

Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z, Gen Alpha, Gen C – differences in communication

Introduction

Communication processes have always fascinated scholars and publicists. Bilateral, mediated, corporate, oral, written, mass, verbal, non-verbal, marketing; characteristics, forms, types, and obstacles to effective communication are just some of the themes in this field. In recent years, theories of communication in organizations have become increasingly popular, such as the one described in great detail by Thomas Erikson, a Swedish psychologist of social communication. Global companies and corporations rely on his work for ever more effective communication between the management level and employees, as well as between a group of colleagues themselves. Erikson explains that each person has their own way of communicating, and therefore also of collaborating and directing others, if necessary. According to his theory, people can be classified into four groups, which Erikson defined as colors: red, yellow, green, and blue.¹

The same goes for transactional analysis, which describes how messages are transmitted: parent, adult, child. This theory, backed up by practice, determines from what point a person communicates with another person, usually based on their own emotional maturity and unresolved internal conflicts. This concept, created by Eric Berne, explains that the emotions felt, expectations and communication in interpersonal relationships can be highly variable.² The same message, spoken by the same person, in the same place, and at the same time, can be understood by different people in very different, even opposite, ways. Why does this happen? Research shows that there is no single standardized way to communicate, nor a single standardized way to receive messages.

Furthermore, the rapid development of technological processes determines the ways of communicating, whether in the family or at school, in business, or in the Church. With great simplification and generalization, it can be said that people born before the invention of the Internet communicate differently from those born with a smartphone in hand. Thus, generational differences, which have become more and more pronounced in recent years, are becoming a complementary factor in interpersonal communication. Communications experts speak of Generation X, Y, Z, Alpha, and C, i.e. Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z, Gen Alpha, and Gen C. In the context of generational differences, understanding of technology, and therefore of the methods of transmission and receiving content, communication sometimes becomes quite complicated and even mutually incomprehensible. Added to this are the respective cultural contexts that help or hinder communication. The following article will briefly illustrate the fundamental differences between Generations X, Y, Z, Alpha, and C, as well as the discrepancies in the transmission and reception of messages by these generations.

¹Thomas Erikson, *Surrounded by idiots: The four types of human behavior and how to effectively communicate with each in business (and in life)*, St. Martin's Essentials, New York 2019.

²Thomas A. Harris, *I'm OK, You're OK: A practical guide to Transactional Analysis*, Cornerstone, 2012.

Due to the brevity of this article, a description of the previous two generations will be omitted. The first is the generation of older seniors, born before or during the Second World War; we speak of the war generation or interwar generation, or Silent Generation (Silent Gen). This group of people mainly used the press and radio from a young age and was characterized by a commitment to working in one place, ethics, and traditions. The Baby Boomers (BB) generation, instead, is made up of those who were born after the Second World War until about 1964, in the so-called demographic boom. Their media world consists mainly of print, radio, and television.³

Gen X

People of this generation were born between 1965 and 1980. Representatives of this age group are described as enterprising and mindful of work-life balance. They are characterized by elevated physical and mental activity, responsibility, adherence to family values, and focus on skills development. They value co-responsibility at work and support from other people. They were born in an epoch when the media was one-way: print and radio, followed by television. For some, it is difficult to adapt to the world of the Internet and smartphones.

Gen X tend to be confident, able to adapt to new conditions, make correct connections naturally, and respond well to feedback, especially to direct criticism. They enjoy being respected for their time and experience and are willing to express balanced opinions in both work and family settings. They value their reputation, which is also related to the quality of the information they provide. They are characterized by resourcefulness, logical thinking, and a strong motivation to solve problems constructively. At the same time, Gen X has a strong need to build relationships based on trust.

Generation X appreciate new technologies, the resulting increase in efficiency at work, and show a strong understanding of new developments in the field of communication. The transition from the analogical to the digital world has created in them the need to look for new solutions, has sensitized them to a critical approach to technological innovations, and has given them a strong motivation to learn technical innovations. People representing this generation generally combine traditional ways of communicating easily with modern, collaborative, and digital activities. They are the ones who started creating group chats and taking selfies; they are very conscious users of social media.

