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Talk to me about Gen Z: political profiling of comment sections in social media

1. Introduction

It is no surprise that generational differences create friction, which often results in what are sometimes called *generational wars*. The trope of previous generations criticizing the youth has been known for centuries. It can be observed, for example, in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* from the 4th century BC, where we read: "[t]hey [the young people] are high-minded, for they have not yet been humbled by life nor have they experienced the force of necessity" (Freese, 1926). Reinhold (1970, p. 348) enumerates other ancient figures emphasizing the inferiority of the younger generation: "as early as the 2500 B.C., the older generation in authoritarian Egypt had to «work at it» to mold the younger generation in its own image". Even myths of ancient Greece depicting cruel parent-child relationships of Uranus, Cronus, or Zeus show that the 'youth' has always been portrayed not together with the adults in a unified society, but in contrast to them (ibid.). This generational "tension", therefore, is described as completely natural and even presented in a positive light as "a good thing" (Duffy, 2021, p. 13). It makes societal progress possible, as it exemplifies "demographic metabolism" (ibid.).

Over the past few years, the worldwide interest in the term *Gen Z* or *Generation Z* has gradually been increasing, reaching its peak in 2024 (Google Trends, n.d.). The meaning behind this term, however, remains unclear, as different sources provide divergent definitions. According to Merriam Webster (n.d.), they are people "[…] born in the late 1990s and early 2000s […]." Investopedia mentions people "[…] born between 1997 and 2012 […]." Reeves and Oh (2008, pp. 296–297) talk about people "born 2001- present". Oxford (n.d.), as well as Urban Dictionary (n.d.), add the factor of being/growing

up familiar with the internet, and Brittanica (n.d.) says that they are specifically "[…] Americans born during the late 1990s and early 2000s […]."

Academic papers, primarily in the fields of economy and business studies, provide some characteristics common to Generation Z, especially in the context of employment. They remark their entrepreneurial minds, openness, innovation (Mărginean, 2021, p. 21), pragmaticism (Törőcsik, Kehl & Szűcs, 2014), empathy (Mahapatra, Bhullar & Gupta, 2022), autonomy (Chillakuri, 2020b), strive for equality (Mahapatra, Bhullar & Gupta, 2022), truthfulness, transparency (Chillakuri, 2020a), and work-life balance (Putri & Amran, 2021). What has to be mentioned, however, is that all the studies quoted above were conducted on a limited group born within one country (in these cases, either Hungary or India). Raslie and Ting (2021), in their comparative study on the communication styles of Gen Z and Gen Y, mention that the generational cohort, and not the demographic background, is of significance. Their study, despite including participants from several different countries, was still limited to South-Asian communities exclusively. We can therefore talk about the characteristics of specifically Hungarian, Indian, or, more broadly, South Asian Gen Z, but not Generation Z as a whole. As is observable, definitions vary, and not much can be extrapolated within Gen Z. As in the case of job-market studies, one may argue that a person born in 2012 in New York cannot be juxtaposed with that born in 1997 in a remote village in Poland, as their life experiences and upbringing conditions might have differed drastically, despite their alleged belonging to one generation.

The term *generation* has been used very frequently in the media in the past few years, and even overused, as remarked by Kingstone (2021). Media coverage uses the term *generation* often to describe a "life stage […], age group […], cohort […] [or] time period" (Kingstone, 2021, p. 2), adding extra layers of complexity to a term which, on its own, is already convoluted. Factors influencing generations are the "individual situation, environmental influences, and cohort experiences" (Törőcsik, Kehl & Szűcs, 2014, p. 24). These, however, cannot be treated as staples because of the loose nature of the term *generation.* Two critical dimensions of the concept of generations are vertical (familial), which can be associated with the fluent change, and lateral (societal), connected with an abrupt separation (ibid.). These perspectives differ in the sense of gap created between the members of different generations; while in a familial relationship, the change seems smooth and harmless, in the societal dimension, the steep break poses a threat to the coexistence of different groups in society. That is especially relevant in the 21st century, where the "diffusion of innovations" is extremely advanced and rapid due to globalization, easy internet access, and the idea of the world as a *global village*. The pace at which innovations enter the market may cause difficulties in adapting to new technologies and ideas for some people, which, as a result, might lead to misunderstandings and even conflicts. Atkin et al. (2015) mention that there are significant differences among people depending on the stage at which they have adopted specific technologies (as cited in Lim & Lemanski, 2020, p. 5). This on its own is enough to lead to age-group tensions. By creating clickbait materials, the media exploit this human tendency. In their

