

Generation Z in cosmetology and aesthetic medicine – trends, expectations, and challenges of young society

Pokolenie Z w kosmetologii i medycynie estetycznej – trendy, oczekiwania i wyzwania młodego społeczeństwa

ABSTRACT

The field of cosmetology and aesthetic medicine is undergoing dynamic changes due to the growing involvement of younger consumers. This requires adapting business strategies and teaching methods to the specific expectations and behavioral profile of this demographic group.

The study aimed to conduct a multifaceted analysis of the impact of Generation Z on the beauty industry, covering the perspectives of aesthetic service customers, salon employees, and students preparing to become cosmetologists. The analysis was based on Polish and English literature on the subject, including peer-reviewed scientific articles, monographs, and industry market reports published between 2015 and 2026.

The young generation is introducing a new work ethic to teams, expecting partnership-based relationships and access to advanced technologies. The educational requirements of cosmetology students indicate that the teaching process needs to be refocused on practical learning and the quick acquisition of clinical skills.

Keywords: Generation Z, cosmetology, labor market, education, consumer behaviour.

STRESZCZENIE

W dziedzinie kosmetologii i medycyny estetycznej zachodzą dynamiczne zmiany pod wpływem rosnącej aktywności młodszych konsumentów. Wymusza to konieczność adaptacji strategii biznesowych oraz metod dydaktycznych do specyficznych oczekiwań i profilu behawioralnego tej grupy demograficznej.

Celem pracy była wieloaspektowa analiza wpływu pokolenia Z na branżę beauty, obejmująca perspektywę klienta usług estetycznych, pracownika gabinetu oraz studenta przygotowującego się do wykonywania zawodu kosmetologa. Analizie poddano polską i anglojęzyczną literaturę przedmiotu, w tym recenzowane artykuły naukowe, monografie oraz branżowe raporty rynkowe opublikowane w latach 2015-2026.

Młode pokolenie wprowadza do zespołów nowy etos pracy, oczekując partnerskich relacji i dostępu do zaawansowanych technologii. Potrzeby edukacyjne studentów kosmetologii wskazują na konieczność reorientacji procesu kształcenia w stronę zajęć praktycznych i szybkiego nabywania kompetencji klinicznych.

Słowa kluczowe: pokolenie Z, kosmetologia, rynek pracy, edukacja, zachowania konsumenckie.

INTRODUCTION

In scientific literature, Generation Z refers to people born between 1995 and 2012, although depending on the source, the starting date of this generation is also given as 1998 or even 2000. This means that today it includes people aged around 15-30. This generation is also referred to in the

literature as Post-Millennials, iGen, Zoomers, or simply as the demographic group immediately following Generation Y (Millennials). Sociologists point out that Generation Z is a special group. It is the first generation in history that has not experienced a world without the internet. For those born

after 1995, digital technology is not just a tool they had to master, but for most of them, it is the basic environment of their everyday functioning, present from the earliest years of their lives. That is why these young people are also referred to as “digital natives”, for whom the boundary between the virtual (online) and real (offline) worlds has blurred, creating a single, hybrid, intertwined reality [1-4].

Comparative analyses of Generation Z with earlier generations – such as Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y – point to significant differences in the perception and interpretation of reality, value systems, and cognitive mechanisms that can directly affect various aspects of life, including the way they work. Representatives of Generation Z, for whom technological skills are natural and commonplace, bring several unique characteristics to the workplace. One of these is their ease of navigation in the digital world, which influences the way they process information, changes their learning mechanisms, and modifies their approach to performing tasks and professional procedures. Labour market research suggests that this is also a social group characterized by high professional mobility. Unlike previous generations, young people are often willing to quickly change employers if they are dissatisfied with their current employment conditions. The literature on the subject raises the thesis that Generation Z is determined by a specific way of processing information. Unlike the linear and in-depth style of knowledge analysis typical of Generation X, members of Generation Z tend to scan content visually. Their style of information processing is often characterized by scattered attention, and the time spent focusing on a single piece of content is significantly reduced. This is due to constant exposure to a variety of digital stimuli (notifications in various text messengers, short video forms, etc.). It has been observed that Generation Z prefers information and instructions that are concise, graphic, and immediately accessible. This phenomenon, referred to as “instant culture”, may determine their attitudes as consumers who expect, for example, immediate results from treatments and as students who prefer knowledge in a nutshell (content presented in the form of bullet points, summaries, and materials that are easy to read and remember quickly) [5-6].

