

BALÁZS BÖCSKEI  
TK Centre for Social Sciences

MARIANN FEKETE  
University of Szeged

ADAM NAGY  
Excenter Research Centre

ANDREA SZABÓ  
TK Centre for Social Sciences

## **“Carpe Punctum!” instead of “Carpe Diem!”—New Suggestions in the Analysis of Youth Opinions and a Research Case of a Possible COVID-Generation**

*Abstract:* Typically, large sample cross-sectional youth surveys are survey-based, and their methodological background is widely recognized in the scientific community. This does not mean, however, that they are not subject to ‘ontological’ (i.e., inherent) question marks about their content and methodology or that they have become more questionable over time due to social change. In describing some of these question marks, we believe that we have reached the limit of survey-based research, where we can say that we need to go beyond questionnaires to describe reality. In this context, we are trying to outline a new agenda for youth research, then present the results of an integrated method in the context of a possible COVID-generation study.

*Keywords:* Youth research, survey, generation, post-COVID, Big Data.

### **Introduction**

In the fall of 2021, one of the most popular television shows was undoubtedly the South Korean series *Squid Game* with its highest-ranking viewership of 111 million on Netflix in October. In the meantime, the global public saw the release of several articles that expressed serious concerns over its popularity with the young, and especially children (Asmelash 2021; Ann 2021; Pidd 2021). According to these reports, the show depicted violence and aggression in such a visual way that undoubtedly points to mental health concerns regarding children as well as to the need for specific studies in youth sociology. The sociological gravity of the situation was clearly shown by the fact that the *International Communication Association’s* journal (*Communication Culture and Critique*) published a special issue<sup>1</sup> in late 2022 (*Squid Game* and the politics of oppression in global capitalism) and called for papers with such themes as “Whiteness,” “gender,” “transnational solidarity,” “heteronormativity” or “decolonial resistance to White supremacy.”

<sup>1</sup> <https://academic.oup.com/ccc/pages/squid-game-call-for-papers>

Despite the show's outstanding and measurable popularity with young audiences, scientific and academic journals have not seemed to realize that the political thinking of youth may as well be studied in line with the consumer segment of *Squid Game*. *Squid Game* offers an opportunity to a discussion of many political (economic) aspects, including indebtedness, individual responsibility and the nature of exploitation. Globally speaking, the show was viewed by a young audience<sup>2</sup>, but we cannot find any studies on young *Squid Game* consumers in political or youth sociology journals. Furthermore, viewership is not the only factor to consider for measuring the show's popularity and (momentary) impact: *Squid Game* virtual communities and free online *Squid Game* themed games also appeared globally with the release of the original series. Therefore, the show can be interpreted as not just a product but as a virtual channel of community building. The fact that *Squid Game* (and the similar shows) were not made for eternity offers little justification for the lack of scientific inquiry, because products, shows, music or trends run their course much sooner in today's digital consumer capitalism than in the less diverse and slower technological environment we used to live in before. Time has irreversibly sped up, with global capitalism leading to faster and faster product cycles. By way of introduction, using the globally popular series as an example, we just wanted to illustrate that, by no means ignoring youth cognition methods, the study of cultural products is increasingly enabling researchers to gain more knowledge about young people. This process is not without precedent and is ongoing, just think of the research on young video game users (Leonard 2003; Mortensen 2016; Hung 2019), which has revealed political attitudes of young people less experienced by previous methods. It should of course be noted that, although we have illustrated a global product in the context of this series, it should also be assumed that the thinking about or in relation to it is not the same for a young person from Central and Eastern Europe or a young person from the West. Perceptions are not independent of the specificities of a society and its development, of the local characteristics of young people and their perception of reality.