strife for visibility on the competitive journalism market, they oftentimes feed the negative sentiment between those who think of themselves as *Gen X*, *Gen Z*, *Millennials*, or *Baby Boomers*. It could be witnessed in 2019 in the American press with the rise of the conceptual phrase *Ok Boomer*. The catchphrase intended for mocking climate crisis denial, anti-technological sentiment, xenophobia, or racism (often associated with *Baby Boomers*) used to be an internet meme, but then the American media picked it up and popularized it, thus promoting a division between two social groups: *the young* and *the old* (Lim & Lemanski, 2020). By explicitly referring to the conceptual metaphor of *war* with headlines such as "Now it's war"[1] or "The Generation Wars are on",[2] the American media became a powerful agent in expanding conflict and hostility within society. Therefore, although generational tension, as already mentioned, is a natural part of evolution, fostering the conflict through highly influential opinion-forming media to such an extent can have truly negative effects. Divisions and hostility may lead to the inability to unify, or even communicate, within one social network, in which case a state cannot properly function (Kingstone, 2021).

When discussing any case of conceptualization, cultural context has to be taken into consideration. In this study, Polish and British points of view are juxtaposed, and although previous research has not tackled the comparison of these societies' views on, specifically, Generation Z or generally generational wars, much has been said about the differences between the Polish and British online discourse styles. For example, Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (2017a) highlights the higher level of abuse severity, *ad personam* comments, and radicality in the case of Polish commenters. In her study on the perception of immigration, she mentions how "[t]he Polish commenters are more emotional, both with respect to refugees as well as to online interactants, display less control, have weaker respect for the law, have more frequent and stronger abuse, are often authored by less educated" (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, p. 17). On the other hand, English online users convey their messages indirectly using sarcasm, irony, and hedging more frequently (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2017b). Despite also posting metalinguistic comments, they do not express as much "grammar Nazism" as the Polish commenters, and they exhibit significantly lower levels of *incivility* (ibid., p. 356), strongly associated with political as well as online discourses (Anderson & Huntington, 2017).

It also has to be noted that the study has a digital dimension. The comments are analyzed within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, which on its own looks into sociocultural and institutional context and interprets discourse as "a type of social practice […] dialectically tied to society […] as it both constitutes and is constituted by social phenomena" (Carvalho, 2008, p. 162). However, because it is a sample of Computer-Mediated-Communication, it has to be treated slightly differently than face-to-face communication. Following KhosraviNik's (2022) guidelines concerning Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS), online debates, because of their multimodality,

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[1] *New York Times*, *The Guardian* (as cited in Lim and Lemanski, 2020, p. 10).
[2] *Washington Post* (as cited in Lim and Lemanski, 2020, p. 10).

have to be considered more holistically, including "newly emerging meaning-making artefacts and practices on social media" (Carvalho, 2008, p. 121), making the analysis go beyond the traditional CDA framework.

2. Methodology

In contexts as socially sensitive as generational wars, the language one uses is of critical value. When it comes to directly connecting language and Generation Z, some scholars have already tried to describe linguistic characteristics of Gen Z in the context of CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication) by tackling the language employed by Gen Z online users on social media (cf. Jeresano & Carretero, 2022; Akmal et al., 2022). The language of Gen Z has also been researched in the context of teaching, especially SLA (second language acquisition) (cf. Kumari & Hemalatha, 2020; Maqbool et al., 2020; Sedanza et al., 2023). However, no research on the language used to describe and conceptualize Generation Z has been published yet (as of April 2024). Because of this gap in the field of sociolinguistics, the study presented in this article aims at preparing preliminary grounds for systematizing the conceptual image of Generation Z. The term *conceptual image* is used here in the sense of what Bartmiński (2012, p. 67) defines as *cognitive definition*, i.e., "the way in which an entity is viewed by the speakers of a language, to represent socio-culturally established and linguistically entrenched knowledge, its categorization and valuation". To understand the way Generation Z is viewed by the online commenters in influential Polish and British media in two political contexts, conservative and liberal, the following research questions were propounded:

RQ1: What is the general conceptualization of Gen Z across the Facebook commenters of the Polish and British newspaper media?

