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## CHANGES IN VALUE SYSTEM AND LIFE ASPIRATIONS OF YOUTH IN POLAND FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THIRTY YEARS (1989-2019)

## ABSTRACT

The Author provides a description and analysis of the significance of the clash of values in Polish youth from the perspective of the thirty-year period (1989-2019), positing the thesis that values situate the young individual within the social reality. This attempt to outline the dynamics of change in the value system of the surveyed youth is based on auditory interviews, primarily the survey declarations of young people, personal statements from teachers, and the Author's own observations. The dramatic shift in the social model of life occurring in Poland has led to the research being conducted in four stages, aimed at uncovering various aspects of social reality, thus enabling deeper reflection. The objective of analyzing the research results was to understand the changes in the value system and life aspirations of the young generation of Poles over the thirty-year period (1989-2019). The research findings indicate a clash occurring between proponents of consumerist values and emancipatory values, which dominate the aspirations and pursuits of the young generation in Poland regarding their personal and the country's civilizational advancement. A generation pursuing civilizational advancement is currently being formed through the confrontation of cultural and civilizational values with traditional, particular values, as well as with appealing consumer values that are modern and global but lack fundamental significance for the essential aspirations, goals, and life patterns of youth.

**KEYWORDS:** *youth, generation, emancipation generation, civilisational advancement, value system*

## INTRODUCTION

The question of the life politics of the surveyed youth in the 1990s and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century implicitly contains hypotheses suggesting that such a generation is a process which can be examined. If this generation can be described in terms of a real social entity (social fact), does this generational collective manifest a specific life politics through their way of thinking and discourse as it pertains to the 21<sup>st</sup> century? The author describes and analyses the significance of cultural values' clash in the Polish youth from the perspective of thirty years (1989-2019), positing the thesis that values situate the young individual within the social reality because: *Values inspire people not only to a variety of actions, but also to a certain degree of activity and diligence when carrying out the actions undertaken. In other words: they inspire not only the*

*action itself, but also a certain quality of action* (Sztumska, Sztumski, 2002, p.34). In this article, the Author analyzes part of the survey results obtained in 2019 in comparison to the results of identical studies conducted with the same population composition and characteristics from the years 2000, 1995, and 1989, in order to capture the dynamics of changes occurring under the influence of systemic transformation.

According to A. Giddens, *the politics of life* is the necessary ability of a young person to manage his life in the age of modernity. This management in the age of modernity requires creative and reflective effort, arranging and planning one's life story (autobiography), which is the core of identity. At the same time, it requires the creation of such a lifestyle in which the overriding value would be concern for the future and well-being of other individuals, collectives, nations, societies, humanity. This leads to responsibility for the whole, for life, as one's own future and prosperity also depends on it. Modernity is also a vision of a new self-realization of young people in the conditions of uniformity of social life (Giddens, 2001, p.13).

It might appear that this imbalance is the one that today most affects the nature of social life and its problems (Banaszak, 2024, p.85 – 100). This situation triggers a number of tensions and dilemmas; questions arise: how to live, how to find oneself, how to cope in a world so diametrically and constantly changing, how to get rid of anxiety and a sense of helplessness?

### ***I. FUNDAMENTAL THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SURVEYED POPULATION***

My research conducted in 1989, 1995, 2000, and 2019 constituted a longitudinal study aimed at elucidating the facts, opinions, and attitudes that characterize the political life of Polish youth. I employed comparative analyses using a standardized research instrument across all four time periods. The primary methodology utilized was survey research, specifically an auditory survey questionnaire.

Key aspects of my auditory surveys included:

- Rigorous methodological frameworks informed by theoretical considerations, encompassing the research problem, formulated hypotheses, and research questions.
- A universal research method applicable across various environments with minimal dependence on socio-cultural contexts.
- The research was conducted in a socially neutral manner, ensuring no interference from the researcher or respondents.
- Quantitative data were gathered, contributing to the development of social theories with varying levels of generality.

Confidentiality and transparency of questions were essential prerequisites for the effectiveness of my research. The selection of an appropriate population significantly influenced the value of the results obtained. The sets of questions were carefully selected, organized, and related to facilitate 'self-monitoring' of the data. A pilot study, conducted through an auditorium survey, preceded the baseline survey, with 10% of the pilot studies corresponding to the baseline studies. The pilot research aimed to acquire preliminary insights into the collective, thereby refining the questions and hypotheses for the primary study.

