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SELF-PERCEPTION OF TRAITS ATTRIBUTED TO THE BABY BOOMERS, GENERATION X, Y, AND Z: A COHORT-BASED APPROACH

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Purpose: This article examines whether traits attributed in the literature to Baby Boomers and Generations X, Y, and Z are reflected in employees' self-perception when generational membership is defined by year of birth. It also tests whether some of these traits may be transgenerational, that is, self-assessed in a similar manner across age cohorts.
Design/methodology/approach: The study was conducted in two stages. First, a literature review was carried out to identify inconsistencies in the definition of age cohorts and to map the traits attributed to individual generations. Second, a quantitative cross-sectional survey was administered using a standardised online questionnaire.
Sample and analysis: The sample comprised 230 respondents. In all statistical tests, the significance threshold was set at $p < 0.05$. Self-perception levels were compared by age using the Kruskal–Wallis ANOVA.
Findings: For most of the analysed traits, no statistically significant differences were observed between generations. Similar levels of self-perception across age cohorts may therefore indicate the transgenerational character of these traits.
Research limitations/implications: The study has several limitations. In the theoretical part, only a limited number of sources were reviewed, and the set of traits was derived from a single publication. This decision was motivated by substantial discrepancies in the literature concerning cohort boundaries, which may affect the reliability of any synthesis of generation-specific traits. In the empirical part, the study relied on self-perception rather than an objective measure of trait importance, and the number of responses varied markedly across cohorts.
Practical implications: The findings suggest that HR practices should not rely on simplified generational assumptions, but rather on a careful analysis of employees' actual traits and competencies regardless of age.
Social implications: The study highlights the need for greater caution when designing actions based solely on generational categories anchored in age cohorts. This may, in turn, encourage a revised understanding of the role of intergenerational and age-diverse teams.
Originality/value: The study's originality lies in its empirical verification of assumptions found in the literature concerning generational distinctiveness.
Keywords: age cohort, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, Generation Z, self-perception, generational traits.
Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Intergenerational differences are a recurring topic in management research (Costanza et al., 2023). Although robust evidence for generation-specific differences remains limited, many publications continue to attribute distinctive traits to particular generations (Ravid et al., 2024). Consequently, empirical studies increasingly seek to determine whether these traits are in fact differentiated across groups defined by year of birth. The present article addresses this gap by confronting generational characteristics described in the literature with employees' declared self-perception. Specifically, it examines whether traits attributed to Baby Boomers and Generations X, Y, and Z are self-reported more strongly by members of those cohorts and whether some of these traits are better understood as transgenerational. A further objective is to demonstrate the extent to which different authors assign different birth-year ranges to the same generations.

Based on the literature review, the following main hypothesis was formulated: traits described in the literature as characteristic of particular generations (BB, X, Y, and Z), defined within specific age ranges, are not self-reported as significantly more descriptive by members of those generations than by members of other generations. The supplementary hypothesis states that most traits regarded as characteristic of these generations display similar levels of self-perception across all cohorts, indicating a transgenerational pattern in the self-perception dimension.

The study was also guided by two research questions:

1. Do individuals belonging to a given age group (age cohort) declare a higher level of self-perception of traits identified in the literature as characteristic of that generation compared with representatives of other generations?
2. Are there transgenerational traits, that is, traits that are self-assessed similarly regardless of age cohort?

2. Generational Classification be Age Cohort

Even a cursory review of the literature reveals that age-cohort boundaries are defined inconsistently. The time frames assigned to individual generations vary markedly across authors (Rudolph et al., 2021).

Although a growing body of research questions the empirical validity of generational differences − particularly because age, life stage, and cohort effects are difficult to disentangle − human resource management practice continues to rely on labels such as Baby Boomers and Generations X, Y, and Z (Parry, Urwin, 2021). The Polish literature reviewed for the purposes

of this article also contains numerous inconsistent birth-year ranges assigned to particular generations.

Baby Boomers. The range most frequently adopted in the literature is 1946-1964 (Nowak, 2025; Sidor-Rządkowska, 2018; Woźny, 2013; Krzemińska, 2021; Wojtoszek, 2023). K. Wojtaszczyk (2016) proposes 1946-1969, B. Tulgan (2009) gives 1949–1964, whereas D. Pendergast (2009) and A. Rogozińska-Pawełczuk et al. (2019) define this cohort as spanning 1943-1960.

