AKADÉMIAI KIADÓ

How generations see each other – The reality of generation stereotypes

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ABSTRACT

Secondary school students are the members of gen Z, while their teachers mostly belong to gen X. Due to multitasking in virtual space, dotcom kids' attention, work memory, and brain activity are changing. Their vision of the future, attitude, and priorities are entirely different from those of earlier generations. The children of gen Z question and reject traditional authority; however, they are creative and innovative. In contrast to this, both the knowledge, the attitude, and the value system of their teachers are significantly different from those of the net generation.

The purpose of the research was to map adolescents' opinions about generation stereotypes as well as what their teachers think about them – according to the students. The anonymous digital questionnaire was spread in social media; adolescents assessed frequently mentioned statements about gen Z. According to the results, it can be claimed that there are some stereotypes, especially about the usage of digital tools and lasting concentration, which were proved to be true by adolescents. However, youngsters rejected stereotypes referring to the instability of their future perspective, behaviour on the sites of social media, and the quality of relationships. On the other hand, they believe that their teachers' opinion about them is different in many ways, such as in online communication, emotional attitudes, and digital safety.

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INTRODUCTION

The differences observed between generations have always been present in society, and the differences in perception and value system are mostly attributed to the experience gained in different ages and decades. Nowadays, the situation is very similar; the main reason for pointing at each other due to the disagreement between generations and the social and environmental problems can be found in different experiences. However, since the appearance of digital technologies, it has become common to categorize people born in different ages by letters (X, Y, Z, alpha), which, above the typical behavioural characteristics and value system, are intended to indicate that a member of a given generation in which period of life they met digital devices at first, and thus what proficiency and attitude they might have in this field (McCrindle-Wolfinger, 2010).

However, it seems that the tendency to typify generations with letters has highlighted the trend to characterize people belonging to the same categories with rather generalized and common features, which are considered true for everyone. The consequence of this is that the tension between generations seems to become harsher, especially in terms of social responsibility (Szabó, 2020a). We can think of the so-called wide-spread phenomenon 'OK, boomer!' (Iannone, 2020). The question is to what extent these statements are proper? Can certain characteristics features be standardized and considered general for a whole age group? The present study follows these generational stereotypes by asking secondary school students' opinions. Not only did we ask them about the statements they hear most frequently about themselves, but we also seek their answers on how they see the generation of their parents and teachers.

In the footsteps of generational typologies

When searching for the exact definition of the word "generation", we come across many variations in dictionaries. According to our ordinary language usage, it mostly means a group of people born in the same era, growing up and living roughly at the same time, and so having a rather similar experience. It should be stated that today's interpretation of generations became widespread only after the 1800s, thanks to the work of the French lexicologist, Émilé Littré in 1863, who was the first to use this horizontal direction to define generations (Nemes, 2019). Before that, the basis for classifying someone into a generation was defined as the vertical and rather biological time interval between the birth of parents and their children. Moreover, these groups were considered relevant only on the male branch, the grandfather-father-son line, and had no significance for mothers and daughters (McCrindle-Wolfinger, 2010).

Since the 19th century, social and economic changes have occurred that continuously, generally every 20–30 years, which means by generations, have overwritten the norms, cultural values, and customs. While in the past, knowledge was passed down from father to son, in the modern age, younger generations had to deal and cope with new knowledge, technologies, and challenges that their ancestors could not pass on to them. Since young people have already socialized in adapting to changes, they have gained an advantage in areas where new procedures required the rapid and flexible acquisition of new knowledge (Somlai, 2010). Since then, it has become common that people who were born in the same period of time were referred to as an independent group, a generation, distinguishing them from others belonging to different age groups.

Sociologist Karl Mannheim, in his famous work ("Das Problem der Generationen"), defined the common consciousness of a particular generation from psychological and social science points of view. He recognised that it is mainly the common experiences and memories gained in the same historical era that make a generation become a community having similar fortune and destiny (Sparschuh, 2007).

Regarding the generational classifications starting in the 20th century and becoming even more widespread from the 21st century, we find the main differences between the definitions of birth time intervals. The characterization and naming of each generation are most often dominated by the fact of what technical achievements and digital devices people who were born in the particular period of time met and used in their life (Szőke-Milinte, 2019). Our research was based on Mark McCrindle's - perhaps best known - generation categorisation, according to which generations were classified as follows:

- Baby Boomers (1946–1964): The most populous generation born after World War II, where modern technology was mostly represented by TVs and other electrical household appliances.
- Generation X (1965–1979): They are sometimes called the 'herald' generation, as the Internet has already appeared in the life span but was used mostly for work.
- Generation Y (1980–1994): The Internet has been a part of their lives since their childhood, they are proficient in the use of ICT tools.
- Generation Z (1995–2010): They did not live without the Internet and have been using ICT tools since their birth.
- Alpha generation (2010–): They routinely handle ICT tools and start using them earlier than learning to read and write (McCrindle, 2018).

