

DO REPRESENTATIVES OF DIFFERENT GENERATIONS IDENTIFY WITH THEIR STEREOTYPICAL CHARACTERISTICS?

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Purpose: This article will aim to show to what degree the representatives of the examined generations BB, X, Y and Z identify with their generation's stereotypical characteristics and indicate the fundamental differences concerning the values they prefer in the workplace.

Design/methodology/approach: The applied research method was a diagnostic survey using a questionnaire survey conducted employing the CAWI technique. The study was conducted between 25 October and 07 November 2020, on a sample of 1009 respondents from 4 generation groups (Baby Boomers, Z, Y and X). The spatial scope of the research covered the entire territory of Poland, and the samples were selected according to population size.

Findings: Significant differences can be observed between the representatives of the surveyed generations regarding their subjective assessment of belonging to a given generation. Studied generations vary regarding preferred work values.

Practical implications: Identification and analysis of the fundamental values esteemed at the workplace by representatives of particular generations operating in the labor market, along with a subjective assessment of their belonging to a given generation, can significantly increase the employer's understanding of the needs, expectations, and motivations their employees.

Originality/value: The authors concluded that further research on age diversity in teams and organizations is still very much needed. First of all, the right approach to generational diversity can have a significant impact on organizational performance and employee engagement levels, and second of all, available research results in the literature are inconclusive.

Keywords: multigenerational, generation BB, X, Y and Z, labor market, work values.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

A large diversity of employees characterizes contemporary trends in the global labor market regarding culture, generation, knowledge, professional and life experience. The process of progressive ageing of the Polish society results in the simultaneous presence of four generations of employees on the labor market: Baby Boomers (BB), people born in the years 1945-1964, X - people born in the years 1965-1980, Y - people born in the years 1980-1995 and the youngest generation Z, born after 1995 (Smolbik-Jęczmień, 2019; Warwas et al., 2016)¹.

Various characteristics of the above-mentioned generational groups can be found in the field literature. However, it should be recalled that these are not homogeneous groups, and it is often possible to observe some differentiation also within particular generations (Lewicka, 2017; Lubrańska, 2016; Gadomska-Lila, 2015; Kołodziejczyk-Olczak, 2014; Rogozińska-Pawelczyk, 2014). Moreover, the assumptions existing in business practice regarding what is most valuable for particular generations, their system of values, their needs, and drivers are often unconfirmed in the dynamically changing conditions of the organization's functioning. Consequently, they should be continuously modified or even rejected - this mainly applies to bias and stereotypes, which can only do much harm (see more: Lipka, Waszczak, 2017). In order to competently manage generational diversity, managers should learn how to use the potential of different age groups cooperating in the labor market in the most effective manner.

In order to determine whether the research area on generational differences and preferred work values forms a coherent whole or whether there are some discrepancies and gaps, the authors conducted a literature review by searching the Web of Science database. Next, the search results were analyzed in terms of the number of publications per year and country. Based on this review, the authors concluded that further research on age diversity in teams and organizations is still very much needed. First of all, the right approach to generational diversity can have a significant impact on organizational performance and employee engagement levels, and second of all, available research results in the literature are inconclusive (Heger, 2007; Zingheim, Schuster, 2006; Constanza, Finklestein, 2015; Rogozińska-Pawelczyk, 2014; Smolbik-Jęczmień, 2017; Warwas et al., 2016).

In the field literature, generations are often referred to as an age group consisting of people born at approximately the same time (Marshall, 2006, p. 240). Thus, generations are formed by people born in the same decade, or representatives of the same birth year, assuming that successive generations, in demographic terms, appear on average every 20 years. It should be noted that the great acceleration of social changes has led to the fact that successive generations appear even at intervals of 10-15 years (William, 2020). In this case, generations are defined as an identifiable group (cohort) that is divided by years of birth, social location and significant

¹ Due to the limited scope of this paper, the authors have refrained from presenting the already well-known characteristics of the above generations.

life events at critical stages of development (Kupperschmidt, 2000, p. 66) or as a group of individuals who share common experiences of entering the system at the same time (Joshi et al., 2011; Parry, Urwin, 2011). Generational diversity may contribute to forming new age-related competencies and accumulating diverse knowledge and experience, which, in turn, may reduce the number of mistakes or increase problem-solving skills, which is particularly important under conditions of high uncertainty and volatility of the environment (Smolbik-Jęczmień, 2019; Gadomska-Lila, 2015). However, in terms of potential threats, age differentiation may lead to significant differences in preferred values in the workplace, which may adversely affect the cohesion of multigenerational teams and the development of cooperation and collaboration between employees.