Another important feature distinguishing Generation Z from previous generations is the attitude of its representatives towards authority and hierarchy, as described by researchers. Many authors point out that Generation Z is extremely pragmatic and realistic, often even cynical in their assessment of the reality around them, which greatly distinguishes them from the idealistic Millennials. According to sociological hypotheses, Generation Z, growing up and learning in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate threats, and wars, have developed an attitude of caution and materialism. Most often, they do not recognize authority based solely on age or

position – in their eyes, respect is earned through authenticity, real competence, and transparency [2, 7]. In the professional environment of the beauty industry, this attitude may manifest itself in the expectation of a partnership-based dialogue and the rejection of the traditional, rigid master-apprentice model in favour of a relationship based on a two-way exchange of knowledge and logical, substantive, sometimes scientific argumentation. As a result, young cosmetologists are often more inclined to critically review established treatment procedures, seeking their justification in reliable scientific evidence, which promotes the development of evidence-based cosmetology (EBC), an approach that transfers scientific standards from medicine to beauty care. As a result, young professionals are increasingly relying on hard data, clinical trials, and various dermatological facts rather than marketing promises. In terms of life values, Generation Z is moving away from the ethos of hard work as an end in itself (characteristic of Generation X) in favour of a philosophy that harmoniously reconciles professional and personal life, or work-life balance. For many young employees today, work is seen primarily as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Young people value flexibility, mobility, and the opportunity for self-fulfilment in their work, which can cause various problems and conflicts for employers, who may perceive them as demanding and disloyal [2, 4, 6, 8, 9]. However, it should be noted that in the light of occupational psychology, this attitude, often interpreted as a lack of commitment, may in fact be a protective mechanism for the younger generation against early burnout. As a result, this may force managers of establishments offering cosmetology and aesthetic medicine services to redefine their organizational culture, in which the priority is not only economic efficiency, but also the mental well-being of staff and the precise definition of working hours.

GENERATION Z AS RECIPIENTS OF COSMETOLOGY AND AESTHETIC MEDICINE SERVICES

The entry of Generation Z into the consumer market for beauty services has begun to force a redefinition of existing business and therapeutic models. It can be argued that Generation Z is not just another demographic group, but a clearly distinct cultural formation that is redefining the approach to beauty care – shifting it from corrective services to preventive and optimizing measures. Market reports indicate that one of the significant changes introduced by Generation Z to beauty salons is an approach based on early skin care, combining anti-aging measures with gentle procedures to improve its appearance (prejuvenation). Generation Z women, unlike their mothers, decide to visit a cosmetologist or aesthetic medicine doctor between the ages of 18 and 25, focusing not on repairing imperfections, but on “preserving youth” and delaying the appearance of the first wrinkles [10, 11]. It has

been noted that Generation Z is the first generation to rely heavily on social media and the internet for skin care and anti-aging. As a result, prejuvenation is an important and almost constant topic on most social-media platforms of the younger generation associated with the cult of beauty and caring for the aesthetics of the skin and body. It should be emphasized that for Generation Z, expectations of beautiful skin and body are largely shaped by the virtual world, as they tend to spend a lot of time using various types of social media. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has further strengthened the influence of social media on beauty standards, as video conferencing has become an almost integral part of everyday life. Research suggests that constantly viewing one's own image on computer screens has led to increased dissatisfaction with appearance in some young people. Various influencers and other social media personalities have also contributed to the significant interest in anti-aging prevention [10, 12].