Young people relate to the cultural logics of contemporary capitalism in a variety of ways (from resistance to critical subcultures to adaptation), all of which are complexities that science must account for in the complexities that these differences generate. The study of young people as individuals and communities within a culture is often reduced to the field of market research, which by definition does not aim to explore complex relations. However, it can be said that the latter do achieve results in segmenting young people. In general, their research is more recent and less self-replicating, but limited in that it is essentially aimed at optimizing campaigns that generate consumption and at improving (market) reach. Therefore, it may be a task for academic scholarship to strengthen subcultural research related to these works and to emphasize a less monolithic conception of culture. In the era of the print press or homogenous media culture and structure, it was worthwhile to examine media consumption at a general level, but today it is more important to explore the diversity of digital platform realities. What matters is not only the channel through which young people are informed, but also how their attention is distributed within it. Today, without a deep exploration of the place of a young person in the attention economy, their status, the

---

<sup>2</sup> According to Netflix's own report, the streaming channel is practically available in every country (except China, North-Korea, Syria and the Krim Peninsula, see: <https://about.netflix.com/en/news/netflix-is-now-available-around-the-world>).

content and the web of their activity, to carry out a sociological study of young people is as much of a fallacy as trying to disentangle them from their family situation or place of residence.

However, we do not claim that traditional quantitative or qualitative studies will or may lose their significance in the future. Their genesis and sustained relevance derive from the very premise that individuals do not exist in isolation in any society. Instead, their opinions and attitudes are shaped by their network of relations. However, this process has become far more complex in the network society (Castells 2009), so if you analyze them in separation, i.e., exclusively in family, friends, and work environments, it raises methodological, and especially contentual-interpretational issues. So, our statement is that in our irrevocably solidifying online existence (which process has rather been accelerated than decelerated by the pandemic), such individual acts as self-expression, following/unfollowing other users, reaction and sharing create such additional connections the impacts of which can be analyzed by traditional sociological tools only to a very limited degree, even compared to the impact assessment studies themselves. Relations and their contexts are born in an enormous ocean of data and a dynamically changing technological environment. The degree to which these factors generate, cross or influence offline connections, effects or knowledge and ego formation, cannot be determined without partially abandoning (but not ignoring) certain methodological conservatisms of research, and/or moving towards hybrid sociological methods.

### **Political Thinking and Participation as a Precedent of Problem Statement Research Challenges in Youth Studies**

Of course, we are fully aware that the research of youth thinking, and behavior cannot be taken for granted in such a sphere where the number of interactions is determined by non-linear growth; researchers face highly complex challenges.

Studying Canadian teenagers, a study found that a large number of young users launch vlogs where they demonstrate their political commitment to social changes or voice their intentions accordingly (Raby et al. 2017). While the analysis of the vlogs did not fundamentally disprove youth apathy or antipathy towards politics, the researchers found that if you study a platform with youth activity or presence (Youtube), you can draw more nuanced conclusions than the generic image of “the quiet, un-rebellious, conformist youth” (Way, Redden 2017). It is important to note that vlogger contents are not always congruous for even the same content creator; they are not consistent in their output. Instead, they tend to reflect on current, less political affairs, fashion or other issues that youth are interested in. In that sense, vloggers not only have their own (digital) time, but a constantly changing agenda, too. As to who, when and how can be reached with these fluid contents and whether they catalyze a deeper commitment and other forms of action, can be the subject of many further studies. Nevertheless, they must be in the focus of sociology, because YouTube channels are becoming quasi agents of socialization, and there apparently is a significant number of people who are active on this platform as content creators, followers or commenters. If researchers put them into the frame of apathy, risk or rational silence, we may miss the

opportunity to explore the “birth” and content of political knowledge in another way, thus giving a more nuanced perspective on youth political thinking.

The alleviation of methodological “seriousness” is quite justified, primarily because an adult socialized before the digital revolution may have different ideas as to what constitutes an important issue or even political participation than a youngster (Soler-i-Martí 2014). For example, young people may view changing their Facebook photo or adding a political message to it as a political act (Chapman, Coffé 2016). Changing a profile photo with a political statement can definitely be considered as a declaration for a certain cause or value. In Hungary in 2021, for instance, many Facebook users added the “A family is a family” caption to their profile picture, as a response to the right-wing government’s proposed and later adopted decree which did not grant equal rights for rainbow families. On the other hand, if a young person absence from an offline solidarity event (e.g., a demonstration or street protest) despite having changed their profile picture before, it does not mean that they are no longer part of the youth communities politically committed to the rights of rainbow families. This kind of participation (if we depict political activity on a scale where election participation is the hard end point) is indeed much softer than actual presence in a demonstration, but the width of online public discourse makes us suggest that it still is intended to influence political processes or the government.