RQ2: Are there any differences in the portrayal of Gen Z in the two linguistic/cultural contexts: Polish and British English? If positive, what are they?

RQ3: Are there any differences in the portrayals of Gen Z across the comment sections depending on the political affiliation of a given medium, i.e., liberal and conservative? If positive, what are they?

To answer these questions, Facebook comment sections of four official newspaper profiles were retrieved: Polish liberal (*Gazeta Wyborcza*), Polish conservative (*Rzeczpospolita*), British liberal (*The Guardian*), and British conservative (*The Telegraph*). The choice of newspapers is dictated by their influence factor, as both *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* were shown to be in the first five of the most influential media in 2023 (IMM, 2024). Similarly, *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* remain in the first three of the most influential British titles of 2023 (Newman, 2024). Comments were retrieved from posts in which the focal point of discussion was the issue of Gen Z and which were shared between November 2022 and February 2024 with the assistance of the *export-comments.com* website.

The reason behind choosing Facebook comments is the gradually declining availability of comment sections on the official newspaper websites. Many sites decide to resign from sharing the open comment sections, likely due to internet troll attacks or spamming. That results in the possibility of commenting exclusively on social media posts shared by the official newspaper profiles, which has its definite disadvantages. Importantly, the algorithm often suggests posts from particular profiles to those who are not interested in such content. Therefore, analyzing the comments shared on liberally and conservatively affiliated profiles does not necessarily indicate analyzing liberal and conservative language, but rather generally the language of online users. Still, Facebook posts gather the most traction out of all social media profiles, in the case of newspapers. Although all of the media discussed here (except for *The Telegraph*) are followed by more users on the X platform[3] (formerly Twitter), all gather more comments per post on Facebook.[4] All of these media have at least two times fewer followers on the Instagram platform, which is why it was immediately rejected as a possible source of corpus material.

Overall, 2674 comments were analyzed (663 from *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 651 from *Rzeczpospolita*, 590 from *The Guardian*, 770 from *The Telegraph*), which sums up to a total of 75,260 tokens (47,009 in comment sections of the British media and 28,251 in Polish ones). The comments were analyzed in two dimensions: quantitative and qualitative. To conduct the quantitative analysis (token frequency), corpus-assisting software (*AntConc* and *WordSmith*), as well as a morpho-syntactic analyzer (*Morfeusz2*) were implemented. In the qualitative part, the method of inductive framing was employed. Deductive framing was rejected due to lack of previous studies on this kind of query, which reduced the possibility of creating predetermined categories. According to Touri and Koteyko (2015), such issues can be resolved by the inductive framing method, i.e., categorizing comments in real time instead of relying on set frames. In cases such as in the presented study, frames seem to pose a great advantage in organizing the conceptual imagery built around the ambiguous term *Generation Z*, as they construct "framework or schemata of interpretation," especially relevant for cognition in Western societies (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). They also help "making sense of relevant events" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3) and lead to a simplified interpretation of convoluted concepts (Touri & Koteyko, 2015). As rightly remarked by Johnston (1995, p. 234), "[f]rame analysis, implicitly or explicitly, is about cognitive processes", which are the focal point of the aforementioned research questions tackled by this paper. Because of its sociological dimension, the qualitative analysis conducted for the purpose of this study is based

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[3] *Gazeta Wyborcza* (*GW*) is followed by 897.8k and 798k on X and Facebook respectively, *Rzeczpospolita* (*RP*) by 353.7k and 173k, *The Guardian* (*GU*) by 10.8 million and 8.9 mln, and *The Telegraph* (*TE*) by 3.3 mln and 5 mln.

[4] *GW*: 25 comments/post (Facebook), 8 comments/post (X), *RP*: 14.4 comments/post (Facebook), 2.6 comments/post (X), *GU*: 103.6 comments/post (Facebook), 12.4 comments/post (X), *TE*: 34.5 comments/post (Facebook), 3.9 comments/post (X); data collected by the author; the average number of comments per post based on all posts published in April 2024.

on the Critical Discourse Analysis pillars as set by Wodak (1995), where its aim is to retrieve "opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language" (as cited in Bloomaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 448). Discourse is thus understood here not only as socially conditioned but also socially constitutive, and the "language is studied for what it tells one about society" (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 459).

