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Generation Z and the Choice of Authority

Pokolenie Z a wybór autorytetu

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ABSTRACT

The article presents the results of research conducted in 2022 on Generation Z's choice of authority. The introduction defines authority. Attention has been drawn to the fact that authority means a positive evaluation, recognition of someone as a person worthy to emulate, a role model, and the attribution of exceptional qualities to that person. The dynamic nature of the concept was also taken into account. Authority is an idea that changes over time and is determined by various factors, including the socio-cultural context. The research aimed at answering the question of who are authority figures for Generation Z, what qualities they possess and what values they should follow. The study was conducted in a quantitative paradigm, using a survey method and a questionnaire technique. The tool was a survey questionnaire. A total of 258 individuals took part in the study. The results of the survey indicate that parents and family members enjoy the greatest authority among Generation Z. They are followed by academic teachers, literary characters and well-known public figures.

Keywords: authority; family; values; characteristics of authority; Generation Z

INTRODUCTION

The paper presents the discussion on the choices of authority figures made by the representatives of Generation Z as well as the characteristics and values these authorities should follow. It is an important issue, especially in the light of changes experienced by this generation, relationships being moved to the virtual world and an increasing role of media in creating authority figures. Significant persons, i.e.

role models, create the world of young people; they are examples to be followed. They have some personality traits which are so attractive that it is worth emulating them. Following authority figures is part of human development. At every stage of growth, some important persons direct one's development, choice of values, as well as educational and professional career paths. Piorunek (2020, p. 20) notices that "in the course of an individual's life, in their most frequent social relationships, a unique role is assigned to significant others who leave important marks on one's psyche and behaviours. In this way, they contribute to one's psychosocial development at every stage of their functioning. They set, modify or preserve certain developmental path of the individual, enriching this person's range of responses and selecting them, motivating to make certain choices". Those who become someone's authority figure motivate them to take actions and grow.

The starting point is the theoretical overview of authority as a category. The word *authority* is multidimensional and it is difficult to define it clearly. The nature of this term can be investigated from many perspectives. As for its etymology, it is derived from the Latin *auctoritas* which means esteem, significance. The meaning of this term has changed over the years, however, keeping its original, ancient meaning emphasizing influence, example, trust, dignity and respect for personality characteristics exhibited by a person of authority. The word was integrated into the Polish language due to its German form *Autorität*, meaning recognition (Jazukiewicz, 2003). Most often, authority figure means that someone has been positively evaluated and recognized as a person worthy to emulate, a role model having some exceptional qualities (see Jagielska, 2021; Łukasik, 2021). Surely, the meaning of the word is associated with influence. There is no doubt that authority is an influence of a person who is respected by another individual or a group. To be an authority figure, a master, or a role model for someone means being recognized as a significant one, an example to be followed. Those who are recognized have, for example, values, personality traits, etc. that someone else thinks are worthy to emulate (see Łukasik, 2021). The very category of recognition is described as an "ideal reciprocal relation between subjects in which each sees the other as its equal and also separates from it. This relation is constitutive for subjectivity because we only become individual subjects when we recognize the sovereignty of others while being recognized by them" (Honneth, 2012, p. 25). Thus, authority is a relation between two individuals. It can be the result of a hierarchy of dependence between the person issuing orders and expecting obedience, and the person showing obedience (being under the influence of the authority of their own choice). It can refer to the relation of power based on voluntary obedience, submission to the power of a person or an institution which does not use violence or persuasion (Arendt, 2019). Bakiera (2013, p. 127) interprets these relations as follows: "The emphasis on the characteristics of a given subject refers to attributed significance. Authority is then an attribute developed and preserved based on the person's behaviour or a certain state of things. It is a characteristic attributed by

a person(s) to other individuals or objects. The process of creating social phenomenon of authority indicates the functional meaning of this concept. In this context, the analysis focuses more on those who recognize an authority and social consequences of this authority's influence. Relational meaning refers to social relation which results in giving authority to an object. In this sense, authority as an interpersonal category exists only in relation between the person(s) representing certain values and standards of action, and the person(s) accepting them".

Theoretical reflections lead to the conclusion that authority is not a static concept. It is dynamic and evolves over time. Therefore, assuming that authority of a person cannot change is incorrect. Authority is a relation and is connected with the category of considering an individual or an institution trustworthy and representing the values recognized by the recipients of the authority. The interpersonal character of authority is connected with its dynamics. Over the years, authorities have changed. As they develop, individuals change their ideas of authority. New authority figures emerge and some persons stop being role models. The basic condition for recognizing someone as an authority figure is noticing this person, setting him/her apart from other people and phenomena. In this process, the recognized person is the object and the person who recognizes him/her is the subject (Bakiera, 2013, p. 128).