The sampling method was designed to enable the examination of youth populations in final grades of various secondary school types and primary schools in 1989 and 1995. By 2000, the focus shifted to eighth-grade students transitioning to first-year gymnasium classes due to state educational reforms. The 2019 research encompassed cities of varying sizes, including Warsaw, Gdańsk, Gdynia, Sopot, Poznań, Zakopane, Szczytno, and Płock. The sample selection process was structured to allow for the treatment of distinct groups of adolescents in final secondary school classes and first gymnasium classes for 2000 and 2019, thereby forming independent representative cohorts. This aim was achieved through a stratified random sampling method. Schools for the survey implementation were selected from each stratum, and the number of participating students was determined proportionally to the total student population. Calculations were based on demographic statistics for the general school population from 1989, 1995, 2000, and 2019.

Comparative analyses were conducted using a consistent survey instrument throughout all four research periods. Efforts were made to maintain a relative gender balance within the study population to capture opinions from a comparable number of male and female respondents, and the intended gender proportions were largely upheld.

## ***II. CHANGES IN THE VALUE SYSTEM AND LIFE ASPIRATIONS OF YOUTH BETWEEN 1989 AND 2019***

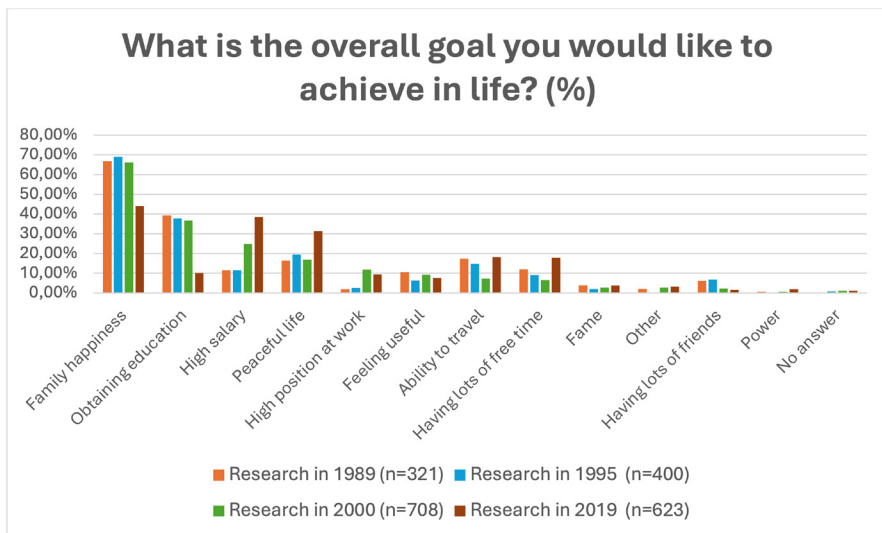
One of the research assumptions was to establish how the interviewed adolescents relate to different types of values that constitute their life goals.

In my considerations I will partly use the term *values* as proposed by H. Świda, who understands them as a criterion based on which we consider various objects as worthy of positive evaluation (Świda, 1979, p.158).

Hanna Świda distinguishes the following system of values: allocentric, intellectual, sociometric, aesthetic, prestige, perfectionist, pleasure, utilitarian, emotional. For the purposes of this analysis, I have modified the system by adopting a typology of values:

- allocentric – family happiness, awareness of usefulness,
- educational – obtaining education, opportunities to travel,
- pro-social – participation in power and fame,
- material – high remuneration,
- professional – high position at work,
- pleasurable – having lots of free time, peaceful life,
- emotional – having lots of friends,
- cultural – contained in other values (esthetic etc).

Such typology is grounded in the real, empirical socio-cultural reality in which the interviewed population functions. Based on the results of my research conducted in years of 1989, 1995, 2000, 2019 I would like to determine what kind of values are preferred by the young people from the perspective of thirty years. What are their life aspirations?