After both quantitative and qualitative analyses, the data was run into a statistical linear mixed model analysis using the *R* environment in order to confirm the relevance of the results. What has to be mentioned here are the limitations of this particular study. First of all, the analysis comprises only 2674 comments, which is definitely not enough to extrapolate. With such a limited sample, preliminary grounds for possible future studies can be laid, but the results do not provide a reliable source of, what one would call, the generalized image of Generation Z across the commenters of the Polish and British English media. Secondly, for similar studies in the future, with more data, the size effect should also be measured.

3. Results

3.1. Overall sentiment

Firstly, each comment was analyzed in the context of two contrastive sentiments proposed: overtly pro-Generation Z (supporting, praising) and overtly anti-Generation Z (strongly criticizing, sharing negative thoughts). Comments which did not explicitly praise or criticize were categorized as *neutral*. On average, 20% of the comments express anti-Gen Z sentiments, 10% are pro-Gen Z, and 70% are neutral. Commenters on the Polish media profiles are more polarized, as 20% of them express explicit anti-Gen Z sentiment and 10% express pro-Gen Z sentiment. 70% of the comments are neutral in this sense. Commenters on the British media profiles are in equal parts pro- (10%), and anti-Gen Z (10%), with 80% of the comments being neutral. In the context of political affiliations, commenters on the conservative media profiles seem to be more polarized, with 20% of anti- and 10% of pro-Gen Z comments. Liberal commenters express equally pro- (10%) and anti-Gen Z (10%) sentiments. The Polish conservative comment sections seem to be the least neutral, with 30% of anti-, 10% of pro- and 60% of neutral expressions. On the other hand, British liberal comment sections remain the most neutral, with 10% of anti-, 10% of pro-, and 80% of neutral sentiment. The fewest pro- expressions (5%) can be found across the British conservative corpus, where 25% of the comments are anti-Gen Z and 70% are neutral. Among the Polish liberal comments, 20% contain anti-Gen Z sentiment, 10% are pro-Gen Z, and 70% remain neutral.

3.2. Focal references

Pro/verb form	Wyborcza (PL-lib)	Rzeczpospolita (PL-cons)	Guardian (BR-lib)	Telegraph (BR-cons)
1st p. sg	n = 215 (46.8%)	n = 257 (42.7%)	n = 517 (52.5%)	n = 630 (50%)
1st p. pl	n = 54 (11.8%)	n = 128 (21.3%)	n = 178 (18.1%)	n = 224 (17.7%)
2nd p.	n = 190 (41.4%)	n = 217 (36%)	n = 290 (29.4%)	n = 408 (32.3%)

Table 1. Focal references

Table 1 presents a brief summary of the use of focal references across the comment sections. When it comes to the use of pronouns, the use of inflected verbs or pronouns and inflected verbs simultaneously (in the case of the Polish language, which is an inflectional one), the most focal references to the 1st person singular (*me/I*) appear in the British liberal corpus (52.5% of all focal references). The most 1st person plural (*we/us*) references can be found in the Polish conservative corpus (21.3% of all focal references). Most references to the 2nd person (plural and singular) can be found in the Polish liberal corpus (41.4% of all focal references). After running the LMM analysis, it shows that independent variable language/cultural context (*p*-value = .0386) is statistically significant, but political affiliation is not (*p*-value = .087), nor are the compounded variables political affiliation and language/cultural context (*p*-value = 0.75).

3.3. Framing

% (N)	Wyborcza (POL-lib)
10.3% (83)	Direct criticism of Gen Z
9.8% (79)	Direct address to another user
9.2% (74)	Praise of Gen Z's approach to relationships
5.6% (45)	Rhetorical questions
5.1% (41)	Generational divisions are redundant
4.7% (38)	Criticism of *Gazeta Wyborcza*
4.3% (35)	Irony
4.2% (34)	Dystopian visions, criticism of demoralization, fear of relationships
3.7% (30)	Praise of Gen Z's approach to childlessness
2.8% (23)	Children = responsibility
2.7% (22)	Criticism of 'leftist' 'progressive' views
2.2% (18)	Praise of previous generations: Gen Z shouldn't complain
2% (16)	Having children = a neutral decision (not bad nor good)
2% (16)	Criticism of the media overall

Table 2. Framing categories in the Polish liberal corpus[5]

[5] The tables do not total to 100% because one comment oftentimes was classified as belonging to more than one category.