The trap of generalization

Conclusions drawn solely on age and categorizing and labelling people on the basis of their year of birth are not valid in several respects and contain a trap. Even though someone belongs to the same group based on their age, it significantly matters where they live, under what circumstances they grow up, what kind of support they receive from their parents (Buda, 2019). For example, a child growing up in Africa, living in deep poverty, with uneducated parents, but based on his or her age, is less likely to have the same consumer habits and digital competencies as a Z-generation child of the same age going to a Swiss elite school.

It is also worth taking into account where individual people can be found in the birth interval of a particular generation. An, approximately, 25-year-old youngster belonging to the first part of generation Z has fundamentally different goals and behavioural habits than a late Z-er has, who was born in 2010, aged 10 and is probably just finishing the lower classes of primary school. What is more, researches surveying generations' habits are mostly focusing on the ones who perform intellectual work, the so-called white-collar workers, which, provides a rather one-sided picture of only one generation (Nemes, 2019).

Buda (2019) highlights that the knowledge of people forming a particular generation is not homogeneous, which makes generalization mostly impossible. It is significantly true when we talk about children who still study in public education as they use both traditional and new, millennial learning techniques including digital technology. It must be considered that rigid generational differentiation could be applied only in special conditions. On the other hand, the division of

people based on the fact whether they use technology consciously and properly or not is believed to be more valid. Szűts (2020) calls the latter ones 'drifters'. According to Szűts, conscious users spend time in the cyberspace on the basis of their usual routine, while drifters often become the victims of continuous searching – infinite feed – on the sites of social media and webshops. This harmful routine may occur when they want to acquire online learning materials.

The question arises why do we generalize at all, what do we benefit from categorizing generations? The answer is simple. As stereotypes work, they provide a kind of security for answering certain questions and problems and give the illusion that we have the knowledge and a picture of the given group, and so we can interpret and deal with situations related to them. However, this is often nothing more than the reduction of more complex problems to an explanation that seems logical, but it is admittedly not entirely reliable (Giddens, 2008).

Five generations – one location

Considering the knowledge acquisition and processing habits and the needs of different generations according to McCrindle's division and comparing it to their proficiency in the use of digital devices, it can be stated that one of the biggest and most significant places for perceiving generational differences is the public education system. The words of Tibor Prievara and Gergely Nádori perfectly illustrate the current situation, "all students studying in public education were born in the 21st century, while all teachers who teach them – in the 20th century" (Prievara & Nádori, 2018). Currently, all 5 generations are represented in the public education system, from alpha, studying in the lower classes of elementary school, to baby boomer teachers approaching retirement. Needless to say, it is a real challenge for teachers, mostly belonging to the X and baby boomer generations, who first encountered the Internet and digital devices in their young adulthood, to arouse the interest of generations Z and alpha, who were born almost with a mobile phone in their hands, who require visual stimuli and have short-term attention (Csikósné, 2019; Szabó, 2019).

Research surveying teachers' attitude also shows that each generation tends to point at the others for arising difficulties and to consider stereotypical beliefs about behaviour and perception differences as generally true statements referring to all the members of a particular age group (Szabó, 2020b). However, teachers must take into account the suitable incorporation of new info-communication devices and methods into the teaching-learning process, as well as the role of conscious users, both teachers and students, and that of virtual communities formulated by them in digital pedagogy (Szűts, 2020). It is obvious that the role of the teacher is indisputable in this multi-age arena, in the world of education, whether offline or online (Bartal, 2019). On the other hand, teachers should not be expected to work and communicate with students according to the space of social media permanently pay attention to messages and instantly react to them (Szűts, 2020).

INTRODUCTION OF THE RESEARCH

Research process

The research was conducted in February and March 2020 with a self-administered anonymous questionnaire. The target population of the research was secondary school students. The

questionnaire was posted on the sites of social media (Facebook), as well as sent to secondary school principals and teachers, the researchers' acquaintances and colleagues in emails and private messages. With the help of these people, the survey was sent to secondary school students. Altogether, 264 students answered the questionnaire. Although the sample is big enough, and due to social media posts, students from different parts of the country answered the questions the research is not representative.

