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## Generation Z's Proclivity for Technological Communication: An Exploration into its Effects on Employers' Perceptions of Gen Z and the Intergenerational Workplace

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***Generation Z's Proclivity for Technological Communication: An Exploration into its  
Effects on Employers' Perceptions of Gen Z and the Intergenerational Workplace***

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in  
*Communication Arts.*

By  
*Hannah Whitehead*

Under the mentorship of *Dr. Pamela Bourland-Davis*

**ABSTRACT**

Generation Z (Gen Z) is the newest generation being integrated into the workforce today. With this new age group entering into workplaces, communicative difficulties have the potential to arise. Gen Z's proclivity for digital communication, specifically their preference for communicating through social media, may be putting them at a disadvantage when shifting into professional settings. Research suggests that Generation Z is inclined to communicate differently than Millennials and Generation Y, the two generations that currently make up the largest percentage of the job market. The idea that Gen Z's future employers prefer different styles of communication creates the risk of negatively influencing these employers' perceptions of Gen Z's professionalism and workplace capabilities. However, other research states that Generation Z's technological skills are crucial to society that is ever-advancing in the use of digital communication. By interviewing 12 internship supervisors from varying industries amidst the Southeast who belong to Generations X and Y, paired with an analysis of past research in the field, the author explores the difference in communication style inclinations between Generation Z and the X and Y Generations, in order to gain a greater understanding of whether these differences are negatively impacting Millennial and Gen X employers' perceptions of Gen Z's workplace potential.

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## **Introduction**

This thesis explores how the differing interpersonal communication preferences between Generation Z (Gen Z) and older generations like Millennials and Gen X are impacting employers' views on Gen Z's employability and workplace readiness. The focus is primarily on the way in which Gen Z's digital communication style, specifically in their proclivity for social media communication, is perceived by the X and Y Generations and if that may put Gen Z at a disadvantage. The overall goal is to better understand whether their differences in communication styles could be a threat to the success of integrating Gen Z into the workforce and to discover new ways to avoid potential issues so that Gen Z and the Millennial and X generations can communicate with each other in efficient and successful manners in the work environment.

In her article, Rue (2018) explains how individuals of Gen Z prove to be more hard-working and show more concern for their futures than any generations before them. It is suggested that this is a result of the anxiety they feel regarding their emergence into the workplace and their lack of confidence in their ability to professionally communicate in a way that aligns with their older employers' standards. It is important to note that these older generations, Generations X and Y, hold the highest percentage of managerial positions in the workforce (Pew Research Center, 2018), which means that these same individuals are those who decide whether people are worth hiring through their perception of interviewees' professionalism and workplace readiness. Given that the majority of Generation Z's individuals are those who are trying to break into the workforce right now, their employability is greatly influenced by Millennials' and Gen X's views of them and their professional abilities. The idea that the X and Y Generations

have differing styles of communication from Gen Z and that they hold a great amount of power over Gen Z's integration into the workforce, proposes that there is potential for disconnects between employers and (prospective) employees, which will result in placing Gen Z at a disadvantage when trying to merge into the workforce. This research can be used as an insight into why Generation Z might face difficulties professionally communicating within their intergenerational work environments. The study also provides solutions that will help better the integration of Generation Z into the workplace and decrease the possible disadvantages they face.

### **Literature Review**

According to a 2018 Pew Research Center article, presently, Generation X represents those individuals who were born between the years of 1965 and 1980, making them anywhere from 42 to 57 years of age. Millennials (Generation Y) are those who were born between 1981 and 1996 (26-41 years old). Generation Z are the individuals born between 1997 and 2012, which means they are among the ages of 10 to 25 (Dimock, 2019). Richard Fry, a senior researcher at the Pew Research Center, posits a 2018 article that explores generational differences in the workforce, observing "More than one-in-three American labor force participants (35%) are Millennials, making them the largest generation in the U.S. labor force, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data" (Pew Research Center, 2018, para. 1). Bea Bourne, "an expert on generational differences and generational response to organizational change" (Purdue University Global, 2021), agrees with Fry's research that explains Generation X and Millennials make up the majority of the current U.S. workforce with a total of 68% shared between the two generations (Pew Research Center, 2018; Purdue University