Table 2 presents fourteen most popular frames retrieved from the Polish liberal corpus using inductive framing analysis. Both direct expressions of praise and criticism towards Gen Z are positioned quite high in the table (3rd and 1st spots). However, it has to be mentioned that what is being praised here is the ideological approach to lifestyle choices (e.g., childlessness or open relationships) and not Gen Z as such (e.g., admiring their courage, sensitivity, etc.). The most popular rhetorical devices are: direct address to another user (appearing in 9.2% of all comments), rhetorical questions (5.6%), and irony (4.7%). Nearly 6% of all comments reject the idea of *generations* as redundant and divisive. Interestingly enough, criticism of the publishing medium (*Gazeta Wyborcza*) is also positioned quite highly, appearing in almost 5% of the comments. Similarly, "leftist" and "progressive" views, openly fostered by the editorial board of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, are also criticized in quite a high percentage, i.e., almost 3% of all comments. Over 4% of the commenters present a dystopian vision of the future and criticize the demoralization of the youth, which, according to these commenters, results in the youth's fear of relationships, romantic as well as platonic. Nearly 3% of the commenters believe that bringing children into the world should always be bound by a sense of responsibility, which is not always the case. According to ca. 2% of the commenters, previous generations are "better" than Gen Z, and because of their advantage in life, members of Generation Z should not complain about their living conditions. 2% of the comments mark the choice to have children as neutral, i.e., neither bad nor good, and 2% criticize the media and their negative impact on the public.

% (N)	Rzeczpospolita (POL-cons)
13.1% (92)	Direct criticism of Gen Z
11.8% (83)	Irony
9% (63)	Rhetorical questions
6.6% (46)	Direct praise of Gen Z
6.3% (44)	Burnout: possible only when one works for a long time
5% (35)	Criticism of social media, technology, the internet
4.6% (32)	Work-life balance: criticism of the *rat race* and hustle culture
3% (21)	Criticism of *helicopter parents* as well as *stress-free* parenting
3% (21)	Burnout: possible with anyone
2.8% (20)	Criticism of *Rzeczpospolita*
2.7% (19)	Dystopian visions
2.4% (17)	Criticism of employers
2.3% (16)	Gen Z has a difficult economic situation to overcome
2.1% (15)	Criticism of previous generations

Table 3. Framing categories in the Polish conservative corpus

Table 3 presents the most frequent framing categories in the comment sections sourced from a Polish conservative medium, *Rzeczpospolita*. Similarly to its liberal counterpart, the comment sections in the Polish conservative medium are primarily centered on direct criticism of Gen Z (13.1%). Again, rhetorical devices preferred are irony (appearing in 11.8% of all comments) and rhetorical questions (appearing in 9% of all comments). Unlike in the Polish liberal medium, Gen Z is praised directly in almost 7% of all comments. The two categories elaborating on the issue of burnout (the focal point of one of the articles) stand in direct contrast to one another. Burnout described as possible only for those with long work experience appears in 6.3% of the comments. 3% of the commenters believe that it is possible in any person, regardless of their work experience. 5% of the commenters criticize social media, technology, and the internet as sources of problems young people are struggling with. Almost 5% emphasize the importance of work-life balance and criticize the *hustle culture* and the job market *rat race* as potentially dangerous to mental and physical health. 3% of the commenters do not criticize Gen Z, but their parents on both sides of the spectrum, i.e., *helicopter* (overprotective) and *stress-free* (careless) parents. Again, almost 3% of the comments criticize the publishing medium (*Rzeczpospolita*). Nearly 3% express a dystopian vision (in a sense similar to that found in the liberal medium). Around 2% criticize contemporary employers as abusive and too demanding, and another 2% emphasize the difficult economic situation faced by Gen Z. 2% of the commenters criticize previous generations, i.e., Millennials, Baby Boomers, and Gen X, juxtaposing them with the, implicitly, "better" Generation Z.