Although none of these actions are necessarily followed up by actual participation offline, they must certainly be considered as a form of political interest and a level of commitment. Furthermore, activities like these can become standard in the given person’s life—although such interest and activity may be transient as well. It is unjustified to relativize the analysis of “hard” participation forms, let alone neglect them, considering the fact that the limitations of click activism (George, Leidner 2019) are well known in terms of their ability to induce political change, as online actions may be registered as only a gesture to improve individual well-being, which does not lead to any further significant solidification of commitment. So, the task is clear: separate community constituting practices from purely individualistic “ego projects.” For that to happen however, we need to research and understand soft practices as well and examine youth accordingly. Thus, conducting research into youth activity may offer a more nuanced picture if we study them in their natural environment and if we define the notion and phenomenon of participation in a novel, generational view. We believe that the usual and standardly applied survey method is not ideal for such a nuanced approach, and we need to move towards Big Data. In order to understand 21st-century youth, we need to study different things, in a different way and different magnitude.

While digital platforms increasingly feature impulsive and emotional utterances and the resulting momentary representations, legacy media or journalism (as platforms of information) still provide a more nuanced, profound and concentrated discourse. It still is characterized by linearity; the narratives follow the traditional dramaturgical expectations: they have a beginning, a middle and an end, i.e., they go from a point to another. With its 10–15-minute TikTok videos on the other hand, meme culture *per definitionem* does not adhere to the fundamental rules of linear narratives. These representations are about living and dominating the moment rather than telling a story.

Depending on which approach (traditional or new digital culture) shapes their image of politics, youth may have different perception and meaning assignment of politics itself.

In this regard, the notion and phenomenon of politics is pluralized in a completely novel way compared to the times before digital content development. In addition, certain (young) users consume their content at different times. As the time spent on social media varies individually as well, followers encounter political affairs at vastly different times (of the day or week), which largely determines whether they are informed of the antecedents (and which) or perhaps only the consequences of a particular event. In light of that, each consumer may perceive a given theme in a different frame depending on when they see it on their social media feed. There is another completely different but equally substantial challenge: it's not just timing that can vary, but content and network characteristics as well. (See: the interest of online friends and followers).

We suggest that the time of immediacy is particularly shaping the reality and perception of the young compared to previous generations (Cuervo, Wood, Black 2022), which immediacy, embedded in a privatized digital space, should make the ongoing study of individualization more complex. Drawing on Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, the critical review mentioned above (Way, Redden 2017) notes that the traditional intellectual apparatus hinders the social sciences from understanding rapidly changing realities. This does not mean, however, that the absolute present can be the reference for youth studies, since it is precisely in order to rethink its generational approach that thinking in terms of significant time scales is justified. Given the huge amount of personal data, attitudes, attitudes, etc. generated by young people's interaction with social media, it would be justified to explore digital footprints in advance. It would allow us to reach a large number of people “from the room,” which was unthinkable with previous methodologies but is now unbelievable and would also give researchers a deeper insight into what characterizes young people today. It's not enough to know what proportion of young people consume something, but what it is specifically, what motivates it, what enduring and momentary trends are associated with it—be it culture, politics, public life or even self-awareness trends. Just as this momentariness is constructed very differently for a young person from Eastern Europe than for a young person from the West, and then the differentially of the associated visions of the present and future is also different (Cook 2016).

All the above factors result in a new challenge for researchers. We must assume that youth society is at least as structured as of the adults, but it cannot be equally explored along the lines of the identity construction by earlier narratives. The identity of today's youth who is socialized digitally (i.e., by a multitude of local and global symbols and meanings) indeed changes constantly, the construction of a “fabricated ego,” typical of late modernity starts at an earlier stage of life. Such theorists of liquid modernity as Ulrich Beck identified capitalism's changed labor arrangement model as the primary driver of linear lives being replaced by fragmented identities, thus becoming a dominant *condicio humana* (Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994). Adding to this idea, we assume that digital culture has grown into such a significant, concurrently integrating, and fragmenting factor in today's post-modern capitalism that fragmented identities are institutionalized as a persistent phenomenon at a young age, even before entering the society of work. The ego's discontinuity essentially becomes the continuity itself. While earlier generations tell and live their ego story through a narrative that is cognitively comprehensible and linear despite its many potential sub-plots, this narrative identity can no longer be constructed so

easily in the age of diversified cultural (and therefore political) meanings and the access thereto.