Global, 2021). In other words, Millennials and Generation X are the most influential age groups in work environments, and these generations hold most of the managerial and employer positions within workplaces. On the other hand, Fry's Pew Research Center article also explains that Generation Z only makes up a mere 5% of the workforce as of 2017 (Pew Research Center, 2018), implying that individuals belonging to the Gen Z cohort are the newest generation merging into the workplace as of 2022. This information suggests that Generation Z's employability rates are heavily dependent on the perceptions Millennials and Generation X hold regarding Gen Z and their professionalism and employability.

This integration of a new generation into the workplace has the potential to cause a communicative disconnect between different intergenerational workplaces. Essentially, Generation Z “demand[s] a whole different leadership style and a use of tools and organizational culture (Halmen et al. 2011, as cited in Bencsik, Juhasz, & Machova, 2017).” Research conducted by Andrea, Gabriella, and Tímea, scholars in the field of management and economics, has shown that the age group/generation an employee belongs to greatly impacts their communication and knowledge-sharing; while it has also been found that the way employees conduct their communication and knowledge-sharing has a direct effect on a corporation's efficiency (Andrea, Gabriella, & Tímea, 2016). The perceptions some generations have about other generations influence the attitudes that employees from different generations direct toward each other in negative ways, causing conflict and misunderstandings within workplaces (Moore & Krause, 2021). It could be anticipated that the perceptions Millennials and Generation X hold in regard to Generation Z might cause a similar disconnect during the hiring process, as these

generations have two different communication style preferences that, when used in the workplace, could create this same sort of misunderstanding or disconnect between the different generations.

Generation Z mainly prefers to communicate by using IMs (Instant Messages), texts, and social media in their personal lives (Purdue University Global, 2021). In her study, Rue (2018) also found that individuals belonging to Gen Z are extremely adept in the use of technology and prefer to communicate digitally in day-to-day life as well. Rue (2018) also notes that Gen Z individuals are very hard-working and concerned with their futures and careers, despite negative stereotypes and perceptions from older generations they face regarding this aspect. In addition to Rue's study, Schroth (2019) explains that Gen Z individuals have been found to be the most achievement-oriented of the past generational cohorts and are also very highly educated. Schroth's research demonstrates that Generation Z is no less valuable than other generations, as they have many traits that are beneficial in workplaces. Janssen and Carridini (2021), two scholars in the field of professional communication, report that although Generation Z prefers IMs, texts, and social media as a means of communication, the majority of Gen Z employees surveyed said they most often choose not to be on their smartphones and use email within the workplace because they believe doing so is more professional and efficient.

Gen Z's proclivity for communicating digitally, especially through social media, sets them apart from the X and Y Generations, creating disconnects and misunderstandings. Since the majority of Millennials share the preference of communicating via IMs, texts, and emails, they fail to see the necessity of and oftentimes prefer to avoid the use of Gen Z's main medium of communication: social media; while,



Generation X is even further removed from Gen Z's preferred communication styles, as they mostly find face-to-face interactions and traditional phone calls more efficient for the workplace (Purdue University Global, 2021).

Despite the differences found between Millennials and Generation X and Gen Z, there is a great deal of research that suggests it is possible to lessen and even eliminate the communicative disconnects between them in the workplace. In their research, DeLuliis and Saylor (2021) write that this can be made possible by “recognizing the potential for conflict and diverse perspectives and taking steps to acknowledge, appreciate, and respect our differences” (p. 3). It is important that, instead of attempting to force Generation Z to adapt to outdated workplace culture, work environments take steps to adapt to a changing society that shaped Gen Z into what they are now. Gravett and Throckmorton (2007), two other scholars published in the field of the multigenerational workplace, describe this same concept with the term “bridging the gap” to describe the use of strategies and solutions that help connect generations. Being open to the idea that different generations must create connections with one another is known to help avoid communicative disconnects in the workplace and should be implemented in the multigenerational professional setting.