Representatives of this generation generally prefer voice calls or emails. They have an elevated sensitivity to marketing messages. "This is a generation for whom face-to-face communication is a value in itself. In addition to mediated communication, which they cannot do without, they appreciate the uniqueness of face-to-face relationships, which cannot be replaced by anything else."⁴ They use social media mostly to connect with friends. Communication with Generation X requires frankness, specificity, a high degree of respect for the interlocutor and his or her time, openness to discussion and exchange, authenticity, and sincerity; they are often characterized by extreme confidence or extreme skepticism.

³ Małgorzata Gruchoła, *Osoby starsze w świecie nowych mediów i technologii*, Teologia i Moralność, Volumen 15 (2020), numer 2 (28), p. 49.

⁴Magdalena Wasylewicz, *Transformacja sposobu komunikowania się pokolenia X, Y, Z – bilans zysków i strat*, Zeszyty Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Humanitas. Pedagogika, 2016 (13), p. 133-141.

Gen Y

Representatives of Gen Y - also known as Millennials, WWW Generation, Net Generation, Thumb Generation, Digital Nation - were born, conventionally, between 1981 and 1996. This generation came of age during the birth and early development of the Internet, to which it had to gradually adapt. The terms Digital Immigrants and Digital Natives are used in the literature for said social group. The former, digital immigrants, are people who have learned to use digital technologies at a certain phase in their adult life. Digital natives, on the other hand, are familiar with technology from childhood and have grown up in its presence.

Representatives of this generation tend to be ambitious and ready to achieve their objectives. Modern technology has become a part of their daily life, even though they were born in the so-called analog world, just before the technological revolution. Generation Y fares better than the next Generation Z, in analyzing information obtained from the Internet and with a lot of work all at once.⁵ They are mostly more educated than the previous generation and speak more foreign languages. They try to make their professional work also a passion, appreciate challenges, take care of themselves, need to change their environment, develop themselves and their skills. At work, they often have a partnership approach with colleagues. They often move away from consumerism and appreciate quality of life. They love to have their own opinions, love to be appreciated and they express themselves in a collaborative group context.

Generation Y is distinguished by the following behaviors: the necessity to be online most of the time, multitasking, frequent use of online social networks, growing up in a fast-paced world, creating their own content (UGC); they hold the conviction that technology is their ally.⁶ As for the advantages, one ought to mention their openness to other cultures, in-depth knowledge of the Internet, information processes in the digital world, new communication technologies, divisibility of attention, above-average ability to work in a team, and development and learning orientation. "The level of use of electronic media in daily life has become for this generation a kind of marker of belonging, even a way of life, and has a significant impact on many of its aspects, including, among others, interpersonal relationships, the value system to which one adheres, their professional activity, interests, as well as the consumer behavior of this generation."⁷

This generation's preferred mode of communication is represented by social media, mobile applications, and, for important matters, face-to-face meetings. They love to receive information via text, process it and respond when necessary. They don't like face-to-face phone calls. On the Internet and on social media, they appreciate their own presence and that

⁵Humaira Raslie, Su-Hie Ting, Gen Y and Gen Z Communication Style, *Estudios de Economía Aplicada*, Volumen: 39-1, p. 10-11.

⁶Małgorzata Gruchota, *Od Pokolenia X do Pokolenia Alpha – wartości mediów*, [w:] Iwona Hofman, Danuta Kępa-Figura (ed.), *Współczesne media: wartości w mediach, wartości mediów*, T. 2, *Wartości mediów*, Lublin 2014, p. 39-40.

⁷Sylwia Kuczamer-Kłopotowska, *Rola mediów społecznościowych w komunikacji pokolenia Y*, *Handel wewnętrzny* 3 (362) 2016, p. 216-219.

of others, User Generated Content and Real-time marketing.⁸ For this generation, status and reach on social media matter a lot. According to research, they get along with their parents quite easily, better than other generations.

"Social media play an important role in the life of Generation Y, which significantly influences the daily reality of the Millennials, and in particular the specificity of the communication processes that take place both among the members of this group and their communication processes with the wider environment. (...) they are a platform for exchanging information, establishing contacts, and creating one's image."⁹ Communicating with Generation Y requires the use of different communication channels, authenticity, sincerity, clarity and simplicity of language and flexibility; respect for their freedom to make decisions, listen to suggestions, support opportunities to develop and improve their skills; understanding their mindset in approaching work-life balance, of having fun and being challenged to acquire new skills and creativity.