Methods

The applied research method was a diagnostic survey using a questionnaire survey conducted employing the CAWI technique. The study was conducted between 25 October and 07 November 2020 on a sample of 1009 respondents from 4 generation groups (Baby Boomers, Z, Y and X). The spatial scope of the research covered the entire territory of Poland, and the samples were selected according to population size.

Generation Y was the most represented generation in the study with 404 people (40%), followed by generation X with 374 people (37.1%), the representatives of the oldest generation BB with 130 people (12.9%) and 101 people from generation Z (10%).

Having diagnosed the research gap, the authors formulated the following hypotheses:

H.1 - There are significant differences among the representatives of the studied generations BB, X, Y and Z regarding identification with the values preferred in a given generational group and

H.2 - There are significant differences among the representatives of the studied generations regarding their preferred values in the workplace².

² More on the differences in values esteemed at work among the surveyed representatives of generations coexisting in the Polish labour market: Employer Value Proposition (EVP) from the perspective of representatives of coexisting generations in the Polish labour market - reflections from the research (Paleń-Tondel, Smolbik-Jęczmień, 2021).

Results

First, hypothesis H.1 concerning the subjective assessment of their generation affiliation by the surveyed respondents was verified. For this purpose, descriptions of particular generations BB, X, Y and Z (the so-called stereotypical characteristics of generations) were prepared. Then, the respondents were asked to choose the description they most identified with (not specifying to which generation the description belongs).

According to the research, most respondents identified with the description of generation X - as much as 38.3%. Then 25% of the respondents identified with the description of the Z generation, and 22.2% identified with the description of the Baby Boomers generation. Finally, the smallest number of respondents - 14.6% - chose generation Y's description as the most appropriate for their characteristics (Figure 1).

In the next step, the respondents were asked to make a subjective assessment of their belonging to particular generations (as the subjective feeling about their generation affiliation does not always coincide with their birth date). According to the research, 17.4% of the respondents feel subjectively toward the X generation, followed by the Y generation - 12.5%. Next, the respondents declared their affiliation to generation Z at the level of 5.3%, while the smallest group are those who subjectively assessed their affiliation to the BB generation - only 3.3%.