Whereas the lack of the latter causes anxiety in older generations—and their political choices are stated in the creation of such narrative, linear identity (Beck 2008), today's youth experience this fragmentation as the baseline condition. In other words, formerly abnormal thinking and behavior have become completely normalized. The idea of the normal, standard, and usual has changed completely in the eyes of youth. Furthermore, the process may have been accelerated by the COVID pandemic, thus rendering the notion of normality even more divergent in terms of young and older generations (Déri, Szabó 2021; Déri, Szabó 2022; Fekete, Nagy 2020a; Fekete, Nagy 2020b). Horace's idea of *carpe diem* (seize the day) refers to a length of time that is almost inconceivable now. The new socialization paradigm prefers the 15 seconds of the present over the given day.

However, the traditional survey questions (and their inherent conceptualizations) are designed to research such a narrative and “expect” youth respondents to demonstrate, via questions and answers, a completed identity construction that do not reflect the elements of their identity. We do not suggest that the youth's identity construction does not fit into some sort of narrative despite the ego fabrications, but we do say that that it fits into a vastly different frame than that of the previous generation of “children” who were not born into late modernity. Studies constructed like this inevitably tend to point towards at least partly repetitive findings and fail to identify substantial differences between generations in terms of (political) activism or other ideas and activities that are outside the narrowly defined personal sphere such as consumption and use of free time.

Questionnaire-based data collection is based on self-reporting, but respondents, often involuntarily and sometimes consciously, avoid telling the truth. This is largely due to their intentions to meet the perceived societal expectations and to provide the answers expected by society. It is especially typical with regard to analyzing vastly different attitudes. Furthermore, distortion is unlikely to stay consistent along the scale of education levels. Educated youth tend to have a deeper knowledge of the “expected, good” answers and PC responses deemed desirable by society, especially when it comes to questions about sensitive issues. This situation may occur in relation with particular themes; for example, youth are reluctant to admit being materially deprived or having financial hardships as poverty is a stigma associated with negative stereotypes. Poverty may have a discriminating effect in peer groups, so the affected youth rather tend to try and hide their true financial and/or social status. Furthermore, the societal pressure on respondents is considered a constant in other situations as well, which is not necessarily valid at all.

We cannot know whether certain notions have the same meaning for each respondent, i.e., “what is there in their heads.” We know that survey-type data collection processes are easily adaptable and answerable for educated middle-class youth, because (just like their school), they use an unemotional, elaborated language code with the occasional abstract notions, while low-educated, lower-class respondents use a heavily context-dependent restricted language code that is rather suitable for communicating practical things and relations (Bernstein 1958). As a result, lower educated youth may presumably find it more difficult on occasion to understand and interpret the questions, and they try to cope with the problem by “translating” it to their familiar language or code, thus losing sight of the very

conceptual correlations the researchers are interested in. According to Bourdieu (1979), people only have opinions about the things which they are interested in, and which do not contain collective problems that exist for everybody. Each respondent answers the questions the way they see them from the perspective of their own problem. While filling out the questionnaire, they are forced to choose from different answers to questions they might not have given a serious thought to before.

The boundary conditions of large-scale youth surveys are twofold: firstly, they are aimed to generate results that are comparable to those of the earlier studies, and secondly, they are designed to form a comprehensive image of the role youth situations and lifestyles play in society. However, the two sides of this duality oppose each other as well: the more comparable the results, the less varied the questionnaire, and the less the poll can follow societal changes and therefore the less suitable to describe youth life situations and lifestyles. In contrast, the better equipped it is to take a momentary snapshot, follows societal trends and provides a comprehensive picture, the less it allows for comparison. To put it more simply, the poll must reflect on the new problems and/or social phenomena caused by socio-economic, political and cultural changes, therefore the survey must contain variable, exchangeable elements as well.