% (N)	Guardian (BR-lib)
8.4% (53)	Criticism of the economic situation
7.7% (49)	Direct praise of Gen Z
6.3% (40)	Direct criticism of Gen Z
6.3% (40)	There are no better or worse generations
6% (38)	Generational war: divisions make no sense and are in the best interest of those in power
5.8% (37)	Rhetorical questions
5.2% (33)	Evolution: differences are natural
4.6% (29)	Criticism of *The Guardian*
4.4% (28)	Gen Z has a good situation both socially and economically
3.9% (25)	Attacks on other users
3.6% (23)	Criticism of media, technology, overstimulation
3.3% (21)	Criticism of previous generations
3% (19)	Gen Z is in an economic situation which is difficult to overcome
2.4% (15)	Gen Z is in a difficult social situation

Table 4. Framing categories in the British liberal corpus

Table 4 presents the results of framing analysis across the comments retrieved from the British liberal medium – *The Guardian.* The most frequent frame in the case of British liberal comment sections is criticism of the current economic situation in the United Kingdom (8.4% of all comments), referring to inflation, high prices, and the crisis on the real estate market. Almost 8% of all commenters directly praise Generation Z (e.g., "I applaud Gen Z for their openness", "they have high EQ [emotional intelligence]"), and around 6% directly criticize them. Circa 6% of the commenters emphasize the redundancy of generational divisions by claiming that no generation is better or worse. 6% highlight the issue of *generational wars*, which, in the end, according to the commenters, are in the best interest of those in power. Out of all rhetorical devices, commenters on the British liberal medium's profiles strongly prefer rhetorical questions (appearing in 5.8% of the comments). 5.2% of the commenters pinpoint the evolutionary dimension of the differences observed in the "new generation" and its natural character. Similarly to the situation regarding both Polish media, 4.6% of commenters directly criticize the publishing medium (*The Guardian*). Over 4% of the commenters believe that both the economic and social situations of Gen Z are good. Contrastively, 3% and 2.4% respectively, comment on the difficulties faced by the youth in the areas of economy and social life. Almost 4% of all commenters attack another online user by, e.g., mocking their flawed spelling or directly insulting them (as in "you a-hole", "you are confused"). 3.6% criticize media, technology, and the internet as having a negative impact on youth. 3.3% criticize the previous generations, i.e., Millennials, Baby Boomers, and Gen X.

% (N)	Telegraph (BR-cons)
15% (144)	Direct criticism of Gen Z
11.5% (110)	Rhetorical questions
5.7% (54)	Everyone in every generation is different
5.1% (49)	Criticism of previous generations
5% (48)	Criticism of parents
4.6% (44)	Irony
4.3% (41)	Attacks on other users
4.1% (39)	My kids/grandkids story
3.8% (37)	Direct praise of Gen Z
3% (29)	Gen Z is in an economic situation which is difficult to overcome
2.8% (27)	Dystopian visions: fear for the future, lost generation
2.8% (27)	Criticism of the system (pensions, welfare, dole, donations)
2.5% (24)	Praise for previous generations
2.3% (22)	Generational wars
2.3% (22)	Criticism of social media, media, technology, the internet

Table 5. Framing categories in the British conservative corpus

Table 5 presents the most frequent categories in the British conservative corpus, i.e., comment sections in *The Telegraph*. In the case of the British conservative medium, the most popular category is direct criticism of Gen Z (15% of all comments), as opposed to direct praise (3.7% of all comments). Again, rhetorical devices preferred by the commenters are rhetorical questions (appearing in 11.5% of all comments) and irony (in 4.6% of all comments). The commenters in this corpus build their narrative around the idea of individual differences, suggesting that generalization is redundant (5.7%). Over 5% of the commenters criticize the previous generation, and 5% criticize parents in the same context as in the Polish conservative medium, i.e., for either being too gentle or too controlling. 4.3% of the commenters attack other online users (e.g., "you sound like a moron", "ridiculous statement"), and over 4% share personal insights from their lives by providing stories of their children or grandchildren as the main protagonists. 3% of the commenters emphasize the difficult economic situation that Gen Z has to face. On a similar note, 2.8% criticize the British system, especially the functioning of the welfare state and pension structure. 2.5% of the commenters praise previous generations as "better" when juxtaposed with Generation Z. 2.3% of all comments refer to the aforementioned idea of generational wars and their utility to those in power. 2.3% criticize social media, technology, and the internet as having a negative influence on youth. Although the criticism of the publishing medium (*The Telegraph*) is not present in the first fourteen frames (as in the case of all remaining comment sections), it is nonetheless observed in 2% of all comments.

As apparent in all corpora, criticism of Generation Z is primarily centered on the following concepts: "stupidity", "naiveness", "lack of respect", "bad work ethics", "laziness", "entitlement", and "selfishness". On the other hand, comments expressing praise describe Gen Z most frequently using the descriptions: "helpful", "courageous", "direct", or "focused on mental health".