These differences are also visible in the definition of the age cohort for Generation X. The ranges indicated in the literature differ, often substantially. Generation X most commonly includes individuals born in 1965-1980 (Nowak, 2025; Woźny, 2013; Przybylski, 2023; Wojciechowska et al., 2025) and 1965-1979 (Rogozińska-Pawełczuk et al., 2019; Krzemińska, 2021; Sidor-Rządkowska, 2018; Wojtoszek, 2023). K. Wojtaszczyk (2016) points to the much later period 1970-1979, whereas D. Pendergast (2009) indicates the much earlier 1961-1981, and B. Przybylski (2023) gives 1961-1983. B. Tulgan (2009) also lists 1965-1976.

Establishing an unambiguous birth-year range is also problematic for Generation Y. The literature cites 1980-1994 (Nowak, 2025; Rogozińska-Pawełczuk et al., 2019; Sidor-Rządkowska, 2018), 1981-1996 (Wojtoszek, 2023; Wojciechowska et al., 2025), 1981-1995 (Woźny, 2013), 1980-1989 (Krzemińska, 2021), 1982-2002 (Pendergast, 2009), 1980-1999 (Przybylski, 2023), 1980-2004 (Wojtaszczyk, 2016), and 1977-1990 (Tulgan, 2009).

Generation Z is likewise defined differently in terms of age cohort. D. Nowak states that individuals belonging to Generation Z were born in 1995-2015 (Nowak, 2025). The range 1997--2012 is supported by two authors in the reviewed literature, G. Wojciechowska et al. (2025) and K. Wojtoszek (2023). A different range, 2003-2014, is given by D. Pendergast (2009). The subject literature also reports ranges beginning in 1990 (Krzemińska, 2021), 1991 (Tulgan, 2009), 1995 (Woźny, 2013; Sidor-Rządkowska, 2018; Rogozińska-Pawełczuk et al., 2019), and as late as 2000 (Przybylski, 2023), with some ranges extending to the present.

Table 1.
Earliest and latest starting and ending dates of cohort ranges reported in the literature for individual generations

Earliest/latest year of cohort start				
Generation	**BB min./max.**	**X min./max.**	**Y min./max.**	**Z min./max.**
Year	1943/1949	1961/1970	1977/1982	1990/2003
Earliest/latest year of cohort end				
Generation	**BB min./max.**	**X min./max.**	**Y min./max.**	**Z min./max.**
Year	1960/1969	1976/1983	1989/2004	2012/present

Source: Authors' own work based on: (Nowak, 2025), (Sidor-Rządkowska, 2018), (Woźny, 2013), (Krzemińska, 2021), (Wojtoszek, 2023), (Wojtaszczyk, 2016), (Tulgan, 2009), (Pendergast, 2009), (Rogozińska-Pawełczuk et al., 2019), (Przybylski, 2023), (Wojciechowska et al., 2025).

This review demonstrates substantial definitional inconsistency in cohort boundaries. At the extremes, the difference between the earliest and latest proposed cohort onset reaches 13 years, while the corresponding difference for cohort end dates reaches 15 years. Comparing studies solely by generational label − without checking the underlying age cohort − may therefore seriously undermine the validity of interpretation and comparison.

3. Traits Commonly Attributed to Individual Generations (Nowak, 2025)

Generations currently active in the labour market are described as possessing distinct constellations of competencies and traits shaped by the social, historical, and technological conditions of their formative years. These conditions are assumed to affect both their approach to work and their expectations regarding professional development. This source was selected because of its recency and because it offers a comprehensive discussion of the issues under investigation.

3.1. Baby Boomers (1946-1964)

Members of the Baby Boomer generation entered adulthood during a period of labour-market expansion and economic growth. In Poland, work was then widely perceived as a moral obligation, which often fostered long-term attachment to one employer and a sense of security rooted in occupational stability. Competence and adherence to order, expressed through clear hierarchical structures, were also highly valued. Accordingly, the literature most often associates this generation with loyalty and stability, respect for hierarchy, and experience combined with mentoring.

3.2. Generation X (1965-1979)

Generation X comprises individuals born between 1965 and 1979. They are commonly described as highly self-reliant and are sometimes referred to as “latchkey children” or “children of the Polish People’s Republic.” Because their parents were largely absorbed by paid work and because their formative years coincided with systemic transformation, they are said to have developed such traits as independence and pragmatism, a strong results orientation and adaptability.

3.3. Generation Y (1980-1994)

Generation Y includes people who grew up during digitalisation and entered the labour market at the turn of the millennium; for this reason, they are also referred to as Millennials. Modern technologies are natural work tools for this cohort, and its members tend to expect innovation and flexibility from employment. They also place strong emphasis on personal development and are motivated by job satisfaction. They are willing to work in environments that are demanding, provided that these environments also offer a sense of purpose and agency. The traits most commonly ascribed to this generation are technological proficiency, a need for meaning and development, and multitasking combined with flexibility.