### **A Novel Approach to the Theory of Generations**

This could be especially important in the discussion of certain sociological issues, for example, when we investigate whether or not there is a COVID generation. The global events of 2020, 2021 and partly 2022 may or may not become formative for our youth. Until now, little scientific evidence has been presented in terms of assessing the COVID-19 pandemic's long-term impact on young people. It is simply impossible to analyze this phenomenon and model its long-term post-COVID impacts with the conventional methods of social science, because memories do not only fade; they are also transformed and updated and adjusted to the present.

The theme of generations has been living its Renaissance in recent decades, which may be attributed to several factors (Woodman 2011; Bartels, Jackman 2014; Woodman, Bennett 2015). The individualization process and reflexive modernism of developed societies appears to have led to a decreased role of collective identities; the key conflicts that determined the stratification of the society have deteriorated (Corsten 1999: 249). We suspect that the disappearing collective identities are increasingly replaced by age and generation as a classification marker that can serve as an indicator of social differences and new conflicts (Fekete 2018: 90).

According to Karl Mannheim's (2000) classic generational theory, generation is a sociological phenomenon the participants of which are somehow connected but this connection does not necessarily give rise to a concrete group. Individuals belonging to the same generation are located similarly in the social sphere, and this generational location is based on the biological rhythm of human existence, i.e., life and death, limited lifespan and ageing. Having the same generational location does not only mean chronological concurrency; it also means an identical socio-historical environment and shared experience.

According to Mannheim's concept, we need the shared experience of socio-historical unity to be able to identify a generational connection. Generational connections are created when individuals with the same generational location have a shared experience of fate (Mannheim 2000: 235). The generational phenomenon is a fundamental factor in the development of historical dynamics, and as to whether a new generational style appears every 30 or 100 years or at any time according to some rhythm, that depends on the driving force of the socio-intellectual process.

The other key authors of the area, William Strauss and Neil Howe (1991) hypothesize a close and symbiotic relationship between historical events and generations. They interpret the generation as a group of such individuals who share the same historical time and place and thus acquire collective characteristics and succeed one another in approximately every 20 years. The recurring dynamics of generational behaviors is determined by how and when the individuals participated in the formative socio-historical changes (Howe, Strauss 1991: 8). They are convinced that these patterns recur rhythmically.<sup>3</sup> Generations are not defined, connected and distinguished exclusively by the fact that they lived in a similar historical era, had similar attitudes to family, values, risks, culture, and citizen engagement. Behavioral patterns are also strongly influenced by the socio-economic system of the given era as well as the development level of science and technology (Howe, Strauss 2007: 45).

So, based on Mannheim (2000), the identification of a cohort as a generation requires

- a) a shared experience;
- b) an actual orientation towards each other and
- c) a shared understanding of the situation, shared attitudes and forms of action. These considerations form the key indicators of becoming a generation (Szabó 2020a, 2020b).

According to Strauss and Howe's (1991) model, generational changes in the Mannheimian sense take place approximately every 20 years.

Our study examines the chances of developing into a generation in the Mannheimian sense as a function of the exogenous shock effect caused by the coronavirus pandemic (Szabó, Déri 2021). More specifically, we investigate whether the pandemic created the circumstances that form the basis for a generational change and how much the youth interiorize them as a generational identity. Furthermore, we also look into the generational impacts where the notion of generation is interpreted as a cohort pattern.

If we talk about a COVID generation, it is advisable to focus on the 15–29-year-olds. The lower age limit is mainly determined by legal reasons, while the upper limit should be set in consideration for comparability with earlier studies, although we should also take into account the phenomenon known as the death of childhood, as well as the extended post-adolescence. This age spectrum ranges from still immature values, perceptions and motivations going through a constant change (see also: the fragmented and diversified routes within each life cycle discussed above) to age group segments characterized by established and more rigid value structures. There is a good reason why a whole sociological school distinguishes, based on Karl Mannheim (1929[2000]), between the so-called formative, forming and special years (see e.g., Andolina et al. 2003; Russo, Stattin 2017). According to Mannheim, effects, changes and impressions occurring in this

---

<sup>3</sup> Counting from the first settlers of the New World, they identify eighteen generations of American history.



period have lifelong consequences, because they are registered as a “natural world view,” i.e., they will be the points of reference in the later stages of life.