Using the Cultural Barriers of Communication theory, this study suggests that the different communication preferences between Gen Z and the Millennial and X Generations have the potential to cause a disconnect during the hiring process that might skew the older generations' perceptions of Generation Z. Given that different generations are often considered to be their own sub-cultures due to the many different attitudes, behaviors, thought patterns, communication styles, etc. that are defined within certain generations,

the theory of Cultural Barriers of Communication helps to frame this study by explaining that cross-cultural communication causes barriers that make it difficult to share messages with those outside of their culture.

Prior to the research reported in this study, it was expected that the findings would conclude Gen Z's partiality to digital communication through social media will significantly impact Millennials' and Generation X's perceptions of Gen Z's employability and workplace readiness in an obstructive way. It was anticipated that this negative attitude the two previous generations could have toward Gen Z's workplace skills is the result of their differing communication preferences that cause disconnects between Generation Z and Millennials and Gen X, the two leading generations that make up the workforce as of 2022. It was also foreseen that, through this research, there might be solutions that can help avoid communicative disconnects between the different generations in the workplace. In that light, there are three research questions the primary investigator hopes to answer with their research, as follows:

#### Research Question 1

Do most X and Y Generation employers hold negative perceptions about Generation Z's proclivity for using technological communication as a main communication medium?

#### Research Question 2

Do most X and Y Generation employers deem the integration of mediated communication into their workplaces as a necessity for communication in their organization?

#### Research Question 3

What traits do most X and Y Generation employers deem helpful in their work environment?

### **Method**

The study's methodology was loosely modeled after a study conducted by Nicole M. Baker Rosa and Sally O. Hastings (2016), two scholars in the field of qualitative research reports in communication; their research explored the ways in which managers in the hospitality industry tend to describe and view Millennials. Their study specifically dealt with qualitative conclusions by interviewing a total of 25 hospitality managers in regards to their perceptions about Millennials in both generalized and professional senses. Although this study's main focus is on the perception of Millennials, the interviews Baker Rosa and Hastings conducted are similar in intention to this study regarding the interviews of older generations and how they tend to view Generation Z's communication styles and professionalism.

The research method included conducting qualitative one-on-one interviews via Zoom, with individuals from both Generations X and Y. The first set of interviews included only individuals who are members of Generation X serving as internship supervisors throughout the Southeast from various industries and positions. The second group was specific to Millennials who also serve as Southeast internship supervisors working in different fields. The sample size of valid subjects/interviews gathered and used in the study came to a total of 12; these 12 interviews provided sufficient redundancy in the responses collected. Seven of the 12 participants identified themselves as Generation X and the remaining five identified as Generation Y. Four of the participants were employed at a large university in the Southeast from separate

departments, one worked in a large Southeast company, three of the subjects were employees from separate small-medium sized companies, two were professionals from large international non-profit organizations, and the remaining two participants worked for medium-large grade schools in the Southeast.

After receiving IRB approval and approval from the Office of Institutional Research to use the PI's institution email system, each of the subjects who were known internship supervisors were first contacted individually using a probe email where they were asked, if interested and eligible, to participate in the study; in the email was an infographic they were asked to refer to in identifying their generations to indicate whether they were eligible. All subjects were contacted by the PI's Georgia Southern email using the contact sites' Georgia Southern email or other active and appropriate emails. If the potential subject identified themselves as either Generation X or Y, additional follow-up emails with details of time, medium, etc. of the interview were exchanged. Prior to the interview, each subject was emailed a digital copy of the Informed Consent Form, which states all necessary information subjects are required to understand about the study and their participation; as mentioned in the document, this form is a binding contract that explains consent will be given by verbally agreeing to participate in the study before any actual questioning pertaining to the research has begun. Lastly, interviews of one individual at a time took place using Zoom, an online video communication application. In these one-on-one interviews, each subject was first asked to give verbal consent; provided that consent was given, the subject was then asked a series of open-ended questions and was told to answer them to the best of their ability. The questions addressed the subject's experiences of being an intern/internship

supervisor, their thoughts on professionalism, their perceptions of Gen Z, Gen Z's communication styles, and Gen Z's professionalism, and their ideas of how communication can happen more effectively within intergenerational workplaces. No experimental manipulations were used in this study.