3.4. Generation Z (1995-2015)

The youngest generation analysed is distinguished by the seamless integration of the digital and offline worlds. The internet constitutes a natural environment for both professional and private functioning. Members of this cohort communicate rapidly through multiple online channels, treat work–life balance as a baseline expectation, and articulate their needs clearly. Having grown up amid multiculturalism and diversity, they tend to value independence, including occupational independence. The literature therefore associates this generation primarily with digital mobility, openness and tolerance, and entrepreneurship combined with independence.

4. Generational Characteristics and Employees' Self-Perception: Empirical Evidence

4.1. Research Methodology

The empirical part of the study took the form of a quantitative cross-sectional survey administered via a standardised online questionnaire. A comparative design was adopted: each participant received the same set of questions and was asked to indicate the extent to which the listed traits described their functioning at work. By design, these assessments were subjective.

The purpose of this procedure was to determine whether traits attributed in the literature to specific generations (BB, X, Y, and Z) are declared as more self-descriptive primarily by members of the corresponding generation, identified by year of birth, or whether they display a transgenerational pattern and are self-assessed similarly regardless of age cohort.

Respondents were assigned to generations using the age ranges proposed by Nowak (2025): BB (1946-1964), X (1965-1979), Y (1980-1994), and Z (1995-2015). This source was chosen because of its recency and its comprehensive treatment of the topic.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The sample comprised 230 respondents (N = 230): BB (N = 11), X (N = 89), Y (N = 83), and Z (N = 47). Owing to the substantial imbalance in group sizes, especially between the BB cohort and the remaining cohorts, the analysis was conducted in two variants: one including all four generations and one restricted to Generations X, Y, and Z. In all statistical tests, the significance threshold was set at $p < 0.05$. Self-perception levels were compared by age using the Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA.

The research instrument was an original questionnaire created in Google Forms and composed of two parts:

- A demographic section including the information necessary to assign respondents to age cohorts, as well as the key descriptive variables such as gender, education, and work experience.
- A self-perception scale covering the traits most commonly associated with specific generations on the basis of the literature review presented above. Each trait was treated as a separate questionnaire item, and respondents were asked to assess the extent to which it described their functioning at work.

A five-point Likert scale (1-5) was used. The measure captured self-reported alignment between a given trait and the respondent's own professional functioning; it did not assess the importance of the trait or objectively verify whether the trait was present.

5. Results

Given the pronounced imbalance in the sizes of the compared groups (N(BB) = 11), the quantitative findings are presented in two analytical variants:

- for all four generations − BB, X, Y, and Z,
- for three generations (X, Y, Z), excluding BB due to the excessively low number of responses obtained.

Variant A: All Four Generations

In this variant, statistically significant intergenerational differences were identified for two traits: loyalty and stability, and technological proficiency.

Loyalty and stability

The analysis revealed a significant age-related difference in self-perception. Respondents born in 1946-1964 (BB) reported significantly higher levels than respondents born in 1980-1994 (Y) and 1995-2015 (Z). No significant difference was found relative to Generation X.

This result suggests that loyalty and stability may distinguish the Baby Boomer cohort and therefore provide partial support for treating the construct as generational. Notably, however, no significant difference emerged between Baby Boomers and Generation X, which may indicate a similar response pattern across these adjacent cohorts.

Technological proficiency − I efficiently use digital tools needed at work.

The analysis revealed a significant age-related difference in self-perception. Respondents born in 1946-1964 (BB) reported significantly lower levels than respondents born in 1980-1994 (Y) and 1995-2015 (Z). No other statistically significant differences were observed, including with respect to Generation X.

In the literature reviewed, this trait is attributed to Generation Y, but the present findings do not support that attribution. At the same time, the relatively low self-assessment reported by Baby Boomers may suggest that lower technological proficiency is more characteristic of older cohorts. As in the previous comparison, Generation X did not differ significantly from the remaining groups.

Variant B: Generations X, Y, and Z (Excluding BB)

In this analytical variant, statistically significant intergenerational differences were observed for five traits.

Loyalty and stability − I am inclined to build long-term cooperation and value predictability at work

The analysis revealed a significant age-related difference in self-perception. Respondents born in 1965-1979 (X) reported significantly higher levels than respondents born in 1995-2015 (Z). No other statistically significant differences were observed.

Experience and mentoring − I draw on my own experience and the experience of others, and I willingly support co-workers by sharing my knowledge

The analysis revealed a significant age-related difference in self-perception. Respondents born in 1980-1994 (Y) reported significantly higher levels than respondents born in 1995-2015 (Z). No other statistically significant differences were observed.

