

Exploring the Leadership Preference of Malaysian Generation Y Employees: A Conceptual Paper

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Abstract

Generation Y, individuals age 34 years and below are dominating the workforce in Malaysia today with nearly half of the labour force comprised of this generational cohort. They will be playing a vital role in the Malaysian labour market and will have unprecedented impact to the country's future economic growth. However, a dilemma confronting leaders today is the limited understanding when leading the Gen Y. This paper is not empirically based but merely conceptual in nature. It is aimed at presenting the preliminary work for a study. The concepts of leadership and the many theories that have evolved are examined. Review of past literature concerning the Gen Y and their leaders are deliberated. From the literature review, many missing parameters were discovered. Firstly, studies in Gen Y mostly covers motivation, values, behaviours, job satisfaction and organisational commitment but not on leadership preferences per se. In addition to that many of the studies conducted are in the Western perspectives and to accept the results entirely will be an over-generalisation. Lastly, the field of leadership is continuously evolving inspired by the current wants and needs. Thus this brings light to the intention of this study which is to explore the leadership preferences of Gen Y employees specifically looking at the local context. The conceptual framework proposed as the foundation of this study consists of the different leadership theories from early days of trait theory to the more contemporary transformational leadership theory. This conceptual framework will guide in the data collection process whereby a basic qualitative method is proposed as the most suitable approach for this study. It will be based on the interpretive or constructivist perspective where multiple realities and lived experiences of Gen Y concerning their leadership preferences will be uncovered through in depth interviews with the participants involved.

Keywords: leadership, Generation Y, Malaysian employees, qualitative method

1. Introduction

It has been about a decade now that we see the invasion of the Generation Y into the workforce worldwide and in Malaysia. Generation Y (Gen Y) – is also referred to as the internet or dot.com generation, millennial, generation next, echo boomers, generation net, and nexters (Broadbridge, Maxwell, & Ogden, 2007; Martin, 2005; Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008). Their entry into the workforce in large numbers has given them the power to reshape the rules of play at work. This phenomenon has ignited concerns from academics and practitioners alike, over the ramification this new generation may have on our 21st century workplaces. We have heard so much about the notorious reputation of Gen Y employees; whereby they are perceived to want flexibility and autonomy yet desire directive and frequent feedback from their leaders (Morton, 2002). Cash and rewards are their main motivating factor yet work-life balance and social contribution is key to a more satisfied job (De Han & Xikun Su, 2011; Ng & Lyons, 2010).

As highlighted by Downe, Loke, Ho and Taiwo (2012), these contrasts of characteristics of the Gen Y have led the managers in a state of irony. In view of this dilemma, leaders are finding it challenging to manage the Gen Y effectively. Organisational success is measured in many ways, but one key aspect of organisational success is effective leadership (Wagner, 2007). Effective leaders must understand the dynamics and the attributes of this Gen Y at the workplace in order to maximise their potentials. Employing effective leadership to attract, motivate

and retain employees with the right skills can minimise voluntary and unplanned turnover in the workplace. Moreover, understanding the Gen Y is critical to organisational leaders because this emergent cohort is expected to undertake major role within the marketplace in the next 30 to 40 years (Alch, 2001).

Since 2002, numerous studies on Gen Y have been conducted to understand their motivational factors at work in order to increase satisfaction thus improving retention. There is a wealth of empirical research and surveys focusing on what this new breed of employees really want - what makes them tick and keep them moving, in other words uncovering the desires and perceptions of Gen Y at the workplace. To name a few are research carried out by Morton, 2002; Harris, 2006; Broadbridge et al., 2007; Meier & Crocker, 2010; De Han & Xikun Su, 2011; Ng & Lyons, 2010 and surveys conducted by reputable consulting firms such as PwC, Accenture, HayGroup, Robert Half International and many more.

However, there seemed to be several gaps in the study of Gen Y. Firstly, albeit the plethora of empirical research of this generation, the findings are conflicting and incongruent—there are too many non-conclusive results which lead to more confusion. As stated by Deal, Altman and Rogelberg (2010), “the relative sparse empirical research published on Gen Y is confusing at best and contradictory at worst” (p. 191).