The younger generation often readily uses the wide variety of treatment protocols available in modern cosmetology and aesthetic medicine. For the sake of terminological precision, this article distinguishes between cosmetology, defined as the field dealing with non-invasive and minimally invasive skin care and anti-aging prevention, and aesthetic medicine, defined as medical procedures, including injections and tissue disruption, performed exclusively by physicians. The term aesthetic medicine, on the other hand, refers to medical procedures, including injections and procedures that break tissue continuity, performed exclusively by doctors.

Trend analyses indicate that young consumers show surprisingly high acceptance of invasive procedures and those using advanced equipment. They expect professional treatments using mostly modern equipment, which, in their opinion guarantees effectiveness and safety. This phenomenon is referred to as the "technification of beauty". Traditional manual or relaxation treatments are increasingly taking a back seat to hi-tech technologies among young people. In addition, statistics show a dynamic increase in the share of treatments using neurotoxins (botulinum toxin) in the 20-30 age group [10, 11, 13]. At the same time, the importance of therapies supporting these procedures is growing in cosmetology clinics. The literature points out that despite its fascination with invasive medicine, Generation Z is also a group seeking specialist knowledge in the field of physiology and various skin dysfunctions. They expect cosmetologists not only to perform hi-tech services, but also to provide professional, evidence-based advice on home care. Representatives of Generation Z are often very conscious customers, so-called skintellectuals, who usually analyze the ingredients of their cosmetics (INCI, *International Nomenclature of Cosmetic Ingredients*) [14-17]. As a result, the role of the cosmetologist is evolving from a procedure performer to an expert-educator who must have in-depth knowledge to justify the selection of

recommended therapies substantively. For representatives of Generation Z, the image of the salon in the virtual space is also important, as according to marketing research, it is usually identified with its real quality. A facility that does not have an attractive profile on social media practically does not exist in the minds of the younger generation. During their visit, some young people pay attention to the photogenicity of the interior, i.e., whether the clinic is modern and fashionably decorated, well-lit, maintained in a consistent color scheme, equipped with branded and comfortable furniture, and at the same time cozy, and whether it allows for taking attractive photos documenting the visit on social media, i.e., "instagrammability".

It has been observed that for Generation Z, the transparency of the office is important, i.e., available price lists for services, before and after photos, and a presentation of the team [18-20]. Interestingly, the purchasing decisions of some members of Generation Z are largely shaped by social proof. Recommendations from influencers can sometimes carry more weight with young customers than traditional advertising. It is important to note that there is a significant risk associated with this phenomenon. Young customers sometimes come to the clinic inspired by social media with a ready-made "idea for a procedure," regardless of whether it is appropriate for them [16, 19-22]. This situation poses an ethical challenge for professionals, requiring a high degree of assertiveness in refusing to perform a procedure that is not in line with the art or anatomy of the client, even at the cost of losing the client. This is particularly important in the era of the growing phenomenon known as "Snapchat dysmorphia", where aesthetic standards are created by digital filters rather than the actual biological capabilities of tissues.

According to psychologists, another characteristic feature of Generation Z is the need for immediate access and quick results. Young people raised in a culture of immediacy usually expect short appointment times and almost equally swift treatment results. Long-term therapies are often much less attractive to them than one-off procedures. This impatience can also translate into their consumer behaviour, i.e., frequent changes of mind or cancellation of appointments [4, 12, 23]. In industry relations, practitioners also point out that Generation Z is sometimes perceived as difficult, sometimes capricious customers. Their expectations regarding the expected effect are often unrealistic, shaped by filters in social media applications (Snapchat dysmorphia) [24-26].

Furthermore, as market data shows, consumer loyalty in this group is a fluid phenomenon. Members of Generation Z often do not become as attached to a place as Generation X, being more like "bargain hunters" [20, 26, 27]. Maintaining a relationship with such a customer, therefore, requires a shift from a transactional to a relational model, in which a unique experience plays a key role, rather than just the treatment procedure itself.