So, our Big Data based research investigated how Hungarian youth constructed the COVID pandemic and its consequences. There seems to be a scientific consensus inasmuch that COVID occurred in young people’s lives as an asteroid effect (Szabó, Déri 2022), but are the impact, its consequent effect, and the degree of adaptation novel and different enough from the earlier generational patterns to have caused the creation of a historical COVID generation? To determine that, we would need to identify a value and attitude shift compared to the earlier generations. Conducted during the COVID pandemic, the surveys that reflected on the momentary discomfort are not suitable for a more long-term/embedded consideration of the problem, because they mainly focus on the mental health or psychological effects occurring during or caused by COVID. Although these consequences are undeniably significant, they are insufficient to constitute a generation.

Above we have attempted to explain *the raison d’être* of generational studies being conducted in novel ways instead of being forced through processes based the classic methodology and traditional conceptualization of research. This experimental study investigates the chances of the occurrence of Mannheimian generations as a function of the exogenic shock effect caused by the COVID pandemic. For a generation like that to be formed, you need such a value and attitude shift, along with the persistence of the new paradigm and its appearance in the activity’s new content patterns, which we cannot identify as of today. What we can certainly determine is whether the relevant preconditions are present. However, it is hardly possible to be investigated in a post-COVID period and with the usual sociological methods because the knowledge and information on the change are rooted in the given moment. So, we either investigate them “right there” or, as we mentioned above, they will simply be lost and/or completely re-framed. It is obviously impossible to investigate the lockdown’s momentary affects and the perceptions of potential loneliness with a survey conducted two years later.

For this reason and in light of the methodological concerns above, we decided to study Hungarian youth (15–29 years) through a Big Data based algorithmic analysis which, compared to all other sociological techniques, has the major advantage that it avoids both the rigid, artificial interview situation and the “coercive” effect of social desirability, thus providing an intervention-free and presumably more sincere picture of youth opinions.

We were looking into

- (1) whether the pandemic created the circumstances that would lay the foundations for a generational shift;
- (2) to what degree young people internalized it as a generational identity.
- (3) Furthermore, we also look into the generational impacts where the notion of generation is interpreted as a cohort pattern.

As we wrote earlier, we only have hypotheses regarding the COVID generation, such as:

- H1) The pandemic-induced lockdown is a point of reference, i.e., a generation-forming occurrence equivalent to such events as the opening of the borders and the change of the political system in the Eastern Bloc in 1989–1990, or the revolutions of 1956 or 1968.

- H2) The generational cycle is extended from Strauss-Howe's 15–20 years to roughly 25–35 years, so the thematization of a COVID generation is primarily a scientific construct, which is not directly construed in youth lives.
- H3) The youth's perceived reality constantly changes throughout the research period, so the formation of a generational identity is realized in multiple phases.

These hypotheses and questions can be examined by new methods. So, when developing the methodology for the two-year research program that began in late 2021, we aimed for methodological triangulation. Joint application of three complementary and mutually reinforcing methods can ensure the validity of the study. The research program begins with focus group discussions and personal interviews to explore the background and unique characteristics of the problem. As a research method, the application of individual and group interviews allows us to detect changes occurring at the micro level, i.e., we can get an insight into how COVID-19 affected the personal life situations, thinking and cultural forms of young people.

As a second step, we used Big Data method. The latest branch of the method is social listening which uses a software-based solution to analyze youth content, themes and activity trends based on keyword groups. During the data collection process, we explore the relations between the coronavirus and the youth's activities, perception and reflection. Based on online discourses, the deep analytical modules below allow us to present the narratives, activities, emotions and opinions related to the given themes.