Far too little attention has been paid by researchers to understanding leadership expectations and preferences of Gen Y in specific. Moorthy (2014) has stated that many existing studies investigated on the leadership styles of managers, but there is a lack of evidence on the specific leadership preferences of Gen Y. As a matter of fact, this has been the common qualms and worries of current leaders in managing the Gen Y. Even though leadership research has advanced over the centuries, a great deal of knowledge remains to be discovered – “ a field (leadership) even more elusive than the origins of the universe” (Bass & Avilio, 1994). Thus, rather than constructing a comprehensive leadership theory that is general in application, leadership theorists need to delve into the specific contexts and phenomena (McElroy, 1982).

In addition, it should also be highlighted that studies on Gen Y is abundance in the Western literature, investigating on Western samples by Western scholars. The findings from these studies may not be applicable to our local context and accepting it will be an over-generalisation. Lee & Tay (2012) concluded that there are differences in characteristics between generations in Malaysia and the events that have shaped them if compared with the Western context. As to date, there is a lack of research conducted on Malaysian Gen Y specifically focusing on their leadership preferences. The closest was a study done by Moorthy (2014) looking at the leadership preferences among Gen Y in Malaysia empirically. However, the study had concluded and boxed Gen Y leadership preference into one of the leadership theories; i.e. in this case was transformational leadership. Whilst this may be true in that research context, we should not ignore other elements or leadership preferences that are present in the other leadership theories.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Generational Theory

A generation, or generational cohort, is a group born in the same defined period of years that have been exposed to similar societal and historical life events during critical stages of their formative development (Schaie, 1965). Strauss and Howe (1991) theorised that events in history help catalyze people into generations that occur every 40 to 45 years. This results in a total of three different generations in the workplace today, each with different personality. They are grouped according to their age and share historical and social experiences, behaviour and beliefs that are common to that time (Cole et al., 2011). The three generational cohorts (Rajan, 2007) are as depicted in Table 1 below:

Table 1. The three generations

Generational Cohort	Year of Birth
Baby Boomer	1946-1964
Generation X	1965-1979
Generation Y	1980-1999

Previous researchers have concluded that different generational cohorts have differences in many aspects especially attitude towards work (Cenamo & Gardner, 2008). Their differences are unique to each generational cohort with distinct sets of characteristics and preferences (Kupperschmidt, 2000). What could be derived from these findings was differences ignite conflicts. Twenge and Campbell (2008) had indicated that potential tensions

and conflicts among different generational cohorts could be a result of differing values, cognition, behaviours and the lack of understanding among each other.

2.1.1 Baby Boomer

The term “Baby Boomers” was coined from the western countries after the post second world war. There was a spike increase in the fertility rate in the United States following the end of the World War II. Born from 1946 to 1964 (Egri & Ralston, 2004; Rajan, 2007; Whitman, 2010), these Baby Boomers had to compete for jobs throughout their lives due to their large numbers (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). They are workaholics (Hall & Richter, 1990), loyal and believe in paying their dues. They would work their way to the top in return for promotions and status symbols (Kupperschmidt, 2000). They ‘live to work’ rather than ‘work to live’ (McNamara, 2005) and are advocates to the perception of without hard work there will be no success. Thus, Baby Boomers are driven to success and measure success materially. They tend to be optimistic and confident and values freedom of expression and social reforms (Eisner, 2003).

2.1.2 Generation X

The next generational cohort is Generation X (Gen X) who were born from 1965 to 1979 (Rajan, 2007). This generation grew up as ‘latch-key kids’, coming home from school to an empty house because their Baby Boomers parents are out working. As a result, they became more independent and able to fend for themselves. They value flexibility and work-life balance. Unlike their Baby Boomer parents who ‘live to work’, Gen X view work as a means to live comfortably. It doesn’t appeal to them to work as hard as their parents and they would go for a lower paying job as long as it provides work-life balance (Glass, 2007). They want to do meaningful work and want to be trusted to get the job done (Tulgan, 2000). They are loyal to themselves; preferring to work for themselves and they define success in their own terms. Thus, they do not have strong organizational loyalty values as held by their predecessors (Howe & Strauss, 1993) and will not allow their professional life to take precedence over their family life.

