enter the workforce.

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