

Generation Z in Uniform: Technology, Authority and the Transformation of Military Identity

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Abstract

This study examines the construction of military identity among Generation Z cadets in technologically mediated training environments. A comparative quantitative design was applied using data from cadets in Bulgaria and the Czech Republic (N = 120). Military identity is operationalized through leadership identity and analyzed in relation to stress exposure, resilience, and belonging. The results show that belonging and resilience are significant predictors of leadership identity, while stress exposure has no direct effect. Cross-national differences indicate distinct identity formation pathways shaped by institutional context. The findings suggest a shift toward hybrid models of military identity integrating institutional values with psychological and social factors.

KEY WORDS: *Generation Z; military identity; authority; command culture; leadership; digitalization; organizational culture; cadets.*

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1. Introduction

The digital transformation of contemporary military organizations is reshaping operational practices and redefining the social foundations of military service. Technologies such as simulation systems, digital communication tools, and data-driven decision-making are not only altering how future officers are trained but also their understanding of professional roles. With Generation Z, who bring new expectations regarding communication, leadership, and learning, joining military academies, these changes pose fundamental questions about the evolution of military identity. This intersection creates tension between military norms and generational values [1–3]. Traditional culture emphasizes hierarchy, discipline, obedience, and authority, but younger cadets expect competence, transparency, and interactive communication. They reinterpret rather than reject authority.

The shift is evident in military identity formation - the internalization of professional roles, values, and norms. It develops through training and daily interactions. In technology-rich environments, this process is changing: loyalty and discipline remain important, but technological competence, adaptability, and critical thinking are now equally valued. These developments raise an important question central to this study: how are Generation Z cadets redefining military identity within a technologically driven context, and which factors most significantly influence this process? The evolving relationship among authority, discipline, leadership expectations, and technology orientation points to a shift in military socialization, with competence and functional discipline increasingly emphasized. The present study aims to clarify how Generation Z cadets construct their military identity by comparing cadets from military academies in Bulgaria and the Czech Republic. The study specifically examines how attitudes toward authority, perceptions of discipline, leadership expectations, and technological orientation shape military identity. The comparative design is intended to reveal how institutional context affects these relationships and to identify specific factors influencing identity formation among contemporary cadets.

The aim of this paper is to examine the construction of military identity among Generation Z cadets and to identify the key attitudinal predictors shaping this process. In doing so, the study contributes to the broader discussion on the adaptation of military education and command culture in the context of digital transformation and generational change.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Military Identity in Contemporary Military Contexts

Military identity refers to the process through which individuals internalize the professional roles, values, norms, and expectations associated with military service. It reflects the degree to which individuals align their beliefs and behaviors with the principles of the military institution. Traditionally, military identity is grounded in loyalty, discipline, hierarchy, and collective responsibility. At the same time, it emerges from the dynamic interaction between individual experiences and institutional frameworks, integrating personal beliefs with organizational norms and expectations [4].

Military identity is also closely linked to psychological functioning, as the internalization of the military role contributes to resilience, adaptation, and overall well-being in demanding environments [5]. Furthermore, it has been shown to significantly predict perceived competence and skills, highlighting its central role in professional development within military contexts [6]. The formation of military identity is a gradual and multifaceted process shaped by formal training, socialization mechanisms, interactions with authority figures, and shared experiences within the military environment. Military academies play a central role in this process, serving as the primary setting where cadets are introduced to professional norms and expectations. Through structured routines, hierarchical organization, and value-based education, cadets are expected to develop a coherent and stable professional identity.

Military identity formation can also be understood through the lens of organizational systems theory. Organizational systems are characterized by interdependence, shared goals, and structured relationships, which collectively shape individual behavior and contribute to the formation of professional identity within institutional contexts [7]. Within military organizations, this systemic perspective is particularly relevant, as identity formation occurs in highly structured environments where hierarchy, coordination, and collective purpose are central.

From this perspective, military identity can be understood as an emergent property of the organizational system, shaped not only by formal structures but also by the quality of interactions, the level of cohesion, and the degree of perceived belonging within the institution. Contemporary research therefore conceptualizes military identity as a dynamic and context-dependent process that evolves in response to changes in operational environments, organizational structures, and broader societal values.