GENERATION Z AS OWNERS AND EMPLOYEES IN COSMETOLOGY AND AESTHETIC MEDICINE CLINICS

The entry of the younger generation into the beauty services market affects not only the demand side but also the supply structure. Young cosmetologists entering the labour market bring with them a new work ethic and a set of expectations that often run counter to traditional management models. It has been observed that Generation Z cosmetologists noticeably prefer to use advanced hi-tech equipment rather than rely on traditional manual methods. This may be due to the fact that the technology used gives faster and more measurable results [6, 20, 28, 29]. In terms of preferred procedures among young beauty industry professionals, there is a clear polarization depending on their qualifications. Young aesthetic medicine doctors tend to favour injection procedures, which are perceived as profitable and provide immediate results [11, 29]. In contrast, Generation Z cosmetologists are fascinated by advanced hi-tech equipment and combination therapies, which allow them to achieve spectacular results within the scope of cosmetology, without crossing the boundaries reserved for medical procedures. Experts point to the risk that this trend may lead to the marginalization of a holistic approach to the patient. As a result, in the long term, this may lead to deficits in manual skills and palpation diagnostics. It should be noted that labour market analyses point to a significant challenge among Generation Z professionals, namely a lack of soft skills and difficulties in establishing deeper relationships with clients. Despite their often high level of instrumental proficiency, direct face-to-face communication can sometimes be stressful for them. In practice, it has been noted that some young cosmetologists find it difficult to establish a deeper relationship with their clients. Discussing skin problems requires empathy, and young cosmetologists, accustomed to digital communication, may find it difficult to establish intimate therapeutic contact [30-32]. Some of them seem to prefer performing the treatment procedure rather than guiding the client, i.e., talking to them and providing complex advice [30-32]. In addition, working with clients who require comprehensive care, i.e., providing broad recommendations for changing eating and skincare habits, is a source of nervousness or frustration for some young professionals. Sometimes they seem to expect mainly clients who “come in, undergo the treatment, and leave satisfied”. The need for lengthy explanations and dealing with client objections is perceived by some young cosmetologists as emotionally burdensome [33]. It should be noted that neglecting the educational aspect of the service may lead to a lower rate of compliance with post-treatment recommendations. In addition, some of the younger generation of specialists may be reluctant to give authoritative advice to older clients, which is due to the paradox described

in the literature of a lack of confidence in direct relationships despite high overall self-esteem [34].

Representatives of Generation Z are described as very demanding employees. According to sociological studies, they do not accept the “dawn to dusk” work model or an authoritarian management style. They expect flexible work schedules and respect for work-life balance [35, 36]. Young professionals are usually focused on development, but expect their employer to finance their training. On the other hand, it should be emphasized that the lack of development opportunities is statistically the most common reason for leaving a job [1]. For representatives of this generation, a sense of psychological security is crucial, which results in a complete rejection of work environments where violent behaviour or behaviour that violates employee dignity occurs. They are very sensitive to falsehood and hypocrisy on the part of employers, e.g., when the image of the office on social media differs drastically from reality, and they are also extremely sensitive to the lack of consistency between the employer's declarations and actions. It should also be emphasized that Generation Z representatives often have high financial expectations at the start of their careers, which researchers explain by economic pressure and comparison with their peers on social media [4, 36]. However, this clashes with business realities, requiring employers to implement transparent incentive systems that clearly link salary increases to measurable gains in clinical competence and sales effectiveness.

TEACHING CHALLENGES IN EDUCATING GENERATION Z IN PRACTICAL FIELDS IN THE BEAUTY INDUSTRY

Current students of cosmetology and those starting vocational education in the broadly understood beauty industry, due to their belonging to Generation Z, pose specific challenges for the education system. It should be clearly noted here that although there are also doctors in the aesthetic sector who are pursuing postgraduate studies, the analysis of behaviour focuses primarily on first- and second-cycle cosmetology students. It is in this group that the generational characteristics of Generation Z, such as digital learning styles and the need for instant gratification, are most strongly manifested and require the greatest modifications in teaching methodology.