The Zoom session was recorded, but solely for audio transcription purposes, and each of the subjects were notified of this beforehand via the email they received with the Zoom link, in addition to it being included in the Informed Consent Form they were sent prior to the interview. This said recording was an audio/visual recording, which was then transcribed for the use of the study. The data, or the recorded answers to the interview questions, were transcribed via Zoom. The initial transcription was then analyzed and edited in order to ensure the integrity and quality of the answers were maintained. The data collected was reported in a qualitative format. Both the audio and visual recordings were destroyed by the completion of the research and the transcriptions do not include any identifiers. In addition, each subject was provided a number, to which that individual will be referred in any and all reports of the study when necessary. Any list of identifiers linked to the subjects were also destroyed by the completion of this project.

### **Analysis and Results**

In a thematic analysis of the findings that were a result of the 12 in-depth interviews conducted in this study, several anticipated themes were identified, in addition to several other unanticipated themes. When asked to describe Generation Z in a few words, 10 of the 12 participants interviewed immediately described the young generation as “tech-savvy,” reliant on technology, “digitally engaged,” and “digitally connected,” while the other two subjects acknowledged Gen Z's heavy involvement with technology

throughout the interview as well. In addition, 100% of the subjects referred to Gen Z's main mediums of communication being text messaging and/or social media platforms, with a likelihood of avoiding real-time communication like face-to-face or phone call interactions when possible. While all of them agreed on Gen Z's main form of communication, most of them also concluded Gen Z individuals lack an ability to distinguish between formal and informal communication, lack the skills to formally communicate, and/or do not see a necessity for formally-conducted messages. Many of the participants linked this issue to Gen Z's difficulty with writing formal emails along with a deficiency in workplace etiquette. Nine out of the 12 subjects noted Generation Z's difference in communication style and viewed it as a possible issue that can cause disconnects in the multigenerational work environment if they allow it to diminish their interpersonal skills and professional communication etiquette. However, all of the internship supervisors acknowledged Gen Z's difference in communication style also allows them to bring their technological skills and proficient use of mediated communication into the workplace, which they all viewed as a valuable asset in the work environment. All subjects with the exception of one expressed their confidence in Gen Z's ability to shift into a job setting and be successful despite their thoughts on Gen Z's communication preferences. After being asked to provide some traits they find to be most important in the workplace, several patterns emerged in their answers. The trait mentioned most with five of the subjects offering it as their answer was having proficient interpersonal skills. Three of the 12 participants listed proficient written communication skills as an important trait in the workplace. Three subjects also claimed time management and initiative were important traits that lead to success in the work

environment. The other four lesser-mentioned traits were technology skills, adaptability, a willingness to learn, and a positive attitude. Finally, it was unanimously thought that the most efficient way to ensure communication differences do not cause disconnects in the multigenerational workplace is for every generation to be willing to learn from one another, adapt communication, and listen to each other, with most of the subjects using one of two phrases: “bridge the gap” or “meet in the middle.”

### **Discussion**

As expected, the themes that have appeared within the interviewees’ answers have shown Generation Z is heavily involved with the use of technological communication and typically prefers to communicate via text messages and social media platforms in lieu of phone calls and face-to-face interactions, paralleling past research. Many of the subjects also expressed their concerns regarding Generation Z’s difficulty with formal communication in both the written and oral forms; several of them used their experience with Gen Z’s frequent inability to conduct formal emails within the workplace, which is a skill many of them implied they feel is crucial for success in the work environment. Given that the majority of the internship supervisors belonging to Generations X and Y acknowledged a notable difference in communication styles between Gen Z and their own generations from experience and observations, it is logical most of them also believe this to be a potential problem in the work environment. This connection was anticipated, as Andrea, Gabriella, and Tímea (2016) found that communication style and knowledge-sharing are behaviors heavily influenced by generational culture and, in turn, impact the workplace; while the same idea is also supported by the Cultural Barriers of Communication theory that explains communicating with those outside of one’s culture is