The research focused on generation stereotypes. Researchers aimed to find answers to the questions of whether adolescents believe that they could be characterized by generation stereotypes. Moreover, teenagers were asked about how their parents and teachers see them. The 44 stereotypical statements were elaborated, on the one hand, by the literature mostly referred in this paper (Buda, 2019; Nemes, 2019; McCrindle, 2018; Tari, 2015); on the other hand, by a previous survey of a very similar issue that was conducted on an international level with the participation of one the authors (Szabó, 2020a). Variables were grouped into five categories: 1) Attitudes and habits, 2) Studies and interests, 3) Time spent in the online space, 4) Use of devices, 5) Relationships and social networks. Students-respondents evaluated the statements on a five-grade Likert-scale on the basis of their agreement (1 = totally not agree, 5 = totally agree).

In the framework of the current paper, researchers would like to present what adolescents think of themselves, to what extent they believe that the frequently mentioned generational stereotypes are typical of them, and what their opinions are on their parents and teachers' beliefs. Adolescents had to evaluate their own habits, activities, and behaviour as all variables were formed in first person singular. While the statements are given in the tables as they were formulated in the questionnaire, authors refer to the results in third person plural, summarizing generation Z's opinions. The hypothesis of the research was that adolescents reject many stereotypes, especially the ones that are in connection with conscious behaviour in the online space; on the other hand, according to students' opinion, their parents and teachers think that generation stereotypes much more characterise gen Z.

Research results and discussion

Regarding the basic statistical data of the research, 67% of the respondents were male, while 32% female (1% did not answer the question). Students go to three different types of secondary education: 32.6% to grammar school, 48.7% to technical secondary school, and 18.8% to vocational school.

Although the members of generation Z are often thought and said to be very similar to one another, there might be a significantly big difference between them, based on their family background and socialization. Regarding parents' qualification, mothers are generally highly qualified than fathers: nearly three fourth (74.2%) of fathers have maximum a secondary qualification and more than one-third of them (36.1%) has no upper secondary qualification (the so-called Hungarian 'érettségi'). On the contrary, 61.3% of the mothers have maximum a secondary qualification and less than one-fourth of them has no upper secondary examination. What is more, nearly 40% of the mothers (38.7%) have gained a higher education degree – while this ratio among the fathers is only 25.9%.

The main part of the research consisted of the 44 stereotypical statements. In the first Table, statements are grouped on the basis of the fact whether adolescents agree with them. Authors grouped the statements on the basis of the mean of the answers: if the mean was under 2.50, the

Table 1. Stereotypes accepted and rejected by generation Z

Stereotypes considered true by gen Z			Stereotypes rejected by gen Z		
Variables	Mean	St. Dev.	Variables	Mean	St. Dev.
Wherever I go, I have their mobile phones with them.	4.33	0.991	I often indulge in my mobile phone so much that cannot recognise what is happening around me	2.38	1.179
As an adult, I would quickly like to have a well-paid job.	4.22	0.989	I am indifferent towards others' problems.	2.25	1.198
My academic results could be better if I put more effort into learning.	3.83	1.236	I generally do not get to the appointments on time.	2.17	1.243
I am an active member of more than two social media.	3.76	1.493	I do not like either study or work.	2.12	1.185
I am eager to find unique solutions.	3.75	1.046	I cannot differentiate between authentic and fake news.	1.92	1.034
They find appearance rather important.	3.75	1.067	I prefer managing my conflicts online in writing to personally.	1.89	1.131
I generally do several activities parallel on my smart devices.	3.60	1.217	I do not have plans for the future.	1.79	1.078
			I have already bullied others on the Internet.	1.67	1.121
			I am not aware of possible risks in the online space.	1.56	0.937
			Wherever I am and whatever I do, at once I post it on social media.	1.50	0.872
			If I go somewhere, I take selfies instead of watching the sights.	1.39	0.700
			I have already shared sexually coquetting photos on social media.	1.30	0.870

statements were categorised as 'rejected', while if the mean was over 3.5, it was categorised as 'considered true'. According to the adolescents' opinions, some stereotypes are true especially the ones that refer to their attitude, behaviour, and their studies. Teenagers on a high level agree with the statements that they always have their own mobiles with themselves (4.33), they are active members on the sites of at least two social media (3.76) and could be characterized by multitasking (3.60). What is more, they find the statement true that they should put more effort into learning (3.83), and becoming adults, they would like to have a well-paid job (4.22). However, they agree with the stereotype that they are eager to look for and find new solutions (3.75). Regarding the first two variables with the highest means, their standard deviation is the lowest, indicating that the students' answers deviate from the mean very little.