The decision to pursue education by this group of young people is often dictated by pragmatism and the strong influence of pop culture. For many candidates, social media is a source of inspiration, where this profession is portrayed as prestigious, lucrative, and “glamorous”. Young people from Generation Z see this as an opportunity for a good job, popularity, and high earnings. Some of them are guided by a genuine passion for beauty care, previously developed as a hobby, but for many, the profession of cosmetologist is seen primarily as practical and stable, providing real professional

skills, financial independence, and the opportunity to quickly open their own salon, which is particularly important for the entrepreneurial Generation Z [37, 38].

However, it should be emphasized that, according to academic staff, Generation Z students have very specific expectations regarding education. First and foremost, they prefer practical experience over theoretical knowledge. Therefore, they definitely expect practical classes and workshops in studios equipped with modern equipment. They expect the university to teach them how to perform procedures, not just understand their theory. Typically theoretical subjects in the academic education process are often considered to be of lesser importance, and the scope of knowledge required to pass them, unless it has direct practical application, tends to be marginalized. Generation Z students prefer modern teaching methods. They find traditional 90-minute lectures ineffective and very tedious, requiring prolonged concentration, which contradicts their digital model of learning, based on rapid interactions and short, intense stimuli. As a generation shaped by visual culture, they naturally gravitate toward microlearning, i.e., learning based on short, independent portions of content delivered in a fast, often visual format. They expect the use of multimedia and interactive forms of work. Importantly, Generation Z students want to learn things that are needed here and now (just-in-time learning) [39-42].

Pedagogical analyses indicate that Generation Z students may display a sense of entitlement and lower stress resistance in their relationship with the university. They generally expect partnership and mentoring, not distance. In their opinion, the lecturer should be their guide in a given subject, and often even an inspiration, rather than a strict "enforcer of knowledge". They are also usually critical of staff who do not have up-to-date knowledge. In addition, they expect a high degree of flexibility in the organization of classes, including elasticity that allows them to combine their studies with work, as well as online class materials and other resources, such as topics to review before a test or exam. It is also characteristic of the younger generation of students that when faced with difficult exams or subjects requiring deep intellectual effort, they often react defensively, questioning the validity of the curriculum instead of looking for fault in their own lack of commitment [39-42].

It should also be added that some students of the younger generation are characterized by excessive self-confidence, which psychologists associate with the Dunning-Kruger effect (a cognitive bias in which people with low or average competence in a given field overestimate their abilities). This sometimes leads to the illusion of expertise, where young professionals expect to be able to perform advanced procedures without the appropriate theoretical background [43-45].

SUMMARY

The analysis of the literature and observation of market trends indicate that the presence of Generation Z in cosmetology and aesthetic medicine is not just a demographic change, but a fundamental transformation of the service model. The key conclusion from these considerations is a permanent shift in the therapeutic paradigm from a corrective model to a preventive and optimization model, known as prejuvenation. Young adults treat aesthetic procedures as part of their lifestyle hygiene, while exhibiting a specific cognitive dichotomy. They are a highly aware group, yet susceptible to misinformation from social media, which raises ethical and psychological challenges.

In the professional and managerial sphere, there is a clear competency paradox, with technological proficiency dominating over interpersonal and manual skills. This forces employers to move away from a hierarchical management style in favour of a partnership culture, where the priority is transparency of the development path and prevention of burnout by respecting the balance between private life and work. In the field of education, it is necessary to quickly adapt teaching methods, moving away from the dominance of lecture-based forms in favour of modular learning (microlearning) and clinical simulations, which are better suited to the cognitive profile of Generation Z. Further empirical research should focus on assessing the long-term physiological effects of early implementation of invasive procedures in young service recipients. Another important area of research seems to be the analysis of the effectiveness of new incentive models in beauty establishments and the correlation between exposure to digital beauty filters and the incidence of body dysmorphic disorder. Ultimately, a harmonious combination of Generation Z's technological skills with a traditional work ethic may contribute to the further evolution of beauty services, as long as a healthy dose of scepticism towards social media trends is maintained.

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