Gen Z

People of this generation were, by convention, born between 1997 and 2012, an epoch dominated by the development of technology. They are sometimes referred to as Centennials, Digitarians, iGens, Plurals, Post-Millennials, Zoomers. Gen Z has acquired a good command of digital technologies; in fact, the Internet has become part of their DNA. Due to their high sensitivity to certain global processes, they give more voice to social issues online. Representatives of this generation sometimes neglect interpersonal relationships, are multi-taskers, independent and demanding as consumers. Frequent job changes are a way of acquiring more and more experience, derived from the need for constant stimulation and seem to be natural for this generation. Gen Z tend to be creative by nature, are highly focused on success and self-development, and have high expectations of their employer. They tend to express their opinions clearly, have high self-esteem, and find it easy to find information.

Technology is their natural environment; they move gracefully in the virtual world and are characterized by multitasking. They prefer electronic communication and sometimes have difficulty with face-to-face interactions. "Since childhood, they have lived amid screens: laptops, smartphones, tablets. Immersed in the digital world, they cannot imagine life without the internet, social media, gadgets."¹⁰ They are fascinated by new social networks and influencer marketing. According to researchers Mark McCrindle and Ashley Fell, this generation is described as: digital, global, social, mobile, and visual.¹¹ "They can do many things at the same time. It's hard for them to focus on one activity – their attention is prone to distractions. They are bombarded with thousands of advertising messages, they swim in a sea of applications and information is not the good they are looking for, but the air they are used to breathing. (...) They are constantly connected to the Internet: at home, away from home, when they work, talk, relax, travel."¹²

⁸Julia Padaszyńska, Pokolenia X, Y i Z. Jak do nich trafić z komunikacją marketingową?, <https://www.marketing-automation.pl/pokolenia-xyiz-jak-do-nich-trafic-z-komunikacja-marketingowa/>.

⁹ Sylwia Kuczamer-Kłopotowska, Rola mediów społecznościowych..., p. 224.

¹⁰Julia Padaszyńska, Pokolenia X, Y i Z...

¹¹Mark McCrindle, Ashley Fell, Understanding Generation Z: Recruiting, training and leading the next generation. Norwest NSW: McCrindle Research Pty Ltd, 2019, p. 10-23.

¹² Małgorzata Gruchoła, Od Pokolenia X do Pokolenia Alpha... , p. 42.

The daily communication tools of this generation are social media, especially the more recent ones; mobile applications, video calls, and other tools that offer quick contact. Gen Z is unlikely to turn on the television; they search for information and entertainment on the Internet and social media; it has always operated in a virtual world. They tend to dislike phone calls; they use social media for direct contact; they love to get straight to the point. They expect feedback on their work and often express dissatisfaction and criticism of others' work themselves. They use the internet to connect with the world and expect immediate and even faster feedback than Gen Y.¹³

Generation Z is greatly changing the way societies communicate. The development of technology has had a direct impact on how they react to their environment. For example, they take online shopping for granted. The representatives of this generation are very present, socially, online and show a strong attachment to mobile devices, through which they seek personal communication. They tend to build online communities around similar opinions and interests. People of this generation are realistic in their assessment of reality, oriented towards dialogue, sensitive to logic in communication, and communicate well with the elders of the BB generation. When communicating with Generation Z, it is important to keep in mind the powerful influence of visual communication, images, videos, and graphics, the expression of short and concise messages, the high value of social media, the expectation of a quick response to messages, authenticity and personalization of content.