**Source:** based on own research.

## 1. ALLOCENTRIC VALUES

Analysis of the data in each studied year demonstrates the differences that emerged in the evaluation of allocentric values. It can be concluded that in the determination of the purpose of life, personal values (family), interest in human being, sensitivity to his fate occupy a relatively stable place (66 – 69% of the options considering the results of the survey in 1989, 1995, 2000). In 2019, the results show a clear decrease to 44.1%. The decrease directed towards allocentric values derives from the fact that, e.g. in 1995 there were still high hopes for a good start in life thanks to the material support of the family. The family have not sufficiently fulfilled its socialisation function and its economic function. The high unemployment in 2000 removed the illusions of respondents that, for example, unemployed parents would be able to help finance studies or apprenticeships. The results of my research are, in a way, confirmed by other publications. Adult Poles surveyed by CBOS in March 2000 described their material conditions as follows: 25.1% as bad, 14.6% as rather bad, 43.2% as neither good nor bad, 12.9% as rather good and 4.2% as good

(statement from CBOS research, 2000, p.28). In 2000, 58% of the respondents considered their family income to be lower compared to an average family, 11% – that it was higher, 27% – that it was the same (4% – undecided). Respondents assess the condition of their own household as follows: I am confident that financially we will manage – 11%; I am not afraid of poverty, although I am worried that my material situation may worsen – 33%, I am afraid of poverty, although I think that we will manage somehow – 37%; I am afraid of poverty and I do not know how we will manage – 18% (undecided – 1%) (Statement from CBOS research, BS/110/2000, pp. 1-5). As indicated above, family happiness was most often chosen as a life goal by respondents in 1995.

In the light of the results of my research, the awareness of usefulness to society has undergone a significant evolution from a relatively high position as a life goal in 1989 (10.6%), as at that time the formal structures and the belief in the importance of involvement in ZHP (the Polish Scouting and Guiding Association) or other compulsory organisations in secondary schools were high. In 2000, the position of this value was placed at similar rate of 9.3%, the motives being dictated by one's own interests as well as a variety of ideological impulses in the form of social welfare volunteering, religious and charitable circles, clubs, artistic, sports and tourist teams, etc. The lowest ranking of this value as a life goal was encountered in 1995, as the old formal structures (still in place in 1989) had already disintegrated and new forms of involvement in volunteering have not yet formed or become widespread.

The life goals understood as *success in life* desired by young people from the point of view of allocentric values are rather inconsistent. When assessing reality, the respondents perceive existential phenomena through the prism of allocentric values. The allocentric values can be understood in two ways. Firstly, they would represent the need for contact with another person for one's own benefit (e.g. a sense of security, love, belonging), while in the second sense, they are the willingness to give these benefits to others.

The young people surveyed prefer allocentric values more in the sense of the former than the latter. From the data quoted above, it is clear that the goal most desired in all four youth groups is family happiness. The surveyed adolescents initiate and consolidate their life attitudes in the family environment, occasionally modifying them, even if it seems to them that they reject this

basic axionormative resource acquired in the family environment. Seemingly crisis-paralysed family turns out to be an axionormative anchor of the world-view for the majority of respondents, who are the most normative perspective-forming part of Polish society in the two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Is the universe of the family of the future being formed in such environment? There is not even a hypothetical answer to this, but we should take a closer look at it. The meaning of life, as well as the happiness associated with it, is *close cordial relations with other people*. These close, cordial, deeply internalised bonds can be most faithfully or most fully realised within a family. Here we are dealing with the fulfilment of one's own needs mentioned above – for example, one's own sense of security, of belonging, of love.

Some respondents indicate that the meaning of life is realized through actions benefiting others. Consequently, the awareness of one's usefulness to others and society exhibits considerable variability. In 1995, there was a notable decline in the perceived significance of this value. By 2000, its importance had stabilized at levels similar to those observed in 1989. However, in 2019, this value experienced a decrease to 7.7%, approaching the 1995 level.

When comparing these values in terms of *taking and giving*, a concerning trend emerges: individuals are nearly nine times more likely to express a desire to 'take for themselves' rather than to give to others, in contrast to a sixfold inclination recorded in 2000.

## 2. EDUCATIONAL VALUES

I have assumed that educational values are extremely important to most of the young people surveyed. Educational values today appear bi-polar. At one extreme, we see the value of cognition, the belief in the importance of scientific development that generates progress. These tendencies are expressed in scientific orientations, as well as certain patterns and beliefs operating within a society. At the other, there are opposing tendencies. New currents within scientific disciplines, social movements that depreciate certain concepts begin to function. The value of intellectual cognition triggers strong emotions. I assume that the recognition of educational values by the surveyed youth



becomes a phenomenon aimed at getting an education, with the prospect of finding a well-paid job, which is the basis for creating a happy family, as well as material opportunities to travel and explore the world.