2.1.3 Generation Y

Similar to Baby Boomers, Generation Y (Gen Y) is commanding a lot of attention from the businesses and public institutions due to the sheer size of their population. They were born from 1980 to 1999 (Rajan, 2007), and is the youngest generation in the workplace. They grew up being micro-managed by their ‘helicopter’ parents; insisting them to take part in various activities from sports, music lessons, language classes and other skills development even at an early age. Gen Y also grew up with technology and social networking; and it has become so much a part of them that their lives depend fundamentally on the internet. This generational cohort is technologically savvy and at the same time highly educated (Hatfield 2002; Swift, 2001; Wallace, 1999) and this is partly due to having both parents who are working. They are considered to be lucky financially as they experience economic stability throughout their forming years. Most of them are well educated with at least a Diploma and Degree in colleges and universities.

As this generation has grown up in a fast changing world and having technological advances such as the Internet and smart phones, they not only have no qualms in embracing change but crave it (Martin, 2005). They seek challenge and are so used in multi tasking as how you see them work while listening to the music and replying messages on their smart phones all at the same time. They will leave an organisation if they feel taken advantage of or unchallenged. Generation Y may experience as many as 10 job changes during their professional career (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). If Generation Y lacks interest or are not maturing in their job, they will change organisations (Dulin, 2008).

The tendencies and preferences of Gen Y create a number of problems for organisations, with the most glaring issue is with regards to low levels of organisational commitment. There are also a lot of negative perceptions about this generation ranging from being narcissist, rating themselves high in terms of performance and perceive themselves as talented. Therefore, putting aside all these stereotypes, it is timely that we get to the root of all the perceptions and assumptions and really dwell into the experiences of Gen Y employees by seeking to understand and exploring their leadership preferences.

2.2 Leadership Paradigms

Bass (1990) stated, “The search for the one and only proper and true definition of leadership seems to be fruitless, since the appropriate choice of definition should depend on the methodological and substantive aspects of leadership in which one is interested” (p. 18). According to Burns (1978), leadership is the process of “inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations—the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations—of both leaders and followers” (p. 19). Thus, the establishment of an effective

leadership is complicated and it has evolved over the centuries influenced by many factors.

2.2.1 Trait Theory

Developed in the 1920s-1930s, this is one of the earliest leadership theories and the focus was on qualities and traits of an individual person. It is believed that people are not made but born with certain traits or characteristics that will allow them to lead. In other words, studies in this area had focused on what are some of the characteristics and traits that leaders need to possess to make them successful leaders.

After many years of research in finding the right traits for leaders, no consistent traits could be identified. Although some traits were quite similar, the results were generally inconclusive (Yukl, 2004). Some leaders might have possessed certain traits but the absence of them did not necessarily mean that the person was not a leader. Another limitation of the theory was that it did not take into consideration the many different circumstances faced by leaders nor the different types of individuals being led. It has been argued that, leaders may require a mixture of different leadership qualities to manage in different situations.

2.2.2 Behavioural Theory

Due to the limitations of the trait approach, in the 1950s there was a move by researchers in the field of leadership to refocus their efforts away from finding out 'who a leader was' to 'what leaders did' - an attempt to identify observable leadership behaviours (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003). Behavioural theory looked at how leaders behave which developed into different leadership styles. It was identified that leaders behaviour fall into two dimension i.e. one focused on the task and the other on the employee orientation. Researchers at Ohio State and Michigan Universities had carried out research that led to similar findings. They identified leaders who are task oriented, exhibit initiating structure behaviours such as focusing on planning, communicating and allocating tasks in efforts to getting the work done. On the other hand, employee oriented leaders, exhibit a considerate leadership style focusing on building good relationship, being attentive to employees' needs and concerns and encourage two-way communication (Northouse, 2004).

Another renowned study conducted in this behavioural approach was Blake and Mouton model of managerial behaviour called the Managerial Grid. The foundation of the model is quite similar to the Ohio State and Michigan Studies whereby, it looks at the two leadership behaviours: concern for production (overlaps with task orientation) and concern for people (overlaps with employee orientation). From here, the managerial grid was developed charting out five leadership styles depending on whether the leaders put an emphasis on production or people. The five leadership styles are, 'impoverished management', 'country club management', 'authority obedience management', 'organisation man management' and 'team management'. According to Blake and Mouton the most effective type of leadership behaviour is team management which has high concern for production and high concern for people.

However, it has been argued that there are more to having these two types of behaviours (i.e. concern for production or concern for people) and having high levels of both types of behaviour may not be necessary as it also depends on the follower and/or situational factors. Thus, behavioural approach gives little guidance as to what constitutes effective leadership in different situations.