Gen Alpha

This is how the last generation of people born between 2012 and today, otherwise known as Google Kids, have been defined. This name, Gen Alpha, derived from the Greek alphabet, was adopted by academics and advertisers after the "exhaustion" of the Roman alphabet.¹⁴ According to *The Atlantic*, an American magazine that covers politics, business, culture, and technology, the representatives of this generation are technologically competent; the keyboard is often replaced by speech; they spend a lot of time in front of a screen, have shorter attention spans, fewer social interactions; their play and learning styles are largely technology- and app-based, and experiential learning plays a fundamental role.¹⁵

People of this generation have a strong need for achievement, autonomy, and recognition, while narcissism, intolerance of ambiguity, risk-taking, and attention-seeking may be strong traits. It is important to instill in them, during the education process, the right virtues and values, managing emotions, critical thinking, teamwork, social and cultural awareness, building stable relationships, and a healthy interaction with technology in daily life.¹⁶ The

¹³Humaira Raslie, Su-Hie Ting, Gen Y and Gen Z communication style..., p. 10-11.

¹⁴Ádám Nagy, Attila Kölcsey, Generation Alpha: Marketing or Science?, 2017, Acta Technologica Dubnicae volume 7, 2017, issue 1.

¹⁵The Atlantic, Joe Pinsker, <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/02/generation-after-gen-z-named-alpha/606862/>, Magdalena Burda, Content marketing dla pokolenia Alfa, <https://k2precise.pl/blog/content-marketing-dla-pokolenia-alfa/>; Rushan Ziatdinov, Juane Cilliers, Generation Alpha: Understanding the next cohort of university students, European Journal of Contemporary Education 10 (3) 2021: 783-789, p. 9.

¹⁶Amrit Kumar Jha, Understanding Generation Alpha, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur,

reality of Gen Alpha is full of iPods, iPads, iPhones, electronic gadgets, the Internet of Things (IoT). In this generation, the physical world is intertwined with the virtual world (which is as real as it gets), with artificial intelligence (AI, Chat GPT) or augmented reality (AR).¹⁷

The representatives of this generation do not know a world without social networks; the smartphone accompanies them from birth, often replacing the laptop or desktop and, depending on technological progress, becoming the principal tool for communicating with others. Generation Alpha expects functional technological solutions and tailored to their needs; it has interesting opportunities compared to previous generations; is growing up as part of a creative and unconventional society.¹⁸ In communicating with Generation Alpha, it is essential to understand their habits and preferences, the essence of growing up in a digital world, the value of visual and interactive communication, the short attention span, the preference for quick and specific messages, the great value of social media, especially the most recent ones, authenticity, and diversity.

The representatives of this generation, still minors, are characterized by social responsibility, sustainability, transparency in communication, commitment to important issues. The pandemic and post-pandemic period have meant that digital tools play an important role in their interactions with people. However, they appreciate authenticity and transparency in their interactions, becoming very sensitive to topics such as ecology, sustainability, energy and water saving, waste separation, and respect for food. They communicate in a fluid and interactive way, with a high degree of involvement. The places where information is exchanged are, in an equivalent and natural way, the "real" world and the digital world, which interpenetrate each other and form a single common real world. The most common ways of receiving and transmitting digital information are video, images, and sound; visual communication can therefore be a key solution.¹⁹

Gen C

Another term exists in literature and journalism, Generation C, which brings together all media consumers, regardless of age – the only condition being the relative constancy of being connected to the Internet – hence the name "C" – "connected". Gen C is not tied to age or date of birth and its members use modern technology in most areas of their lives, often instinctively. Gen C consumers tend not to be users of traditional media; they live on the digital continent, using mainly smartphones and laptops, and are connected to the Internet practically all the time. Members of this generation are up to date with information about the world.²⁰

2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342347030_Understanding_Generation_Alpha, p. 9.

¹⁷ Małgorzata Gruchoła, *Osoby starsze...*, p. 49-51.

¹⁸ Małgorzata Gruchoła, *Generation alpha – a new dimension of identity? KUL, Rozprawy Społeczne 2016, Tom 10, Nr 3, p. 8.*

¹⁹ Educational marketing, Giulia Cattoni, *Gen Alpha: 5 ideas for communicating with primary and secondary school students*, <https://www.educationmarketing.it/attualita-e-tendenze/gen-alpha-5-idee-per-communicare-agli-primary-and-secondary-school-students/>.

²⁰ Energy Resourcing, *6 things you need to know about Generation C*, <https://energyresourcing.com/blog/6-things-you-need-to-know-about-generation-c>.