In the light of the results of my research, education as a life goal was placed by respondents in the 1990s within the range of 37-40%, i.e. quite stable, with the most frequent marking of this value at the beginning of the transformation, when there were many opportunities in newly established public schools (39.3%). There has been a gradual, albeit slight, decline in the importance of education as a life goal (37.8% in 1995 and 36.7 in 2000). There is a significant decline in the importance of education in 2019 (10.1%). One may ask oneself at this point what are the reasons. The answer to this question must be sought in the social changes transforming awareness and individual behaviour. The generation entering adult life in 1989 is the first group of Polish youth since World War II to start adult life in a world organised and structured in a radically different way than that of their parents.

The young individuals surveyed in 1989 entered adulthood facing critical decisions regarding further education or workforce participation. In the context of Poland's significant social transformation, behavioral patterns and daily life structures have evolved. This transformation has impacted the mentality of young people, influencing their perspectives and attitudes, as reflected in the findings of my research. Young people began to construct their lives differently than during the communist era, moving away from predetermined career paths that typically involved pursuing education followed by assured employment. At the educational stage, youth actively evaluate educational programs and specializations available to them. The framework of educational values has shifted to include opportunities for travel and exposure to diverse cultures as essential life goals. Notably, this value has undergone a considerable evolution. In 1989, 17.4% of respondents identified travel as a primary goal; however, this figure declined to 7.2% in 2000. By 2019, there was a significant increase to 18.3%. In 2000, despite the increased opportunities for travel, including work abroad, the early years of transformation appeared to be characterized by a pronounced enthusiasm for newfound freedoms, which significantly influenced the youth.

In 2000, young people displayed a heightened sense of realism and pragmatic thinking regarding their future, acknowledging various limitations. The notable decrease in this value from 14.8% in 1995 to 7.2% in 2000, followed by a significant increase to 18.3% in 2019, can be attributed to several underlying factors.

### 3. PRO-SOCIAL VALUES

I have attempted to distinguish pro-social values in the light of the categorisation of recognised life values by the young people surveyed. In the light of my methodological assumptions, the basis for referring to sociocentric values will be the surveyed adolescents' vision of involvement in collective life.

Based on my research, I have included fame and participation in power among the pro-social values. Thus, the value of living in fame (the life of a famous person, celebrity) decreased from 4.0% in 1989 to 2.0% in 1995 and 2.7% in 2000. In 2019, there was an increase to 3.8%. Born in the second half of the 1960s, at the time of the Great Turning Point they attended secondary schools, studying to graduate and taking up their first job. They entered the world of the market economy without bad habits, but also without special preparation. One could say, the respondents completely disregarded life dedicated to the exercise of power, as the choices in all four rounds of my research ranged from 0.7% to 1.9% (2019 – 1.9%, 2000 – 0.7%, 1995 – 0.3%, 1989 – 0.6%). The pro-social values of the young people surveyed rarely set individual aspirations for themselves. Respondents rarely include social work in their life prospects, as indicated by the results of research into the activities of school youth organisations. In the light of the results of a study by Janusz Mariański conducted in 1994 among high school graduates, the respondents are minimally interested in politics. The group of people for whom politics is very important at the time of the study ranged from 1.5% (in Tarnów) to 5.1% (in Gdańsk) (Mariański, 1995, p.166).

The results of my research have been, to some extent, confirmed by statistical data from the CBOS reports published in 2012 and 2022 (CBOS 2021a, 20121b, 2022). The 'dormant' civic potential of youth is indicated by engaging

in issues that are important to young people, but not related to specific political groups. Mobilising when young people's interests are threatened (e.g. ACTA, All-Poland Women's Strike). Lack of party affiliation is not necessarily the same as lack of interest in politics whatsoever. There is a preference for other, unconventional forms of political activism (e.g. internet activities, consumer boycotts (Kwiecińska – Zdrenka, 2022, p.139).

#### 4. MATERIAL VALUES

We shall assume that an individual appreciates material values because economic viability is a positive choice for them.

Based on the results of my research, high earnings as a life goal was strongly gaining importance for high school graduates starting out in life, what some researchers have even called the *cashing in of consciousness* in the second half of the decade of the 1990s. In 1989 and 1995, respondents at the same level indicated this as their life goal (11.5%), while in 2000, already one in four respondents (24.9%) also set this as a life goal. In 2019, there was a marked increase to 38.5%. How should we interpret such a leap in awareness?