2.2.3 Contingency Theory

Many leadership researchers today concluded that there is no one style of leadership that is right for managers under all circumstances. Looking at the downside of the previous leadership approaches, researchers have continued to evolve and contingency-situational theories were developed to indicate that style to be used is contingent upon such factors as the situation, the people, the task, the organisation, and other environmental variables. This has also reiterated by Yukl (2004) which noted that the effectiveness of a leader's behaviour could be dependent upon a number of several factors.

According to Fiedler (1967) there is no single best way for managers to lead. Situations will create different leadership style requirements for a manager. The solution to a managerial situation is contingent on the factors that impinge on the situation. For example, in a highly routine (mechanistic) environment where repetitive tasks are the norm, a relatively directive leadership style may result in the best performance, however, in a dynamic environment a more flexible, participative style may be required. The three situations Fiedler observed that would decide on the type of leadership styles to be employed are; leader-member relations, task structure and position power.

Hersey and Blanchard (1982) developed a model that suggests the developmental levels of subordinates, plays the greatest role in determining which leadership styles (leader behaviours) are most appropriate. This theory is based on the amount of direction (task behaviour) and socio-emotional support (relationship behaviour) a leader

must provide given the situation and the “level of maturity” of the followers. Thus, the subordinates’ level of readiness to assume greater responsibility and their developmental level determine the style of leadership to be employed. As a result, four leadership styles were introduced; directing, coaching, supporting and delegating.

However there were some criticisms with the contingency theories where it relates to subjectivity, diversity of the situations, and prescription of actions (Yoosuf, 2005). The theories can be quite complex and this may be of limited practical value in ensuring managers become effective leaders (Yukl, 2004). Despite all the limitations the past research conducted had somehow strengthened the leadership knowledge base.

2.2.4 Transactional – Transformational Theory

Many leaders in organisations today are practicing transactional leadership. Covey (1992) had clearly described transactional leaders as those who develop employees so as to get a job done; preoccupied with power and position, politics and perks; bogged down with daily affairs; short-term and hard data orientated; focused only on tactical issues; and supports structures and systems in ensuring maximum efficiency and guaranteed short-term profits.

This type of leadership practiced management by exception and contingent reward. Management by exception is a leadership style that occurs on an as need basis whereby, leaders will only intervene when the need arise. Leaders who practice management by exception trust employees will complete tasks and do not encourage subordinates to go beyond expected outcomes (Sarros & Santora, 2001). As for contingent reward, it is exchange driven with an emphasis on goal achievement. In this context, followers who accomplished goals will be rewarded based on the task established by their leaders (Bass, 1990).

Bass and Avolio (1994) had suggested that transactional leadership is the precursor for transformational leadership. They had theorised that transformational leaders help “followers transcend their own immediate self-interests, increase their awareness of the larger issues, and shift the goals away from personal safety and security toward achievement and self-actualisation” (p. 652). As transactional leaders are focused on the day-to-day issues i.e. short-term; transformational leaders are more far-sighted and looks at achieving long term goals.

In other words, transformational leaders are futuristic, intuitive, creative, risk-takers and forward thinking. They have a vision and a sense of mission; they have respect, confidence, and loyalty of the group members. Transformational leaders transform the personal values of followers to support the vision and goals of the organization by fostering an environment where relationships are formed and by establishing a climate of trust where visions are shared (Stone & Patterson, 2005). Transformational leadership is by far the most powerful leadership approaches among all others as it is the most current and therefore is seen to be more relevant to be practiced in the 21st century. However, much can still be explored in the field of leadership and the evolution of leadership theories will still continue depending on the current and future environment.

2.3 Past Research on Generation Y and Leadership

Many findings from western scholars have generalised on the following conclusion about Gen Y: - Raised around computers and technology, workers from generation Y are trained to multitask, and thus organisational leaders must capitalise on their technological skills and the ability to multitask (Kapetanovic, 2010). Gen Y tends to favour an inclusive style of management, dislike slowness, and expects immediate feedback about performance (Francis-Smith, 2004). This was supported by a similar findings by Cox (2016) which highlighted that Gen Y has high preference for an approachable leader with vision who walks the walk and does not just talk. Gen Y is thought to be sceptical to long-term commitments and is said to desire greater flexibility in their career (Hewlett, Sherbin, & Sumberg, 2009). Gen Y give high priority to work-life balance but are willing to work hard on their terms. Gen Ys are attracted to working with company that practice corporate social responsibility as it gives them a feeling of serving the community and a sense of fulfilment (Sfilgoj, 2010).