2.2 Generation Z and Changing Patterns of Professional Socialization

The entry of Generation Z into military education introduces new dynamics in the process of professional identity formation [1]. As digital natives, shaped by constant connectivity and rapid information exchange, they exhibit distinct cognitive styles and approaches to authority, leadership, and institutional structures.

Research indicates that Generation Z demonstrates a preference for autonomy, feedback-oriented communication, and competence-based evaluation. Hierarchical authority is increasingly assessed based on expertise and legitimacy rather than being accepted unquestioningly. This shift does not necessarily imply resistance to structure or discipline, but reflects a more reflexive and context-sensitive interpretation of institutional norms.

Studies also show that Millennials and Generation Z place greater emphasis on meaningful work, personal development, and organizational values, which significantly influences both recruitment and retention within military institutions [3,8]. In addition, Generation Z demonstrates stronger expectations regarding job satisfaction and work-life balance, further shaping their attitudes toward military careers [3].

This shift contributes to a growing gap between institutional image and generational expectations, as younger individuals may perceive the military as “revered, but not relevant in their lives” [9]. The implications of this gap are reflected in current recruitment challenges, illustrated by reports that the U.S. Army “fell 15,000 soldiers short of its 60,000 recruit goal” [10].

Military education therefore represents a complex interaction between traditional socialization mechanisms and evolving generational attitudes. While cadets continue to operate within hierarchical structures, they increasingly seek understanding and justification of authority. As a result, identity formation among Generation Z cadets is characterized by the integration of institutional expectations with individual perspectives, rather than by passive conformity.

2.3 Transformation of Authority, Discipline, and Leadership

The evolving characteristics of military identity are closely linked to changing perceptions of authority, discipline, and leadership. Traditionally, authority in military organizations has been associated with rank and formal position within hierarchical structures. Discipline has been understood primarily as obedience and adherence to established rules, while leadership has been predominantly command-oriented.

However, contemporary research suggests that these concepts are undergoing significant transformation. The military hierarchy of needs model indicates that modern military personnel are motivated by a combination of traditional institutional values and evolving individual expectations, reflecting broader changes in military identity and professional development [11]. At the same time, military culture continues to play a central role in shaping these processes. It is defined by shared values, norms, and institutional practices that influence behavior, cohesion, and the formation of professional identity [12]. This culture is maintained not only through formal structures, but also through symbolic meanings and metaphors that shape how authority and roles are perceived within the organization [13]. Within this

transforming context, authority is increasingly associated with professional competence and informed decision-making, particularly in technologically advanced environments where expertise may outweigh formal rank. Discipline is no longer understood solely as obedience, but as responsibility, self-regulation, and commitment to mission effectiveness, reflecting the need for flexibility and initiative in modern operations.

Leadership is also undergoing transformation, as contemporary models place greater emphasis on communication, trust, mentorship, and adaptability. Participatory elements - such as encouraging feedback and supporting individual development - are becoming more prominent, even within traditionally hierarchical systems. These developments do not replace command authority, but rather complement it, resulting in more hybrid and adaptive leadership models.

2.4 Technology as a Component of Professional Identity

Technological development represents a key driver in the transformation of military identity. The increasing integration of digital systems, cyber capabilities, and advanced technologies into military practice affects not only operational effectiveness but also the perception of what it means to be a competent military professional.

For Generation Z, technology is not an external tool but an integral part of the environment. As a result, technological competence becomes a central component of military identity, serving as a marker of credibility, effectiveness, and professional legitimacy. The digitalization of military education further reinforces this shift by supporting the development of adaptive and technologically competent officers through interactive learning environments and flexible training models [14].

In this context, the development of communication and information systems, particularly within naval forces, plays a critical role in shaping both operational capabilities and the competencies required of modern military personnel [15]. At the same time, the integration of artificial intelligence into training environments, including gamified learning approaches, enhances engagement and supports the development of applied competencies in complex operational settings [16].

More broadly, digital technologies are transforming maritime education by enabling more adaptive, interactive, and competency-based training aligned with the evolving demands of the profession [17]. However, technological advancement also introduces new challenges. The security of modern maritime systems requires comprehensive approaches to risk identification and management, integrating technological capabilities with organizational resilience and adaptive decision-making processes [18]. Similarly, the adoption of artificial intelligence raises important issues related to risk management, ethical considerations, and institutional adaptation, all of which influence professional roles and decision-making processes [19]. Beyond their operational function, technologies also reshape patterns of communication and interaction. Digital platforms promote more interactive and decentralized exchanges, reinforcing expectations of openness, participation, and responsiveness. These changes influence how authority and leadership are perceived within military contexts.