When writing about authority, one must refer to the prevalent influence of the media on creation of authorities. Mass media decide through their messages who should be an authority figure. Individuals promoted as authorities are not necessarily persons with certain personal characteristics which are worth following. They can be celebrities who, for some reason, are considered to be role models. These people often appear in the media, give interviews, comment on different events and promote certain lifestyle. They are individuals who are the objects of worship and desire of some groups of people (Barabas, 2019).

In this paper, authority is understood as characteristics, relation and social phenomenon. It is understood as a dynamic phenomenon which changes in time and is dependent on the cultural context referred to certain time. The article aims at answering the question who are the authority figures for young adults from Generation Z and what values, according to the respondents, these authorities should follow. The literature provides different definitions of Generation Z. It is mainly described as having high civilizational competencies, in particular those related to using virtual space (Muster, 2020, p. 133). There are also different timeframes set for this generation. For the purpose of this paper, it is assumed that Generation Z are people born between 1995 and 2010 (see Kukla, Nowacka, 2019).

YOUNG POLES' AUTHORITY FIGURES IN THE LIGHT OF RESEARCH

There is a tendency noticeable in the subject matter literature and opinion polls, which leads to conclusions that perception of authorities has been changing

recently. The changes that took place in recent years are in line with transformations caused by the development of communication and information technologies, access to information, common presence of the media and their influence on the lives of individuals. Authority has not been keeping pace with technological advancements, access to information, image creation in media, social media in particular. The consequence of the common access to the media is the fact that it is not only parents, school and teachers, but also widely understood media that take part in education and development of young people. Authority figures change depending on the media discourse. It is also hard to foresee the results of the lack of new authorities, life without significant one or role models. The decreasing significance of traditional authorities may be explained by globalization and transculturation. The above-mentioned phenomena are considered to be the challenges of today (Infuture hatalska foresight institute, 2019). The established patterns of behaviour may disappear, existing and unquestionable value systems may be challenged in many areas of individuals' life. Weakening the relationships between the young people and their teachers, school, parents and peers, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the loss of trust and excessive use of media also could have influenced the perception of an authority (Jagielska, 2020; Jaskulska, Jankowiak, 2020; Poleszak, Pyżalski, 2020; Ptaszek et al., 2020; Pyżalski, 2020). However, a question arises whether these tendencies related to the perception of authorities are properly evaluated.

Referring to the Public Opinion Research Center (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, CBOS) survey from 2009, one can see that the decline of authorities was already described then. Almost three quarters of the respondents (74%) agreed with the statement that having significant persons in life is important. Only one in five people (21%) disagreed. Almost half (48%) of the respondents admitted that they have/had a significant one – an authority figure. Slightly less (44%) declared that they had no such persons in their lives. Among those who declared having authorities, 52% said their parents were authority figures to them, while one in six respondents (17%) said that the person who influenced them the most was Pope John Paul II. Others were followed by grandparents (6%), spouses (6%), teachers and professors (5%). Only 4% of the interviewees pointed out to public figures (excluding John Paul II) as their role models. Other people indicated as significant ones were friends, siblings and others. The analysis of the results of this survey shows a great role of family as the source of authority. The respondents were also asked about authority figures in public life. As much as 57% did not see any authorities among the public figures, whereas 34% admitted they had such a role model. Those who recognized authorities in public life most often pointed out to Pope John Paul II (59%; see CBOS, 2009). The results of a TNS OBOP study regarding authority figures (among private and public persons), conducted among young Poles aged 19–26, were similar to those from 2009. More than half of the respondents indicated parents (53%) as their authority figures, while

47% mentioned John Paul II. For 8% of the group Jerzy Owsiak was an authority figure. Dalai Lama, Kuba Wojewódzki (a celebrity) and a teacher each received 4% of the votes. According to the data, 13% of the respondents said that they had no authority figures in their life (see Wasylewicz, 2016, p. 103).