Based on the results of my research and comparisons with other studies, I contend that there is an increasing awareness among the youngest segment of the youth generation that only substantial personal earnings can guarantee a decent standard of living and social significance. Unlike previous generations, they recognize that reliance on family, state welfare, free leisure time, educational opportunities, healthcare, housing, and stable employment—benefits that were more readily available in the past—is no longer feasible. Previous generations, particularly those who lived through 1989-1995, retained certain habits and illusions inherited from their families, often rooted in the mindset of the communist regime.

## 5. PROFESSIONAL VALUES

Respondents who appreciate professional values, frame the reality in terms of individual performance or character traits. There is an inspiration to improve skills and character, or there are generating factors forcing this type of behaviour. A rational view of reality allows the personality to create an adjustment mechanism when a person sets a goal. At this point one can refer to the socialisation institutions, thanks to which in a person who prefers professional values, a strong will to work on oneself has been formed, the formation of such a character, which would allow in the future to choose the right means to achieve the set goal and constantly adapt to the changing reality. It is difficult to say to what extent this is due to socialisation institutions and to what extent to natural (innate) characteristics. Let other scientific disciplines consider this issue.

Within professional values, respondents perceive a high work position as a goal. A high position at work as a life achievement grows strongly in the evaluation among the respondents, as does a high salary, even more dynamically. Whereas between 1989 and 1995, respondents assigned it between 2.0 and 2.5%, in 2000 it was already at 11.5%, an increase in appetite of almost fivefold! Although in 2019, there was a slight decrease to 9.5%, the respondents' belief that material condition counts the most in life and society, and is ensured by a correspondingly high position (position) at work, had strengthened – whether this being a position in a prominent function, one's own income-generating business or one's own professional practice e.g. lawyer, doctor, etc. The vision of a career and its prosperous effects on life is becoming a significant element of the politics of life in this segment of the youth generation.

## 6. VALUES ASSOCIATED WITH PLEASURE

The 'pleasurable' values contained in the life goals of the surveyed adolescents appear as objects that make it possible to level out unpleasant and burdensome states. The value of a peaceful life as a life goal is an expression of this, alongside family happiness. In the light of the results of my research, the value of a peaceful life occupies the fourth, relatively stable place in the hierarchy

of these goals in the 1990s in the population of respondents who chose this goal between 16.5% – 19.5%. This is also relevant for family happiness in 1995 (19.5%), which may also suggest a relationship occurring between these values. To conclude further, it should be noted that in 1995, hopes for a stable, peaceful life in the mid-1990s were higher than at the beginning of the turbulent transition. The same is true in 2000, while in 2019 as many as 31.3% of respondents wanted a peaceful life when various economic and political crises with high unemployment at the forefront occurred, which strongly intensified the fears of young people about their own future.

At the onset of the transformation, respondents expressed a sense of opportunity for the unusual and often unspecified—sometimes chaotic—possibilities that emerged with the advent of the New World. Many young individuals did not complete their studies on schedule and entered the workforce prematurely. In this evolving landscape, proficiency in English and basic computer skills frequently sufficed to secure good employment. Despite their limited knowledge of the new realities, these young people were undeterred.

However, not all students abandoned their studies for immediate financial gain. The prospects for their futures became increasingly challenging as the pathways to easy careers diminished. By 2000, my research findings indicated a rise in anxiety among young people regarding their futures, particularly among those whose parents were unable to guide them toward success or support their educational endeavors. Further, the results of my research indicate that free time, which qualifies as a pleasure value, was a popular life goal in 1989, chosen by 12.1% of the respondents and 9.0% in 1995. In 2000, it occupied an almost marginal position (6.6%). In the 2019 survey results, we observe an increase to 17.8%. It can be presumed that the group that chooses the laid-back life model counts on prosperity, freedom, modern technology etc., which no longer seemed realistic for so many young people in 2019.

The results of my research, particularly those from 2019, indicate that some respondents aspire to attain a quality education and secure a prestigious job that allows for a balance between professional obligations and personal interests. However, it is increasingly uncommon to successfully pursue a prestigious career while simultaneously leading a life aligned with one's individual preferences.