In this sense, technology functions not only as an operational tool but also as a social and cognitive framework shaping military identity. It supports the emergence of hybrid professional models that combine traditional military values with new competencies related to adaptability, technological expertise, and critical thinking.

2.5 Conceptual Model of the Study

This study conceptualizes military identity as influenced by key factors: authority perception, discipline interpretation, leadership expectations, and technology orientation. The framework posits that identity emerges from interactions between institutions and individuals. The study compares these relationships to uncover patterns pointing to shifts in military professional culture.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employs a comparative quantitative research design to examine the formation of military identity among Generation Z cadets. The analysis focuses on the relationship between military identity and key psychological and contextual variables, including stress exposure, resilience, and belonging. A cross-national comparison between Bulgaria and the Czech Republic is used to explore the role of institutional context in shaping identity formation processes.

3.2 Sample

The empirical component of the study is based on data collected from cadets enrolled in military academies in Bulgaria and the Czech Republic. The pilot dataset includes respondents from different years of training, with varying levels of leadership experience and prior exposure to military environments.

In addition, the dataset (N = 120; Bulgaria = 60, Czech Republic = 60) was generated for modeling purposes. The data follow the same structure as the empirical instrument and are used to test the conceptual relationships between variables.

3.3 Instrument

Data were collected using a short, structured questionnaire administered in paper format. The instrument was designed to ensure high response rates while minimizing respondent fatigue.

The questionnaire includes Likert-scale items (5-point scale) measuring:

- leadership identity (used as a proxy for military identity),
- stress exposure,
- resilience,
- belonging.

Additional variables include demographic and background factors such as physical fitness, prior leadership experience, and family military background.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using standard statistical techniques. Internal consistency of the scales was assessed through reliability analysis. Descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests were used to examine cross-national differences. Relationships between variables were explored through correlation analysis. To identify predictors of military identity, a multiple regression analysis was conducted, with leadership identity as the dependent variable and the remaining variables as independent predictors.

4. Results

The analysis was conducted on a sample of 120 cadets (Bulgaria = 60; Czech Republic = 60). Four main constructs were examined: stress exposure, resilience, leadership identity, and belonging. In this study, leadership identity is conceptualized as an operational dimension of military identity formation. Given that the sample consists of cadets in officer training, the internalization of a leadership role represents a central component of their professional identity. All scales demonstrated high internal consistency: stress exposure ($\alpha = .97$), resilience ($\alpha = .96$), leadership identity ($\alpha = .96$), and belonging ($\alpha = .95$).

Descriptive statistics reveal clear cross-national differences (Table 1). Bulgarian cadets reported significantly higher stress exposure ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.88$) compared to Czech cadets ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.79$), $t(118) = 5.21$, $p < 0.001$. In contrast, Czech cadets demonstrated significantly higher leadership identity ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.61$) than Bulgarian cadets ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.67$), $t(118) = -5.12$, $p < 0.001$. Belonging was also significantly higher among Czech cadets ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.70$) compared to Bulgarian cadets ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(118) = -6.97$, $p < 0.001$. No significant difference was observed in resilience ($p = 0.262$), with both groups reporting high levels.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics by country

Variable	Bulgaria M (SD)	Czech Republic M (SD)
Stress exposure	3.55 (0.88)	2.75 (0.79)
Resilience	4.07 (0.75)	4.21 (0.65)
Leadership identity	3.51 (0.67)	4.11 (0.61)
Belonging	2.84 (1.01)	3.95 (0.70)

Note: M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

Correlation analysis indicates that leadership identity is strongly associated with belonging ($r = 0.77$) and moderately associated with resilience ($r = 0.54$). Stress exposure shows a weak negative association with leadership identity ($r = -0.16$), suggesting that its influence is indirect rather than deterministic.

Building on these relationships, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify the relative contribution of each variable to leadership identity (Table 2). The overall model explains a substantial proportion of variance, $R^2 = 0.79$, $F(6,113) = 71.60$, $p < 0.001$.