At this point, is it worth recalling the results of research conducted in 2016 by Wasylewicz (2016, p. 106) among 215 secondary school students. The results indicate that, for young people, members of the closest family are authority figures (42%), while 28% of the respondents mentioned also John Paul II as the greatest authority of our times and only 8% pointed out to teachers as significant ones. Interestingly, none of the students chose a teacher from their school. Their authorities were the teachers of out-of-school activities, especially sports, music and language classes. Church had not much greater authority among the teenagers (9%) and, at the same time, the percentage of young people who were looking for examples to follow in the media (41%) was growing. Students declaring that they looked up to role models in the media, respected mainly actors and actresses (19%), then singers (10%), athletes (8%), fictional or novel characters (2%), and show hosts like Kuba Wojewódzki (2%).

The most recent studies into authorities in Poland, conducted by Kantar Public in June 2022 in a nation-wide representative sample of 1,102 Polish residents aged 15 and more, revealed that as much as 42% of Poles do not have any authorities, while 19% did not know how to answer this question. For Poles, the greatest authorities are their family members (6%), Robert Lewandowski (3%), Lech Wałęsa (3%), Jarosław Kaczyński (3%) and Andrzej Duda (3%). They are followed by Jerzy Owsiak (2%) and Iga Świątek (2%). Adam Małysz, Olga Tokarczuk, Pope Francis, Rafał Trzaskowski, Mateusz Morawiecki, Donald Tusk and Aleksander Kwaśniewski, each were mentioned by 1% of the respondents. The option “other” was chosen by 12% of the interviewees. What is interesting is that people in their 20s more often point out to their family as to an authority (see Wnp.pl, 2022).

Thus, one can observe that the attitude towards authority has been changing over the years. Family remains the main authority. It is mentioned in all the studies. What has been changing in the globalized and constantly transforming world, is the influence of leaders, public figures, idols, influencers. Today, the role of authority figures gets redefined. Changes in our world result in changing perception of some phenomena. The approach to the role of authority has been changing, too. Surely, it is worth noticing the role media play in our lives. The media discourse is connected with the way we choose authorities.

METHODOLOGY OF ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The research presented herein was conducted according to the quantitative strategy. The study focused on the choice of authorities by the representatives of

Generation Z. The goal was to find out who are authority figures for this generation. The main research problem was formulated as follows: Who are authority figures for representatives of Generation Z? The research method used was a survey with the questionnaire technique and the research tool was an original survey questionnaire.

The study was performed in Q4 of 2022. The online survey was conducted among 258 individuals. The respondents were university students aged: 18 years – 6%, 19 years – 32%, 20 years – 24%, 21 years – 14%, 22 years – 9%, 23 years – 7%, 24 years – 4%, 25 years – 4%. The sample consisted of 86% women and 14% men. As for the place of residence, 46% of the respondents came from villages, 5% from towns with population up to 20,000 citizens, 10% from towns with population between 20,000 and 80,000 citizens, and 39% lived in cities with more than 100,000 citizens. The family financial status was described as very good by 15% of the respondents, good by 46%, average by 33%, whereas 6% declared it was poor or very poor. Students were also asked about the media they used daily. Most frequently, they used the Internet – 99% (including podcasts) and social media – 95%, then books – 46% (including e-books), television – 42%, radio – 31%, Internet TV – 26%, streaming platforms – 27%, written magazines – 12%.

AUTHORITY FIGURES OF GENERATION Z IN THE LIGHT OF RESULTS OF ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The respondents were asked to indicate who they recognized as their authorities. As much as 50% declared their parents were authority figures to them. It is comparable to the results obtained by Wasylewicz (2016). According to her study among the secondary school students, parents are the greatest authority for the young people. The next most frequently chosen answers were: mother – 26%, academic teacher – 18%, grandparents – 17%. The results regarding the choice of authority are presented in Figure 1.

It is worth noticing that mother (26%) is more often mentioned as the authority figure than father (7%). Also, grandmother (13%) is chosen more frequently than grandfather (6%). This may be due to the traditional role assigned to women. They are administrators of family life; they take care of children and supervise their education. Generation Z has been raised by the generation where women and men had specific roles within the family. It may turn out that for Generation Alpha (born after 2010) the authorities associated with parents will change.