Generation C breaks down preconceptions about age as a function of online activity. 65% of this generation is under the age of 35, yet their approach to the internet unites the generations. Participants in this group are engaged online with brands, content, and communities; they consume videos, articles, and other content from the Internet in large quantities; they live and breathe the Internet and are active consumers who expect smart marketing.²¹ Gen C is a powerful, global group of consumers who love to be creative, to connect and build community. People of this generation seek information on the reality that surrounds them, even while being an active part of the Internet.

Members of this community do not only passively consume content, but according to research, 90% of them create content online at least once a month. They become passionate advocates of their chosen brand; two-thirds admit to speaking highly online about a brand that meets their expectations. They are characterized by consumer activism; 56% act after seeing an advertisement for a relevant product or service. They regularly use YouTube; 76% of Gen C representatives visit this platform at least weekly and 36% daily.²² A significant portion of Gen C's time is taken up with live streaming, which allows them to keep up with the latest events and trends. Also, they appreciate the reactions and comments on social networks.

When communicating with this generation, it is important to take into consideration their strong engagement in creating and consuming digital content, using social media and sharing information and opinions on platforms; frequent consumption of video content, authenticity and transparency, preference for two-way communication, and mutual commitment to communication. Representatives of this generation use the Internet in the following ways: they are constantly connected (connection), they create communities (community), they communicate through these communities (communication), they are very creative in creating content (creation, content), they are called "always clicking."²³

Conclusion

Communication, in Salesian work, too, especially with young people, is multifaceted and has no rigid boundaries. The above distinctions are only theoretical and it should be noted that the generations "mix" with each other. With the distinctions adopted, the educator and the communicator can learn behaviors and ways of communicating within and between generations. The educator himself should also be aware of which generation he belongs to and in which preferred style he communicates with others, which can have a decisive impact on his daily work. Understanding the differences present, combining the thought and actions of people of different generations and different communication styles, can become the key to good collaboration and mutual understanding.

²¹Rich Media, Introducing Generation C, <https://www.richmedia.com/richideas/articles/introducing-generation-c>.

²² Think with Google, The Power of Gen C: Connecting with Your Best Customers, <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/consumer-insights/the-power-of-gen-c/>.

²³Home.pl, Nowa generacja konsumentów – kim są i jak się z nimi komunikować?, <https://blog.home.pl/2015/02/nowa-generacja-konsumentow-kim-sa-i-jak-sie-z-nimi-komunikowac/>.

Intergenerational collaboration characterized by good communication can yield tangible results. Sheryl Sandberg, former Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, represents Generation X. In contrast, Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO, belongs to Generation Y, the Millennials. Thanks to their collaboration, for the first time in history, one billion people used Facebook in a single day.²⁴ This example shows how different points of view and different conceptions of the world and of communication processes can contribute to enormous successes on an international scale. And mutual cooperation helps to eliminate stereotypes, prejudices, and myths associated with different generations, while also helping to identify intergenerational communication conflicts.

In light of the above, it is worth seeking answers to the following questions: What characterizes the different generations in Salesian work, in educational work, in the job market? What do other generations expect from me in communication? Why is it necessary to adapt the message? What are the motivations of the different generations? How do I manage the representatives of the different generations in my institution? How do I manage the communicative conflict deriving from the different communicative approaches? These questions lead to a stronger commitment to learning the forms of communication preferred by different generations, as well as fruitful intergenerational cooperation in many educational projects and works.

The Salesian Family, by virtue of the charism presented, touches on the themes and methods of communication of every young generation with all its self-awareness. Technological advances have an impact on culture and also on communication paradigms, which constantly challenge those who work and educate in the spirit of St. John Bosco. Hence the importance of learning from the new generations who present often positively surprising communicative characteristics and behaviors, aided by unprecedented technology and ways of creating communicative processes. The enormous educational, human, emotional, psychophysical, and spiritual potential allows us to acknowledge that the Salesian Family is at the forefront in the world, in terms of education and communication in each successive young generation.

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²⁴Vanessa Van Edwards, Science of People, How to communicate with people from different generations, <https://www.scienceofpeople.com/communication-generations/>.

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