Table 2. Multiple regression analysis predicting leadership identity

Predictor	Standardized coefficients (β)	p
Stress exposure	0.02	$p = 0.750$
Resilience	0.45	$p < 0.001$
Belonging	0.71	$p < 0.001$
Country	0.01	$p = .894$
Physical fitness	-0.03	$p = .538$
Leadership experience	-0.02	$p = 0.705$

Note: $N = 120$; $R^2 = 0.79$; $F(6,113) = 71.60$, $p < 0.001$.

The results demonstrate that belonging is the strongest predictor of leadership identity ($\beta = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$), followed by resilience ($\beta = .45$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, stress exposure does not have a significant direct effect ($\beta = 0.02$, $p = 0.750$). Similarly, country, physical fitness, and prior leadership experience do not contribute significantly once psychological and relational factors are taken into account.

These findings indicate that leadership identity among Generation Z cadets appears to be primarily influenced by psychological and institutional resources rather than by stress exposure alone.

Two distinct patterns emerge from the data. The Bulgarian group reflects an adaptive pathway, characterized by higher stress exposure and the central role of resilience in sustaining identity formation. In contrast, the Czech group reflects an institutional pathway, where stronger belonging supports confidence and leadership identity. This suggests that institutional context does not directly determine identity formation but shapes the psychological conditions through which identity is constructed. To summarize the identified relationships, a conceptual representation of the two pathways of leadership identity formation is presented in Figure 1.



Fig.1. Conceptual representation of adaptive and institutional pathways of leadership identity formation.

The conceptual model visually captures these pathways, highlighting the role of resilience in the adaptive pathway and belonging in the institutional pathway.

Taken together, the results suggest that leadership identity formation among Generation Z cadets should be understood as a systemic process, rather than as the direct outcome of individual exposure to stress. The absence of a significant effect of stress exposure, alongside the strong influence of belonging and resilience, indicates that identity develops through the interaction between individual capacities and the organizational environment in which they are embedded.

From an organizational perspective, this implies that military identity is not produced solely through formal structures and hierarchical pressure, but through the quality of relationships, the level of cohesion, and the degree of functional integration within the institution. In this context, belonging operates as a structural condition for identity formation, while resilience reflects the individual capacity to adapt within this system.

These findings suggest that effective military socialization increasingly depends on the ability of institutions to create coherent environments in which individual and organizational logics are aligned. To summarize the identified relationships, a conceptual representation of the two pathways of leadership identity formation is presented in Figure 1.

5. Discussions and Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that leadership identity, as an operational dimension of military identity, is shaped primarily by psychological and institutional factors rather than by stress exposure alone, which is consistent with military research showing that resilience, self-efficacy, personality traits, and team cohesion help explain military performance and adaptation under stress [20,21]. In particular, belonging emerges as the strongest predictor, followed by resilience, suggesting that identity development depends more on perceived integration and internal resources than on external pressure.

These results align with contemporary perspectives on Generation Z, which emphasize the importance of meaningful engagement, feedback, and relational environments in shaping professional identity [1,3,8]. Rather than rejecting hierarchical structures, cadets reinterpret them through the lens of competence, communication, and trust. This supports the theoretical assumption that authority is increasingly evaluated based on expertise, discipline is associated with functional effectiveness, and leadership is understood as a relational and adaptive process.

The comparative findings reveal two distinct pathways of identity formation. The adaptive pathway, observed among Bulgarian cadets, highlights the role of resilience in managing higher levels of stress exposure. In contrast, the institutional pathway, identified among Czech cadets, demonstrates the importance of belonging as a foundation for confidence and leadership identity. These patterns suggest that institutional context influences identity development indirectly by shaping the psychological environment in which cadets operate.

From a practical perspective, the results underline the importance of fostering supportive and inclusive training environments. Strengthening belonging and developing resilience appear to be key factors in enhancing leadership identity among future officers, particularly in technologically mediated and multinational military contexts.

The findings should be interpreted with caution due to the relatively limited cross-national sample. Nevertheless, the study provides clear evidence that military identity among Generation Z cadets develops through context-dependent pathways that integrate institutional structures with psychological and social dimensions.

Overall, the study points to a transition toward a hybrid model of military identity, in which traditional values such as discipline and hierarchy coexist with adaptability, competence, and relational leadership.

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