## 7. EMOTIONAL VALUES

Based on the results of my research, the emotional value which involves having a wide circle of friends as the chosen life goal of the adolescents surveyed in 2000 shows a decrease in value to 2.3 per cent and to 1.6 per cent in 2019, while in 1995 and 1989 this value takes a levelling off (6.8-6.2 per cent). What factors have influenced such a significant reduction in this value? Often in casual interviews, in private conversations, in publications, young people declare that they highly value friendship, love, interpersonal contacts, while the results of my research indicate otherwise. It can be assumed that the preference for emotional values is the result of individual preferences. The beginning of the transformation meant a disjointed system of values, which gave rise to the belief among young people that close contact with another person provides a state of internal equilibrium, a state that seems valuable and worthwhile. This is why the values of 1989 and 1995 take on an equal level.

The decline in this value in 2000 and 2019 should be explained by the fact that competition is emerging among young people, a fight for grades, for position in the class. Some young people are not able to fight and are thus doomed to lose, divisions between the poor and the rich are outlined – people of success versus losers. In the case of the former, the shareholders of success are wealthy people. As for the latter, they have to take their fate into their own hands – the question is whether they will take up this challenge.

Perhaps they choose non-prestigious schools for further education, further non-prestigious jobs to escape the destructive competition, because they do not feel up to it, they simply did not graduate from elite schools because their parents did not invest in them. The value of having a larger circle of friends occurs, as it were, in correlation to family happiness, and here friends, loved ones, parents and those further afield are often helpless in the face of social conditioning. It is becoming more and more ingrained in people's minds that they are alone in the competitive struggle and that it is up to them alone whether they win this race or stay in the losing position. Let us believe that young people do not give up so easily.

## 8. CULTURAL VALUES

Cultural values in the light of the collected research material in 1989, 1995, 2000, 2019 appear vestigial in the light of the categorisation of life goals defined as 'other'. The small number of choices made by the respondents do not authorise me to generalise. I am only signalling that they are necessary for human development and their free choices and limitations. In the hierarchy of life goals, they appear as communing with beauty, participating in culture, creating beauty, etc.

## CONCLUSIONS

The research findings illuminate various aspects of social reality, facilitating a deeper reflection on the evolving value system among the surveyed youth. While acknowledging certain limitations and exercising caution in drawing conclusions, the results are compelling, indicating a gradual yet distinct transformation in values over time. The presentation of survey results on the evolution of values during the 1990s and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century—specifically in 1989, 1995, 2000, and 2019 — provides a focused analysis of value-related issues, forming the foundation for understanding the life policies and plans of the youth surveyed. These results suggest that the generation of the surveyed youth can be characterized as a distinct social entity, whose collective thinking and discourse reflect a specific life policy relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The term *generation of civilization advancement* captures the processes involved in shaping the aspirations, value systems, lifestyles, and goals of today's youth, not only in Poland but globally, albeit with varying intensities across different countries. Research conducted in Poland illustrates this phenomenon. In this multifaceted and often risky advancement process, consumption and consumerism play significant roles, both positively and negatively. However, they do not constitute an ideology or lifestyle determinant for the young generation; rather, they represent new global movements that transcend national boundaries.

This generation is unique in its ability to engage interculturally on a global scale, facilitated by the internet and other global electronic media.

Today's youth exhibit proficiency in navigating digital spaces, and their patterns of internet use—along with the time they allocate to specific online resources—reflect their social affiliations, value hierarchies, and engagement styles. Additionally, the creation and consumption of online content necessitate a dynamic redefinition of personal attitudes, opinions, and relationships, ultimately shaping social identity in both real and virtual contexts.

This trend has been corroborated by research conducted by the National Research Institute, which has surveyed Polish teenagers' online behaviors and opinions every two years since 2014. In 2020, students were asked about their interest in pursuing careers related to computer and network technologies. One in nine respondents expressed a definite interest in working in ICT-related professions, while one in five responded affirmatively. Given its appeal, the internet is likely to continue exerting a significant influence on the formation of various aspects of identity (NASK – Państwowy Instytut Badawczy, 2021, p.60).

It is evident that the generation of the 21st century must engage in careful life planning and cultivate a thoughtful approach to self-fulfillment, navigating both local and global dynamics as well as the emergence of self-perpetuating systems of modernity. This represents a significant generational challenge. Should the potential audiences of young people recognize the evolution of their perspectives, it will motivate me to pursue further in-depth research into the consciousness of the younger generation.



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