Young people's authorities include also fictional characters (from movies and books) as well as people connected with music and film industry, public figures, celebrities, athletes. The respondents also pointed out to other people whom they recognized as authority figures. This group included clergy (student chaplains, priests, Franciszek Blachnicki, Dominik Chmielewski, Michał Heller, St. Maksymilian Kolbe, St. Faustina), John Paul II, Jesus. There were also historical figures (Alexander the

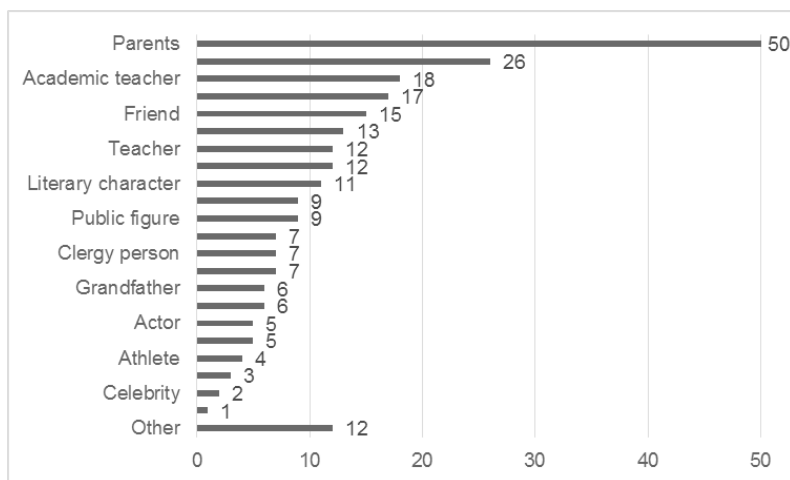


Figure 1. Choice of authority (%)

Source: Author's research.

Great, Tadeusz Kościuszko, Witold Pilecki), politicians, scientists (Stephen Hawking, Marie Skłodowska-Curie, Zbigniew Brzeziński, Neal de Grass Tyson, Albert Einstein) as well as musicians (Freddie Mercury, Nigel Kennedy, Flo Rida, Harry Styles, John Lennon, Cameron Carpenter, Bang Chan, Jacob Collier), DJs (Armin van Buuren, Fat Rat), actors (Michał Żebrowski, Alan Rickman, Edvin Ryding, Chris Evans), fictional characters – literary and movie (Harry Potter, Sirius Black, Aelin Galathynius, Ahsoka Tano, Anne Shirley, Atticus Finch, Natasha Romanoff, Batman, Winston, Sherlock Holmes), athletes (Agata Mróz, Bartosz Kurek, Michael Phelps, Robert Lewandowski, Kamil Stoch, Justyna Kowalczyk, Iga Świątek), celebrities (Doda, Selena Gomez, Martyna Wojciechowska, Tomasz Wolny, Ewa Chodakowska). Among the authorities were also Wanda Rutkiewicz, Marek Edelman and Jarosław Wolski. These figures are connected with different areas of life. It is worth emphasizing that not only present-day celebrities (musicians, athletes, influencers, etc.) are treated by Generation Z as role models. The respondents also pointed out to historical figures known for their great achievements. Thus, not only contemporary people are authority figures for the young people. Another interesting phenomenon is treating literary and movie characters as role models. Most often, they are characters from contemporary literature, games, TV series and movies, which are very popular and promoted by the big movie and gaming industry. Only two respondents declared that they did not have any authority figure. Thus, our research does not confirm the results of the Kantar study according to which as much as 42% of the respondents answered that they had no authority figure. Thus, our research does not confirm the results of the Kantar study according to which as much as 42% of the respondents answered that they had no authority figure. (see Wnp.pl, 2022).

The interviewed students were also asked about the characteristics of their authority figure (Figure 2) and values they followed (Figure 3). This helped to

determine what young people admired. The attributes of authority figures included: empathy (54%), integrity (46%), living according to principles (34%). Figure 2 presents the distribution of answers. It is worth pointing out that the included characteristics use one's own experience, financial independence, listening skills, authenticity, professionalism, expertise. Thus, people recognized by the young people as authority figures have a set of certain features that make them stand out.