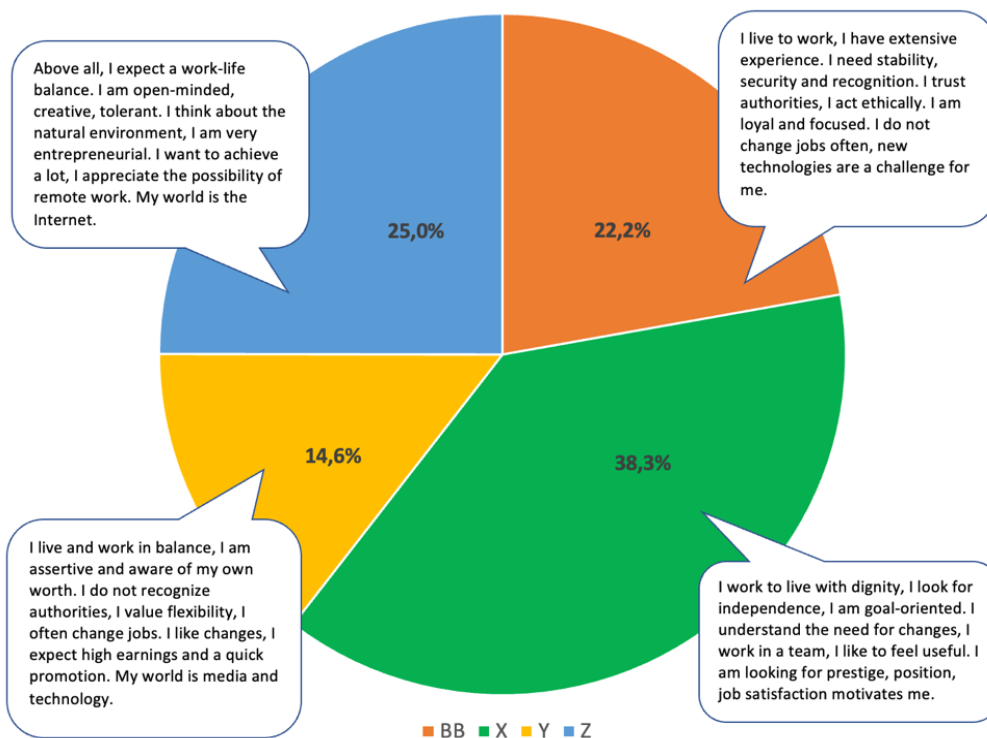


Figure 1. Identification of the surveyed respondents with the descriptions of individual generations.

Source: own elaboration based on the conducted research.

Finally, it should be noted that as many as 40.7% of the respondents had difficulties with a subjective assessment of their generation affiliation, and 20.8% of the respondents stated that they do not identify with any generation. Altogether, they constitute a large group of 61.5% of all respondents (Figure 2).

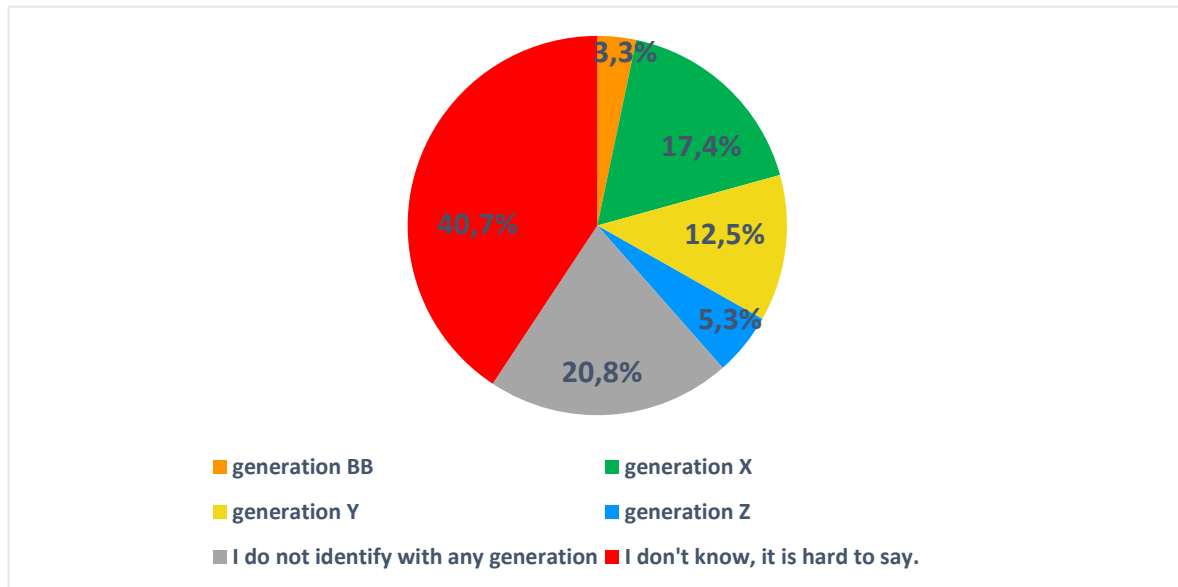


Figure 2. The surveyed respondents' subjective assessment of their generation affiliation.

Source: own elaboration based on the conducted research.

It is worth emphasizing an extensive internal differentiation within individual generations. Generation X most strongly identified their subjective generation affiliation with 56.3% by age. However, 27.3% of them feel they belong to the Y generation, and 9.4% identify with the oldest BB generation. Generation Z ranks second regarding the subjective assessment of their generation affiliation, amounting to 37% by age. At the same time, as many as 34.8% of them subjectively identify with generation Y, and 23.9% with generation X. Generation Y is the third generation with the highest subjective assessment of their generation affiliation, 34.5% by age. Here, too, one can observe considerable variation within the generation. As many as 48.3% of these individuals feel belonging to the X generation, and 10.3% to the youngest generation Z. The oldest generation BB holds the last position in this comparison. Only 17.7% of its representatives identify with their generation. However, as much as 37.5% subjectively assess they belong to the Y generation and 22.5% to the Z and X generations (Figure 3).