When framing is concerned, LMM analysis shows statistical significance for the independent variables of political affiliation (p-value = .0103) and political affiliation combined with the language/cultural context (p-value = .0471) No statistical significance has been observed exclusively for the language/culture context (p-value = .0563).

4. Discussion

Based on the results presented above, the following answers to the research questions can be suggested. Firstly (RQ1), when it comes to the general perception of Generation Z across the Facebook comment sections of liberally and conservatively affiliated media in Poland and in the United Kingdom, it can be said that the perception of Gen Z is neutral to negative, with only 10% of the commenters overtly expressing their support/praise of Gen Z members and 20% explicitly criticizing them. On the topic of Gen Z criticism, it is the most popular category of comments, with the exception of *The Guardian*, where it is nonetheless situated quite high as the 3rd most

frequent category. Commenters, however, are not unified in their criticism, as words of praise appear quite frequently as well. Therefore, it can be inferred that the commenters do not have a clear vision of the prototypical representation of Generation Z, which might be due to the aforementioned lack of a clear-cut definition. A large number of commenters do not believe in generational divisions at all and highlight the conceptual metaphor of (*generational*) *war* as fed to society in order to prevent it from unifying in a crisis. All comment sections criticize, at least to some extent, social media and widely available technology. According to these comments, it is the social media that are responsible for the poor social skills of Generation Z, and not an innate inability to function in society.

To answer RQ2, it has to be said that there are no statistically significant differences in the frames employed by the commenters, dependent exclusively on the language/culture context. That is, the image of Gen Z does not significantly differ between the lenses of Polish and British English conceptualization. Still, the difference in explicit expressions of pro- or anti- stance and use of focal references is statistically significant. While commenters on the Polish media profiles are slightly more likely to take an open pro- or anti-stance, commenters in the British media profiles stay more neutral. Additionally, Polish commenters tend to build their narrative around the 2nd person slightly more, while the British prefer to structure their comments by centering the 1st person singular, which might suggest more collective thinking in the case of the Polish commenters and more individual thinking across the British, which reinforces Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk's (2017b, p. 361) conclusion on the Polish online commenters as "characterized […] [as] more collectivist, more restrained and showing a higher power distance in society".

In the case of RQ3, statistical analysis shows there are significant differences in the construction of narratives between the commenters of liberal and conservative media. It can be said that commenters on liberal media profile are less likely to take an explicit pro-/anti- stance. 80% of the comments posted under materials published by the liberal media can be classified as neutral, 10% as pro-, and 10% as anti- Gen Z. On the other hand, 20% of conservative comment sections express anti-Gen Z sentiments, and 10% take a pro-Gen Z stance, which leaves 70% of the comments neutral. Moreover, commenters on liberal media profiles use quantitatively more positive frames: they praise the members of Generation Z's approach to different lifestyle choices, such as relationships or reproduction. What is more, individual differences between members of specific generations are often emphasized by the commenters on conservative media profiles, which indicates a redundancy of generational divisions. Liberal commenters, on average, agree with such sentiments but have stronger feelings on that topic, as can be observed in the additional component of disagreement with systemic divisions expressed in their comments. Additionally, comments on the conservative part frequently mention poor parenting methods fostered by the parents of Gen Z. This highlights how critical family structure is in the eyes of the conservative media

commenters. Such comments are scarce in the liberal media, which might indicate the conservative commenters' stronger attachment to one of the critical traditional values: family.

5. Conclusion

Just in March 2023, over 20 articles with the key word "Generation Z" were published in *The Guardian*, 12 in *The Telegraph*, 8 in *Gazeta Wyborcza,* and 5 in *Rzeczpospolita*. These numbers show the great interest of the media in publishing content concerning Generation Z. The majority of these articles aim at evoking controversy by using headlines such as "The Generation of snowflakes on the job market",[6] "[…] If only it wasn't so easy to laugh at them [Gen Z]…",[7] "Why 'really annoying' Gen Z's lack of work ethic riles the rest of us"[8] or "Generation Z comes back down to earth".[9] It is not surprising that such headlines spark debate in the comment sections, and thus add to the web traffic so desired by the journalists, as it increases their monetary gains. This explains why criticism of the publishing medium is prevalent in all comment sections; the readers are well aware of the journalistic tricks and manipulation employed. The majority of the articles do not necessarily present Generation Z in a negative light; they rather report behaviors observed and highlight social phenomena, such as "lazy girl job",[10] "quiet quitting",[11] "situationships",[12] "work-life balance",[13] or sensitivity to mental health issues[14]. However, the headings, and especially keywords with negative connotations, suggest quite the opposite. This sparks controversy, provoking many online users to comment without even reading an article, especially on social media, where one can immediately react to content. It has to be kept in mind that the media can be predatory and oftentimes feed on the most basic human instincts, such as self-defense mechanisms evoked by a sense of danger. This is particularly feasible in cases such as the one discussed in this paper: online debate played in a highly politicized context. Anderson and Huntington (2017, p. 1), quoting past research on the topic of incivility, emphasize "how the use of and exposure to incivility generates anger, anxiety, or mental distress, and can lead to aggression […] and hostile communication", and this issue is especially acute in the case of political discourse, as