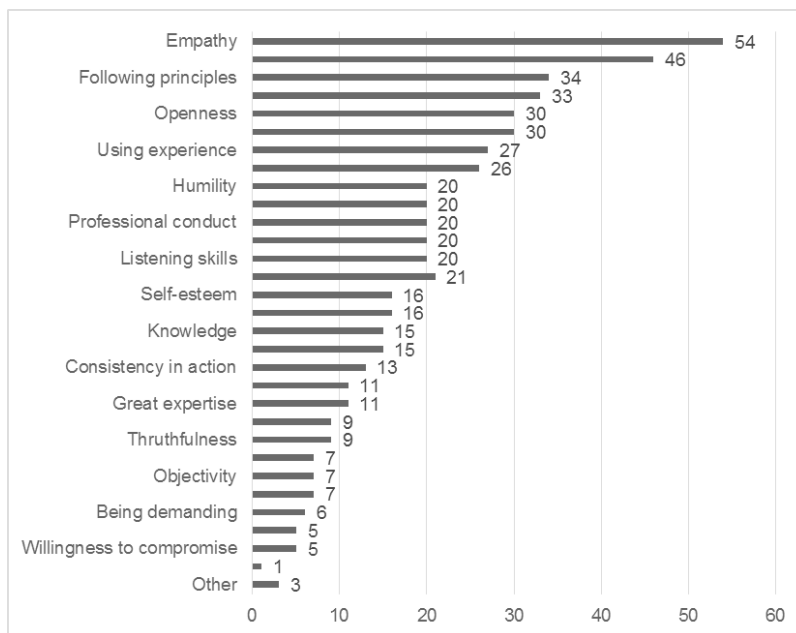


Figure 2. Characteristics of authority figures indicated by respondents (%)

Source: Author's research.

Values give meaning to an individual's actions. A statement can be found in the literature that in times of "great change one cannot at the same time approve evil and good, morality and the lack of it. That is why one should seek characteristics, values and examples of humanistic and human moral culture. (...) Authority figures who develop and support the moral code and standards of decent life can play a unique role in this search for authentic values that give meaning to our actions and help us integrate our personality. An authority figure represents values which are important not only for creating interpersonal relations but, first of all, the sense of security and self-worth" (Wagner, 2005, p. 73). Living according to the system of values recognized by one's authority figure develops the sense of security and self-esteem of that person. In the study, the respondents were asked what values should guide their authorities. The following values were rated the highest: respect (80%), honesty (76%) and integrity (71%). Other highly evaluated values were responsibility (59%)

and endurance (57%), then morality, diligence and humility (47%). It might be surprising that one of the values of the young people's authorities is success (16%). It may be connected with a role the media play in shaping our everyday reality. The detailed distribution of values is presented in Figure 3.

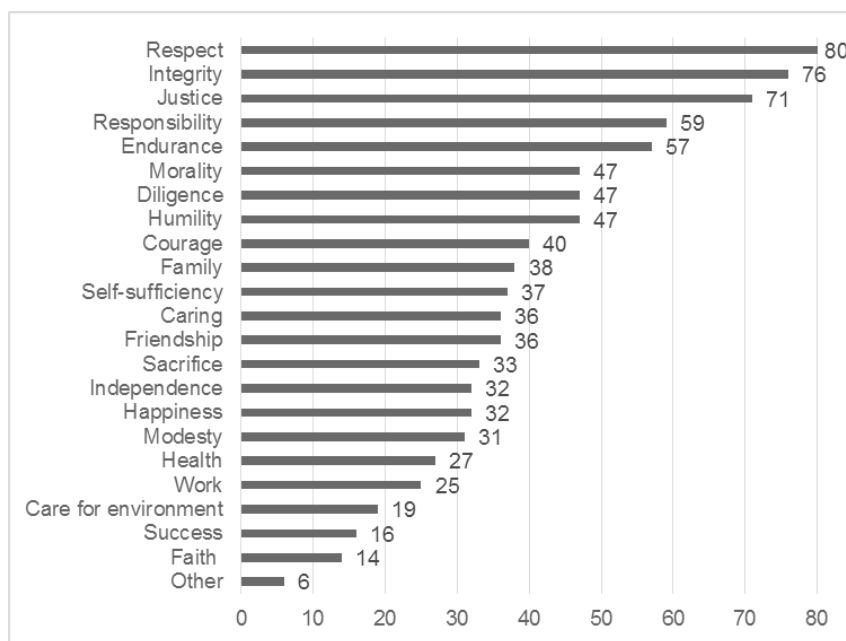


Figure 3. Values which should guide authority (%)

Source: Author's research.

The respondents were also asked why we need authorities. The goal of this question was to further determine the role of authority. According to Wagner (2005, p. 73), "at individual level, the function of authority is connected with the need to confirm one's own value, that is, with meeting the recognition and/or acceptance standard. By performing certain functions at social and individual level, authorities may be for others: a significant source of information, patterns of behaviours, conduct, certain actions; a source where they meet their needs (of security, recognition, loyalty, self-esteem, discipline and social order, approval, etc.) or justify higher rights (e.g. tradition, law). They can improve people's actions by inspiring, leading and communicating".