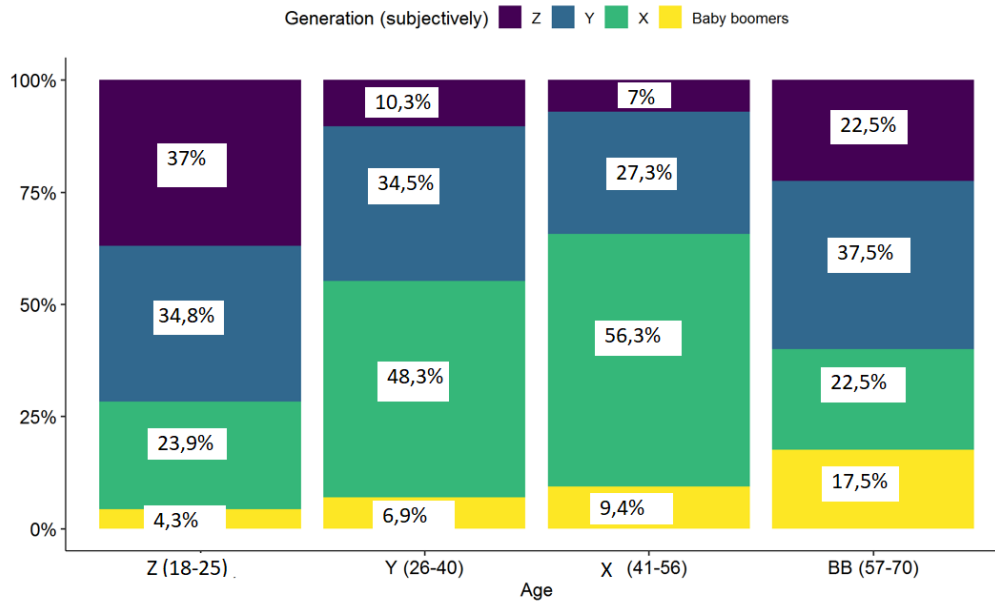


Figure 3. Differentiation of subjective assessment of generation affiliation within generations.

Source: own elaboration based on the conducted research.

Due to those points, one should not be guided by age as the only criterion for belonging to particular generations. It is also worth diagnosing which generation individual employees feel they belong to.

Next, the second hypothesis was verified – ‘There are significant differences among the representatives of the studied generations regarding their preferred values in the workplace’. For this purpose, a set of 23 values esteemed in the workplace was analyzed, namely: work following interests, a sense of autonomy, variety of tasks, the possibility of promotion, training following one's own needs, high salary, job security, job stability, employer brand prestige, good atmosphere, relationships, having a mentor, company support in professional development, the flexibility of working time, possibility of remote work, compliance of the position with education, work-life balance, the possibility of frequent trips, no need to travel, easy commuting, high level of technology, sense of influence on organization development, benefits (e.g. car, multisport, awards), the company's care for the natural environment and the company's activities for the local community, charity activities³. The obtained data were subjected to statistical analysis (mean, standard deviation, Student's t-test). Subsequently, each of the 23 values esteemed in the workplace was analyzed (P1-P 23 variables), where their importance was evidenced by the rating given by the respondents according to the Likert scale from 1 - not important to 5 - very important. The following assumptions were made in the analysis of the research results: the mean numbers of the variables were calculated and subtracted from the original numbers, which allowed to simplify the interpretation as follows.

³ The set of 23 work values esteemed in the workplace was created in collaboration with five experts (including two HRM managers, one HR Business Partner, 1 owner of a successful recruitment agency and 1 business coach) (see further Paleń-Tondel, Smolbik-Jęczmień, 2021).

If the obtained number of the tested value is 0, the weight of the value for a given generation is the same as the average for Poland. If the number is greater than 0, the weight of the given value is greater than the average for Poland.

As the research shows, a significant differentiation of the weights of values preferred at work among the surveyed generations can be noticed. Thus, the highest ratings of values esteemed in the workplace can be found for the oldest generation (Baby Boomers), to whom almost all values (except for benefits and work-life balance) achieve ratings above the average in Poland. Representatives of this generation attach great importance to the prestige of the employer's brand, the compatibility of the position with education, the company's support for professional development and the company's care for the environment. On the other hand, generation Y and partially X representatives assessed almost all 23 values significantly below the average (except for the possibility of promotion, remuneration, obtaining benefits and charity activities, which were slightly above the national average for generation X) (Figure 4).