On the other hand, generation Z rejected many stereotypes. Opposite to the beliefs of generation X, adolescents hardly agree with the statements that they are indifferent towards

others' problems (2.25) or have no future plans (1.79). They can even hardly think true that they indulge in their mobile phones so much that cannot recognise what is happening around them (2.38) – however, the members of older generations experience totally the opposite. Adolescents rejected that they are lazy and do not like either work or study (2.12). Moreover, they think that the often-mentioned stereotypes are absolutely not or rather not true. Generation Z claims they behave rather consciously in the online space: they reject not being able to differentiate between real and fake news (1.92), not being aware of the risks of online space (1.56), they always take selfies (1.39), post the events of their private life in social media (1.50), and share sexually coquetting pictures (1.30). Examining the standard deviation of the rejected statements, the results prove that the four most rejected variables have the lowest deviation, so adolescents' answers are the closest to the means. According to teenagers' opinion, members of generation Z more consciously behave in the online space than older generations think about.

Adolescents had to estimate what their teachers and parents think about them – based on the same 44 statements. According to the students' opinion, their parents and teachers' thoughts are similar to those of teenagers: they usually consider the stereotypes true that are considered true by the adolescents themselves too. By teenagers' opinions, neither the parents, nor the teachers agree – like adolescents themselves – that generation Z does not have plans for the future, posts everything on social media, or everywhere takes selfies. On the other hand, gen Z thinks that their parents and teachers rather agree with the statements that adolescents are aware of the risks on the Internet, would like to have well-paid jobs and should put more effort into their studies.

However, in case of several stereotypical statements, Paired Sample T-test proved significant differences between the opinions of adolescents about themselves and those of parents and teachers – as adolescents believe. The analysis was done in two steps: first, the adolescents' opinion was compared with the data what teachers think about them; then what their parents think about them. As there are quite many variables where the difference is significant, Table 2 contains only the statements where the differences between the means are the biggest, taking 3 variables from each category.

The results partly confirm those in Table 1: adolescents are convinced that they significantly consciously behave in the online space (aware of the possible risks, can differentiate between real and fake news) than their parents and teachers think – even according to the students' opinions. On the other hand, teenagers rather agree that they are capable of effective multitasking: can listen to people while working on mobiles, do parallel activities on smart devices, and pay attention to the lesson and the mobile at the same time.

Regarding adolescents' studies and interests, they find school lessons more boring than they think their parents and teachers believe. Moreover, teenagers rather declared that they have not enough time for other activities due to school tasks. However, students are more likely to agree to look for unique solutions. These results should make educators think over the teaching-learning process and able to adapt it to the new generation's needs: more creativity, more in-dividual and project work reducing the old-fashioned frontal teaching.

Taking into consideration the cyber bullying, although students mentioned it is not typical, in the students' opinion, their parents and teachers evaluated that this activity happens even fewer times. Finally, we must emphasize that the results reflect not the direct opinions of parents and teachers but that what adolescents believe about their parents and educators' ideas. Based on other research results, parents and teachers see teenagers' behaviour and attitude much worse than students think (Szabó, 2020b).

Table 2. Difference between adolescents, teachers, and parents' opinions

Category	Variable	Students' opinion	Teachers' opinion	Mean	Sig.	Parents' opinion	Mean	Sig.
Attitudes and habits	I often express my feelings with emojis.	2.87	2.25	0.617	0.000	2.41	0.466	0.000
	I do not answer the messages at once.	2.88	2.41	0.470	0.000	2.67	0.212	0.001
	I find it annoying if someone does not answer my messages.	3.41	2.98	0.428	0.000	3.15	0.254	0.000
Studies and interests	Due to school tasks, I do not have enough time for other activities.	2.99	2.42	0.572	0.000	2.72	0.273	0.000
	I find school lessons boring.	3.21	2.85	356	0.000	2.98	0.223	0.000
	I am eager to find unique solutions.	3.75	3.45	0.299	0.000	3.56	0.189	0.000
Activities in the online space	I am not aware of possible risks in the online space.	1.56	1.94	−0.375	0.000	1.84	−0.284	0.000
	I cannot differentiate between authentic and fake news.	1.92	2.25	−0.326	0.000	2.18	−0.258	0.000
	I am annoyed if others share photos or information about me without my permission.	3.64	3.40	0.239	0.000			
Use of devices	I can listen to people while I am paying attention to my mobile.	3.49	3.06	0.428	0.000	3.17	0.318	0.000
	I generally do several	3.60	3.41	0.193	0.000	3.44	0.155	0.000