The respondents said that we need authorities because we need guidance in life. This answer was indicated by as much as 57% of the students. Other answers included: the need to strive to be a better person (50%), the need to have someone who will motivate me to action (43%), the need to have examples to follow (34%), the need to have someone who will motivate me to work by myself (31%), the

need to have someone to turn to in case of difficulties (29%), the need to live according to certain values (27%), the need to have someone who will support me in gaining life and professional experience (24%), the need to have someone who will give me the sense of security in uncertain times (14%). The functions indicated by the respondents are strictly connected with their lives, development and system of value. Even though, authorities change over the years, their roles – at least for the young adults, representatives of Generation Z – are related with setting the direction for development.

CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained from the study do not differ much from the results obtained by other researchers and public opinion research institutions. The perception of authorities has been changing over the years. This is due to changes taking place in the public discourse. New authorities are created and some old ones are rejected. What does not change is the need for authority figures. Individuals want to have someone to follow, who lives according to certain values, inspires them to grow and act. For sure, family remains an authority for the young adults. This is indicated not only by the values but also by significant others identified by the respondents. Representatives of Generation Z declare that they have authority figures who are their guides, who motivate them to self-development and pursuing their goals. They share certain characteristics and values. The greatest authority belongs to a family. However, this does not change the fact that some changes in the perception of authorities can be observed. The study conducted in 2022 by Kantar shows a decline of authorities – their respondents indicate that they do not have authorities, the role of family is also evaluated as low while the influence of celebrities has been growing (see Wnp.pl, 2022). The authority of teachers has been also declining, which is disturbing. These changes are surely the result of media messages received by individuals. In this communication, the role of church, school and teachers are depreciated. These findings – awareness of who and why young people consider to be their authority figures – can be used at teacher training sessions.

The results of this study have important implications for work at schools. Knowledge about the authorities of the youth helps understand them better and provides important information to be used when developing educational and preventive programmes. Education to values is one of the goals to be met through educational and preventive curricula. Authority figures live according to certain values. Perhaps, it is worth to draw young people's attention to those who became successful by following these values. It is also worth supporting parents in their educational efforts since they are authorities for their children. Thus, supporting families can bring tangible results.

Let the reflection of Witkowski (2011, p. 41) be the summary of the above: "And most importantly, I am concerned about the following: the declining need

for authorities (in a culturally relevant sense) and the decline in attitude allowing to recognize someone as authority because that person meets high cultural – not social or elite – criteria, is noticeable also in academic environment, in some disciplines of humanities from which authorities could normally come. Statuses resulting from the individual's cultural capital are commonly mistaken with those based on one's present role in the power system or presence in media which consistently promote those who are more accessible and whose language is smooth rather than deep. In this way, some persons are designated as 'authorities on duty' who comment everything or monopolize specific topics, sometimes only because they are more available and can deliver witty remarks which work so perfectly in the media".

However, it is worth emphasizing that we still need authorities. They are particularly important in the face of new crises. Authority figures communicate values and build trust. Individuals with authority are important especially for children and youth as they develop their identity. Looking up to their role models, young people create their educational and professional paths. They set goals they want to achieve.

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ABSTRAKT

W artykule przedstawiono wyniki badań przeprowadzonych w 2022 r., dotyczących wyboru autorytetu przez pokolenie Z. We wprowadzeniu zdefiniowano pojęcie autorytetu. Zwrócono uwagę na fakt, że autorytet oznacza pozytywną ocenę, uznanie kogoś za osobę godną naśladowania, będącą wzorem postępowania oraz przypisano tej osobie cechy wyjątkowe. Pod uwagę wzięto również dynamiczny wymiar tego pojęcia. Zjawisko autorytetu jest bowiem pojęciem zmiennym w czasie, uwarunkowanym różnymi czynnikami, w tym kontekstem społeczno-kulturowym. Celem prowadzonych badań była próba odpowiedzi na pytanie, kto dla pokolenia Z jest autorytetem oraz jakie cechy posiada osoba będąca autorytetem i jakimi wartościami powinna się kierować. Badania zostały przeprowadzone w paradygmacie ilościowym, zastosowano metodę sondażu i technikę ankiety. Narzędziem był kwestionariusz ankiety. W badaniu wzięło udział 258 osób. Uzyskane wyniki wskazują na fakt, że wśród pokolenia Z największym autorytetem cieszą się rodzice i członkowie rodziny. Na kolejnych miejscach znajdują się wykładowcy akademicy, bohaterowie literacy i znane osoby publiczne.

Słowa kluczowe: autorytet; rodzina; wartości; cechy autorytetu; pokolenie Z