Holt, Marques and Way (2012) have intuitively suggested that transformational leadership as the best leadership approach that fits the needs of the Gen Y. Transformational leaders create synergies within organisations by working together with their followers to achieve organisational goals through creating a culture of meaning that boosts loyalty and nurtures collective potential (Bass & Avolio, 1994). This is very similar to Gen Y’s preferences as they favour working within a collaborative environment. Allowing for a reasonable level of autonomy and self-direction is healthy for Gen Y, and in getting such autonomy, Gen Y are likely to feel a certain freedom and thus be more creative in thought and innovative in action (Holt et al., 2012).

As speculated by Tulgan (2000) leaders must appreciate generational differences and consider giving subordinates the essential facts, independence, and empowerment to do their jobs as they see fit. Individuals

from each generation bring their own expectations into the workplace, therefore, true leadership means recognising such differences in managing different generational cohorts (Patota, 2007). Leaders who understand the characteristics of Gen Y can easily design a programme that meets the desires of the employees.

Thus in this 21st century, the followers' needs and preferences is given more emphasis than leaders' capabilities. Great leaders modify their leadership style to fit the work characteristics of the employees they lead. It is apparent that taking the energy and trouble to understand Gen Y's unique circumstances, characteristics and preferences will go a long way in moving organisations forward and achieving organisational success. As we know, Gen Y is becoming the major force behind organisations today due to their large numbers in the workforce. So it is obvious that leaders will have to attract and retain young talent and capitalise on their collective strengths they bring to the workplace. Leaders need to understand them; their preferences and expectations in order to achieve effective leadership.

2.4 The Missing Parameter

From the earlier literature, much is still left to be understood about this 'Me Generation' - on what their expectations of a good leader are and how they want themselves to be managed effectively. Past literatures of Gen Y have mostly covered on Gen Y's work motivation, values, behaviours, job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Weyland, 2012; Teng, 2011; Deal, Altman and Rogelberg, 2010; Glass, 2007; Holt et al., 2012); and not on leadership preferences specifically.

In response to the research carried out, most of it were in the Western context; investigating on Western samples by Western scholars. The findings from these studies may not be applicable to the Malaysian context and accepting it wholly would be on over-generalisation. As to date, there were numerous studies conducted on Malaysian Gen Y focusing on work values and expectations (Teng, 2011), managing generational diversity (Tay, 2011), attributes that motivates Gen Y (Silong & Baba, 2013), empirical study of Gen Y preference of leadership theories (Moorthy, 2014) and many others but none has actually focused on the Gen Y leadership preference per se. Most of these studies conducted were using quantitative approach by testing hypotheses from a set of variables identified. Thus methodically, the research was carried out objectively and in a positivistic manner, so as to allow the results to follow the proposition proposed.

Whilst this may be true in that research context, we should not ignore other elements that can come into play and the results may be viewed by using a different lens that enables one to explain the reasons for such results obtained. Hence, it is proposed that this study to be conducted using a qualitative approach as it would give a more comprehensive result in understanding the leadership preferences of Gen Y in the Malaysian context. It is hoped that the outcome of this study would reveal many other variables or factors that has not been discussed in past literatures.

2.5 The Conceptual Framework

From the review of the past literatures and theoretical perspectives, the different leadership theories will become the underpinning theory in approaching this qualitative study. The culmination of the different theories can be depicted in Figure 1 as our conceptual framework. The conceptual framework indicates that the leadership preferences of Gen Y will be scrutinised using the different leadership theories, looking at the traits, behaviours or styles of leadership. All the concepts will be determined and described through *What, How, When, Why, Who and Where*. These elements will be incorporated in the interview protocols in the effort to probe informants' experience and point of view with regards to this study. It is hoped the outcome of this study will bring about a new perspective towards the leadership theory and a deeper understanding of what is preferred of the Malaysian Gen Y employees of their leaders.