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Category	Variable	Students' opinion	Teachers' opinion	Mean	Sig.	Parents' opinion	Mean	Sig.
	activities parallel on smart devices. I pay attention to my mobile in lessons – not connected to the learning material.	3.05	3.82	0.186	0.003	3.87	0.231	0.000
Relationships and social networks	I have already been bullied on the Internet.	2.25	1.93	0.318	0.000			
	I have already bullied others on the Internet.	1.76	1.51	0.155	0.000	1.53	0.136	0.000
	I am an active member of more than two social media.	3.76	3.61	0.144	0.010	3.61	0.152	0.001

In the survey, students gave their academic results. It was examined if there is a correlation between the school results and their opinions on generation stereotypes. The correlation was proved to be significant in case of several variables. Although the correlations are weak, it could be stated that good academic results function as a protecting factor regarding attitudes to and activities directly connected with school, as this variable negatively correlates with variables referring to school problems (cannot concentrate for a long time: $r = -0.247$, $P = 0.000$; pay attention to their mobiles during lessons: $r = -0.243$, $P = 0.000$; spend time on the Internet instead of studying: $r = -0.209$, $P < 0.01$). Moreover, academic results function as a protective factor in activities that are not connected to school: students with higher academic results are less likely to consider their social media acquaintances as friends ($r = -0.165$, $P < 0.01$) but more likely to worry about climate change ($r = 0.123$, $P < 0.05$).

Except for academic results, correlations were examined between parents' qualifications and adolescents' attitudes and ways of thinking. Based on the results, the father's qualification significantly correlates only with two variables, while the mother's qualification positively influences adolescents' behaviour in several cases – the correlational coefficient is weak, though.

Table 3 indicates that the higher the mother's qualification is the less negative adolescents' attitude and behaviour: they are less likely not to have plans for the future and have a negative attitude to school (find school lessons boring: $r = -0.136$; $P < 0.05$). Moreover, social media play a smaller role in their lives (post what are doing: $r = -0.142$; $P < 0.05$; consider social media acquaintances as friends: $r = -0.137$; $P < 0.05$). On the other hand, higher qualification parents' children are less likely to be indifferent to others' problems (mother: $r = -0.157$; $P < 0.05$; father: $r = -0.140$; $P < 0.05$) and are more likely to worry about climate problems

Table 3. Correlation between parents' qualification and adolescents' opinion on stereotypes

	Mother's qualification	Father's qualification
I do not have plans for the future.	−0.188	−0.145
As an adult, I would quickly like to have a well-paid job.	−0.157	−0.130
I find school lessons boring.	−0.136	
I could have better academic results if I put more effort into it.	−0.131	
Wherever I am and whatever I do, at once I post it on social media.	−0.142	
I consider my acquaintances in social media as friends; however, I have never met them personally.	−0.137	
I am not troubled to break up with someone.	−0.145	
I have already been bullied on the Internet.	−0.129	
I am indifferent towards others' problems.	−0.157	−0.140
I worry about climate problems.	0.159	

($r = 0.159$; $P < 0.05$). Based on all these results, it can be stated that the mother's qualification functions as a protective factor such as good academic results.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the survey carried out among secondary school students was to get a picture of their attitude to generation stereotypes that are most frequently declared about them.

Based on the research results, the respondents mostly agreed with the statements that they always carry their mobile phones and are active members of several social media. They also highlighted their ability to do multiple, parallel things at the same time, but stereotypes suggesting their unconscious behaviour in digital space were firmly rejected. The majority of respondents believe that they consciously use the Internet and can distinguish real information from fake news. According to adolescents' opinion, it is not true that they post all events of their private lives on social media and believe that although they spend more time online than the members of older generations, they behave more consciously than most of their generation X teachers and parents think of them.

By the results, the question arises whether young people belonging to generation Z are really aware of the risks in the digital space, and how safely and carefully they use online platforms, not only for protecting their personal data but also for finding authentic information and sources. This issue is particularly relevant today, especially regarding secondary school zappers doomed to home schooling by the pandemic. Due to online learning, the best available sources for gen Z are the fast-flowing online news, which, many times, contains fake news in order to collect clicks and likes, instead of authentic content. The question is whether adolescents are able to

differentiate between real and fake news? If so, according to what criteria they make their decisions? If not, from whom they ask for and expect help? Whose job is it to teach them the steps and the criteria to distinguish correct information from the fake one?

These are the questions that could be the starting point of further research. Moreover, the authors also plan to extend the research presented in the study with qualitative methods, mostly through focus group interviews among the secondary school Z-generation and their teachers.

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