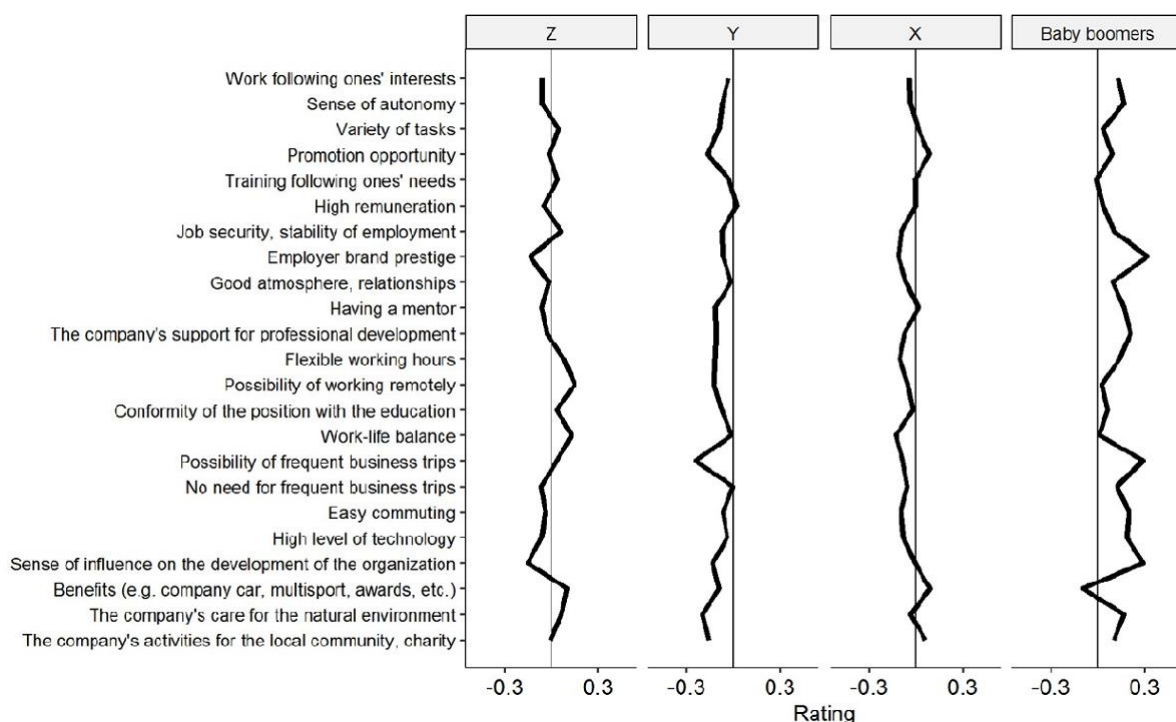


Figure 4. Preferred work values esteemed by respondents from the Z, Y, X and BB generations.

Source: own elaboration based on the conducted research.

Another finding of the study is that for generation Y, the sense of autonomy and possibility of promotion is less critical compared to the highest importance of the salary level and similar to the national average importance of work-life balance. On the other hand, the preferences of the values esteemed at work by the youngest generation Z largely coincide with the average in Poland. However, they attach more importance to work-life balance, benefits, remote work and flexible working time, task variety and training tailored to their needs. Therefore, the second hypothesis was confirmed.

The weights of values esteemed in the workplace are also interesting among the respondents who did not identify with any generation (20.8% of all respondents). The highest rank among values esteemed in the workplace in this group was obtained by a good atmosphere at work - slightly above the national average. In contrast, high salaries and ensuring a work-life balance were assessed at the level of average values for Poland (Figure 5).