Although the literature identifies loyalty and stability as well as experience and mentoring as traits characteristic of Baby Boomers, the authors also examined these variables in the X–Y–Z comparison. If these traits were truly exclusive to the BB cohort, the analysis − similarly to the case of respect for hierarchy − should not have revealed significant differences

within the younger cohorts. Yet such differences did emerge. Consequently, self-perception data do not support the view that these traits are exclusive to Baby Boomers.

Independence and pragmatism (X) − I act independently and focus on practical solutions

The analysis revealed a significant age-related difference in self-perception. Respondents born in 1980-1994 (Y) reported significantly higher levels than respondents born in 1995-2015 (Z). No other statistically significant differences were observed.

Accordingly, the study does not show that independence and pragmatism are self-perceived more strongly by Generation X. Interestingly, the only significant difference emerged between Generation Y and Generation Z, suggesting that this trait cannot be treated as distinctive of Generation X on the basis of the present self-perception data.

Technological proficiency (Y) −I efficiently use digital tools needed at work

The analysis revealed a significant age-related difference in self-perception. Respondents born in 1965-1979 (X) reported significantly lower levels than respondents born in 1995-2015 (Z). No other statistically significant differences were observed.

Although technological proficiency is attributed in the literature to Generation Y, the present study shows only that Generation X assesses this trait significantly lower than Generation Z. It does not demonstrate that Generation Y reports significantly higher levels than the remaining cohorts. In this analytical framework, therefore, technological proficiency cannot be treated as a distinctive generational trait of Generation Y.

Entrepreneurship and independence (Z) − I demonstrate initiative, seek improvements, and like to influence how tasks are carried out

The analysis revealed a significant age-related difference in self-perception. Respondents born in 1965-1979 (X) reported significantly higher levels than respondents born in 1995-2015 (Z). No other statistically significant differences were observed.

These findings likewise do not justify treating entrepreneurship and independence as a distinctive generational trait of Generation Z. Although respondents from Generation X reported significantly higher levels than those from Generation Z, Generation Z did not achieve a significantly higher score than the remaining cohorts.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The theoretical analysis demonstrates that definitional discrepancies in age cohorts are substantial: in extreme cases, the difference between the earliest and latest proposed cohort onset reaches 13 years, while the corresponding difference for cohort end dates reaches 15 years. This finding indicates that considerable caution is required when year of birth is used

as the sole criterion for assigning individuals to generations. In comparative research on generations, the cohort definitions adopted at the design stage should therefore be made explicit. Specifying age cohorts appears essential for valid interpretation and credible conclusions.

Taking both analytical variants into account, the study indicates that traits attributed in the literature to particular generations (BB, X, Y, and Z), defined within specific age ranges, are not self-reported as significantly more descriptive by members of those generations than by members of other cohorts. Moreover, most of the traits analysed display similar levels of self-perception across generations, which points to their transgenerational character in the self-perception dimension.

Thus, the main hypothesis was supported to a substantial extent, while the supplementary hypothesis was fully supported. In answer to the research questions, the findings indicate that membership of a given age cohort does not entail a higher self-perception of traits described in the literature as characteristic of that generation. Accordingly, the results do not provide sufficient grounds for assigning the analysed traits to specific generations solely on the basis of year of birth. The main exception is loyalty and stability, for which Baby Boomers reported significantly higher self-perception than Generations Y and Z.

The purpose of the article was to determine whether the traits ascribed in the analysed literature to Baby Boomers and Generations X, Y, and Z are reflected in the self-perception of individuals assigned to those cohorts on the basis of year of birth. The results show that, for the vast majority of analysed traits, there are no statistically significant intergenerational differences and that these traits overlap across cohorts. Year of birth should therefore not be treated as a sufficient basis for assigning specific characteristics to individuals, and generational boundaries appear less distinct than suggested by the literature reviewed. The study also sought to verify empirically whether some of the analysed traits may have a transgenerational character. The results support this interpretation: for most traits, the declared level of self-perception was similar across age cohorts. A substantial share of the traits described in the literature as generation-specific may therefore be better understood, in the self-perception dimension, as transgenerational.

In this context, caution is warranted with regard to the cohort-based approach as the primary criterion for differentiating employees. Rather than defining individuals mainly through generational affiliation, a more adequate approach would focus on actual competencies and individual patterns of professional functioning. Such an approach helps to avoid oversimplification and stereotyping while better reflecting the complexity and intra-generational diversity of contemporary teams.

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