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[6] *Gazeta Wyborcza* [transl. by the author; orig. in Pol: „Pokolenie płatków śniegu na rynku pracy"].

[7] *The Guardian.*

[8] *The Telegraph.*

[9] *Rzeczpospolita* [transl. by the author; orig. in Pol: "Pokolenie Z schodzi na ziemię"].

[10] A job that is not demanding, easy to quit, talked about in e.g., *Rzeczpospolita* (Popko, 2024), *Wyborcza* (Korcz 2023), *The Telegraph* (Steafel, 2024).

[11] The least effort rule, in which an employee provides the bare minimum at work, discussed in, e.g., *Rzeczpospolita* (Popko, 2024).

[12] No-commitment romantic relationship, discussed in, e.g., *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Kuffel, 2023).

[13] Discussed in, e.g., *The Telegraph* (Steafel, 2024).

[14] Discussed in, e.g., *The Guardian* (Williams, 2022).

it is political incivility that is said to be the most prominent. As remarked by Kingstone (2021, p. 7), "when generational identities lead to a sense of conflict over resources or even simply of incompatibility between generational groups, they can become socially and politically harmful," and that is what we, as a society, should be aware of.

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SUMMARY

Keywords: sociolinguistics, Generation Z, generational wars, political language, contrastive linguistics

The aim of the study presented in this paper is to describe the conceptual image of Generation Z as portrayed in the Facebook comment sections of liberal and conservative newspapers in Poland and in the United Kingdom. The results show that the commenters do not have a unified image of Generation Z. The general sentiment presented by the commenters is neutral to negative, with criticism of Gen Z being the most frequent frame used across all comment sections, based on a presupposed stupidity, naiveté, lack of respect, bad work ethics, laziness, entitlement, and selfishness. On the other hand, words of praise emphasize Gen

Z's courage, helpfulness, focus on mental health, and directness. Commenters on the liberal media profiles are more likely to take the pro-Gen Z stance and can be characterized by more positive frames, while those on the conservative media express an anti-Gen Z stance more frequently.

STRESZCZENIE

Opowiedz mi o Gen Z: Profilowanie polityczne sekcji komentarzy w mediach społecznościowych

Słowa kluczowe: socjolingwistyka, Pokolenie Z, wojny generacyjne, język polityczny, lingwistyka kontrastywna

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest opisanie obrazu Pokolenia Z, jaki tworzą użytkownicy Facebooka komentujący treści polskich i brytyjskich mediów o profilach liberalnych i konserwatywnych. Wyniki pokazują, że komentujący nie mają do końca ustrukturyzowanego pojęcia Pokolenia Z. Ogólnie wyrażają oni swoje opinie jako neutralne, jakkolwiek z pewną tendencją negatywną. Krytyka Pokolenia Z jest najczęstszą kategorią pośród wszystkich sekcji komentarzy, a argumentowana jest domniemaną głupotą, naiwnością, brakiem szacunku, etyki pracy, lenistwem, uprzywilejowaniem i samolubnością Pokolenia Z. Z drugiej strony pojawiają się słowa pochwały, podkreślające odwagę, chęć udzielania pomocy, koncentrację na zdrowiu psychicznym oraz bezpośredniość. Sekcje komentarzy w mediach liberalnych częściej bezpośrednio wyrażają stanowisko *pro*-Pokolenie Z oraz charakteryzują się większą liczbą pozytywnych kategorii komentarzy, podczas gdy komentujący w mediach konserwatywnych częściej otwarcie wyrażają swoje stanowisko *anty*.