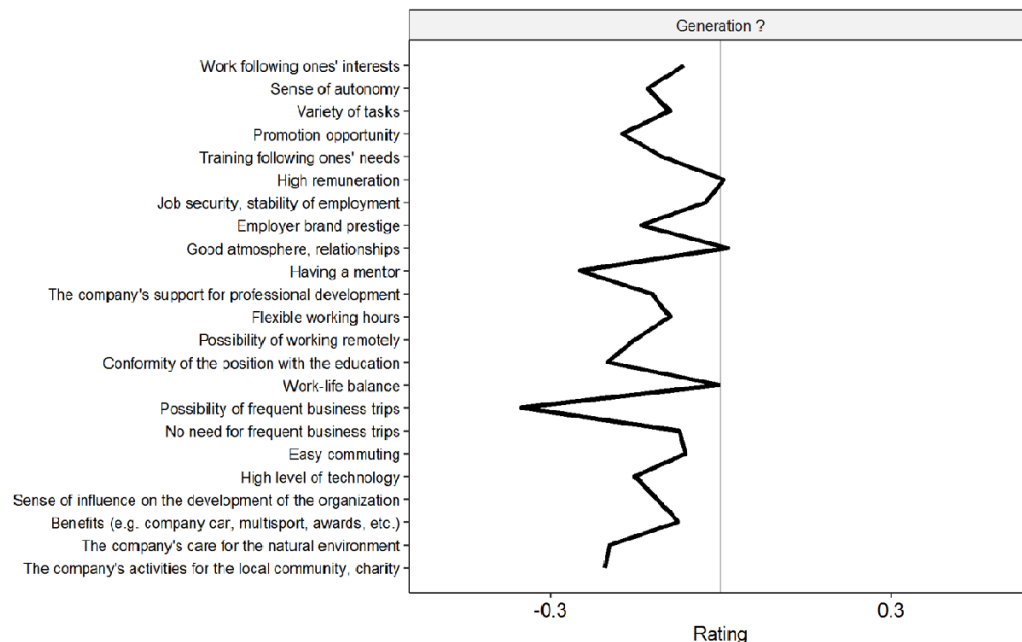


Figure 5. Preferred workplace values esteemed by respondents who did not identify with any generation
Source: own elaboration based on the conducted research.

About other values appreciated in the workplace, they are significantly below the average for Poland. The aspects of work least valued by this group of respondents are frequent business trips, having a mentor, the possibility of remote working and promotion, charitable activities and the company's care for the natural environment.

Discussion

It is worth quoting the research results on values esteemed in the workplace by representatives of generations coexisting in the labor market, published in the Randstad Employer Brand Report in 2021 (Report, 2021). According to the data presented, the BB generation needs attractive remuneration and benefits (80%) and employment stability (76%). Employment stability is equally important for the X and Y generations (70%) and the least important for the Z (60%). It is noteworthy that the representatives of all surveyed generations attach relatively high importance to maintaining the balance between private and professional life (from 58% to 60%). Compared to the other generations, generation Z highly

values a pleasant atmosphere at work (78%) and the possibility of professional development (74%). According to the report, the importance of professional development has increased significantly compared to last year, and this is true for all age groups (Y - 72%; X - 60% and BB - 54%).

Summary

As a result of the conducted research, significant differences can be observed between the representatives of the surveyed generations regarding their subjective assessment of belonging to a given generation (representatives of generation X - 56.3%, generation Z - 37%, generation Y - 34.5%, and the smallest number of only 17.5% for the oldest BB generation). What is significant, as many as 40.7% of the respondents had difficulties with subjective assessment of their generation affiliation, and 20.8% of the respondents stated they did not identify with any generation.

However, despite differences in the degree of identification of the examined generations' representatives with values preferred in a given generation group, one may observe a relatively traditional approach to values they appreciate in the workplace. For example, among the representatives of the BB generation, these are such values as the amount of remuneration, compliance of the position with education or a sense of autonomy. For generation X, first of all, the possibility of remote work; for Y, the most important values are benefits and the possibility of promotion. Finally, the youngest generation expects flexible working time and a guarantee of work-life balance.

Identification and analysis of the fundamental values esteemed at the workplace by representatives of particular generations operating in the labor market, along with a subjective assessment of their belonging to a given generation, can significantly increase the employer's understanding of the needs, expectations, and motivations their employees. It will also improve communication and cooperation in a team and strengthen generational solidarity. As a result, those processes should improve employee retention, build their commitment, and achieve general organizational success. As this poses a major challenge both for managers leading multigenerational teams and for the members of those teams, the authors hope that the studies conducted will enrich the research on similarities and differences between generations present in the current labor market, and the results obtained will be helpful in understanding the general trends in this area.

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