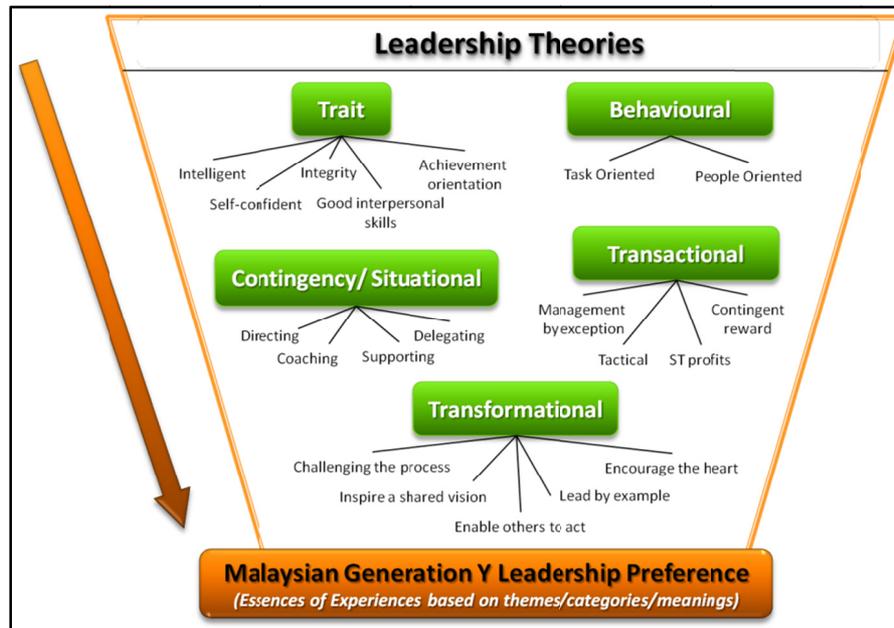


Fig 1: Conceptual framework for exploring gen Y employees' leadership preferences

3. Qualitative Method

“Qualitative research is not done for the purpose of generalisation but rather to produce evidence based on the exploration of specific contexts and particular individuals” (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 203). The qualitative methodology focuses upon exploring the phenomena as interpreted by the research participants (Merriam, 2002). For this study, we are suggesting to use basic qualitative approach as the method of research. Van Maanen (1979) as cited by Merriam (2009) described qualitative research as “an umbrella term covering array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of a certain more or less natural occurring phenomena in the social world.” (p. 13). In essence, qualitative research is all about understanding the *meaning people have constructed*, that is how people have make sense of the experience that they live in the world.

We feel it is deemed appropriate for us to continue with this research journey using this method as we would be able to understand the experiences of the Malaysian Gen Y employees with their leaders and uncover what they perceived as their preferred leaders. The insights and experiences provided by the Malaysian Gen Y participants will help in generating themes and common meanings. One-to-one, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews will be conducted to collect data from Malaysian Gen Y employees in the private sector. The data from the interviews will be transcribed, coded and thematised using constant comparative analysis or the usage of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (e.g. NVIVO, ATLAS.ti).

Therefore, we expect and are optimistic that by using this approach a more complete and comprehensive findings can be concluded and ultimately contributes significantly to the academia and industry alike. A set of principles or guidelines for leaders on how to manage the Gen Y more effectively could be developed. And we hoped that the results from this study will contribute to the body of leadership knowledge on Gen Y particularly in the Malaysian context.

4. Conclusion

We began this study because of our concern that there is a need for a deeper understanding of the leadership preferences of the Malaysian Gen Y employees. Them being the future generation that will succeed the leadership management of organisations and ultimately spearhead the economy of our country, it is then our responsibilities as leaders today to lead them well and tap on their potentials and strengths. We started our quest by firstly revealing sufficient scholarships exist in this area of study. We found that many important studies have contributed insights concerning the Gen Y mostly in the areas of motivation, values, behaviours, job satisfaction and organisational commitment but not on leadership preferences specifically. In addition to that many of the studies conducted are in the Western perspectives and to accept the results entirely will be an over-generalisation. Then we examined the different leadership theories that have evolved over the years and with the many factors

influencing leadership, research in this field is still growing. New findings and theories will be developed inspired by the current wants and needs. Thus this brings light to our deep interest on this topic to further enhance the leadership literature focusing at what are the leadership preferences of Gen Y employees specifically looking at the local context. As our intention is to uncover new findings and have a better understanding of the current situation, we are taking the qualitative stand as the way to approach this study. In depth interviews as the method of data collection is apposite in attaining rich information data from the selected samples of Gen Y employees. We hope the continuance of this study will surface reasonable findings that will be of value to the academia and practitioners alike.

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