challenging and poses the risk of causing communicative disconnects, considering that a generation is a form of subculture. The idea that the subjects find Gen Z's communication style to be a possible hindrance in the workplace also corresponds to the large number of participants who listed interpersonal skills and written communication skills as two of the most important traits for professionals to possess. The aforementioned findings were all anticipated by the author due to the analysis of past research completed in the field, along with using the Cultural Barriers of Communication theory as a lens for this study; however, it was unexpected that, although the majority of the participants expressed concern regarding Gen Z's communication style and its impact on their emergence into the workplace, the large majority of them also noted they were extremely confident in Gen Z's professional capabilities. In addition, they communicated that, despite it being different and a possible challenge, their proclivity for mediated communication is often viewed as a helpful new perspective that is crucial to today's technologically-centered society. One other anticipated theme found within the subjects' answers is the matter of avoiding possible communicative disconnects between different generations in the workplace; all of the participants agreed the best way to communicate more successfully with different generational cohorts is through active listening and being open to learning from each other by "meeting in the middle" or "bridging the gap," which is precisely the phrase Gravett and Throckmorton (2007) refer to in their research concerning the best ways in which generations can better communicate with one another.

As for research question 1, it is unclear whether the X and Y Generations view Gen Z negatively due to their preference for social media; however, it can be said that the two older generations do view this difference in communication style as a possible threat



when allowed to hinder interpersonal and written communication skills, which may negatively influence their perceptions of Generation Z's professionalism. Regarding research question 2, the fact that 100% of the internship supervisors interviewed expressed they believe Gen Z's digital fluency to be a valuable asset to the work environment, points to the idea that Generations X and Y do deem the integration of mediated communication into the workplace a necessity. Lastly, with respect to research question 3, the most important traits employers tend to think of as helpful in the professional space are interpersonal skills, written communication skills, time management, and initiative.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations of this study that the researcher recognizes and encourages to be considered in future research regarding this particular subject and field of study. One major restraint of this research regards the limited number of subjects who participated in the interview process; of course, a larger sample size would provide a more substantial range of data, that of which would be conducive to more thorough and accurate conclusions. Another limitation of this research is a symptom of the previous one and concerns the narrow range of industries the participants are employed in, resulting in the potential for data that fails to fully represent realistic conclusions. It is also acknowledged the small sample does not account for much of the U.S. population and instead can only be considered to represent the Southeast, given that all participants were employed in that specific area. The primary investigator hopes those who wish to move forward with and add to this area of research would take these limitations into consideration by allowing more time and utilizing more resources in the recruitment

process while prioritizing a broad range of professional fields and locations across America to allow for more comprehensive findings.

### **Conclusion**

In analyzing 12 interviews with internship supervisors who belong to both Generation X and Y, several themes were revealed regarding their perceptions of Gen Z's communication style and, as a result, their professionalism. Parallel to much of the past research done on Gen Z's communication, it was found that they are thought to primarily interface via text messaging and/or social media platforms. A second theme disclosed that the two older generations believe Generation Z to be lacking in their abilities to conduct formal messages, which is viewed as cause for concern by many already acquainted with workplace etiquette. While most of the subjects expressed their worry that the difference in communication could likely be an issue in the work setting, an even larger majority still believed that Generation Z will have success in the workplace and will even be a valuable addition to it. Other themes uncovered that employers of Generations X and Y believe some of the most important traits to have in the workplace are interpersonal skills, writing skills, time management, and a drive to take initiative. Lastly, another theme connected better communication in the multigenerational work environment with all generations being willing to learn from each other, openly communicating about preferred communication styles, and being willing to adapt.

This study contributes to the field of communication, specifically multigenerational communication in a technological world, as it begins to investigate the way preference for mediated communication is affecting newer generations' professionalism and the way it is viewed by employers. With mediated communication

quickly becoming the main mode of interaction as newer generations grow and merge into the workforce, it is crucial to understand how that is impacting communication itself, along with the dynamic between individuals from different generations in the professional setting. With very little literature in this specific area of study, this research acts as an introductory exploration into how perceptions of Gen Z's communication are able to hinder and/or help the workplace; in addition, it is the author's hope that further research will be conducted on how to avoid the possible harms that opposing communication style preferences can cause in work settings.

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