During the research process, we use a software solution to collect data by creating COVID-related keyword nets. This procedure guarantees that all relevant online posts and comments made by the youth in the context of the virus are included in the analytical database. The software-based data collection process involves the social media platforms relevant in Hungary, such as: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2021, i.e., during the two-year period when young people were most affected by the direct impacts of the COVID pandemic. Based on the hundreds of thousands of textual content elements, the Big-Data-based algorithmic analysis provides *insights* and assesses opinion ranges from the relevant discussions of the online media platforms in the pre-determined period. The insights come from the momentary self-expressions and opinion statements of online users, without any intervention or researcher preconception. The algorithm-based Big Data analysis, coupled with the researchers' reading, coding, textual analysis and interpretation allows for a deep understanding in the analyzed topic. The strength of this method lies in its non-intrusive nature, i.e., the method itself, unlike focus group interviews, does not influence the observed communication. The key point of data analysis lies in the software-based contextualization of online content, which allows us to speed up such processes as coding, data linking, data visualization and content analysis.

In other words, we analyze what young people themselves say and how they talk about the coronavirus, education, their activities, roles, and pastime during the lockdowns. We, the researchers do not frame the questions here. Instead, the youth themselves determine and assign the frames of their conversations. However, we do not reject the other traditional sociological methodologies, either.

In the second year of the research, the project is concluded by an online survey with 2000 subjects, which is designed to reflect on the intersections, problems and suggestions

found through the Big Data process. Instead of looking into the subjective experience of the pandemic, the survey analyzes its consequences, so investigates the consequences of the pandemic rather than how people experienced it. So, while the Big Data can provide the control for the information received via the survey responses, the survey can be used as the “representativity test” for the Big Data results. This is the best way to ensure mutuality and reciprocal influence.

### **Could the COVID Generation have been Created Based on the Empirical Data?—Results**

Our main research findings are presented in the following chapter. The data show that there is an accepted generational orientation among young people. The focus group interviews conducted showed that there was a consensus, regardless of age, that there are generations: young people perceive that there is some kind of variation, some difference between people of different ages. Although they did not know the exact names of the generations, memories and expressions did emerge. They had no in-depth knowledge of each generation; they had fragmentary information.

In the group discussions, they were able to distinguish the generations mainly in terms of the young–parent–grandparent relationship, and according to this approach, they perceived big differences between the generations. Several people, especially those of higher social status, point out that generations are mostly defined by the environment in which they grow up and are young, and by their ability to adapt to change later. By environment they also mean historical events, social systems, and norms, but also digitalization. The conversations revealed that the common generational experience was digitalization and the transformation of personal relationships.

The online survey conducted in the spring of 2023 also shows that the majority of 16–29-year-olds do indeed accept the generational divide, but that the proportion of sceptics increases with age.

In relation to age, the acceptance of the generational divide is particularly high among students, at 71%, but only two-thirds among working 16–29-year-olds, and 57% among the (narrow) group of those neither working nor studying. The importance of cultural capital is highlighted by the fact that 74% of those with at least a secondary school leaving certificate and more than three quarters (77%) of children of parents with tertiary education consider it sensible to divide people by generation according to age. The results of social listening showed that generational tensions increased during the epidemic, with young people often attributing the breaking of rules and norms of responsible behavior to the bad example of older generations. In this context, young people felt the least at risk compared to other generations, perceiving the quarantine and the epidemic situation as a special and strange experience. During the second wave, narratives in the online space that increasingly started to blame older generations and illogical state measures for the prolongation of the epidemic—many retired and older citizens were seen as not complying with measures that were primarily intended to ensure their safety, while state measures (e.g., curfews, time-limited shopping) were not actually serving to stop or mitigate the epidemic. In recent years,

the concept of generational identity has been added to the generational theory, according to which if an individual is aware of belonging to a generation, he or she also associates an emotional and value significance with belonging to this group. It is therefore not just a 'classification' that is created independently of the individual, but also a self-defined belonging to a generation (Ng-Parry 2016, cited in Csutorás 2021). As can be seen, while generational divisions are accepted by young people, the picture is much more nuanced. It seems that generational segregation among young Hungarians does not appear as an identity, but as a kind of imprint of cultural and knowledge capital, or as a media effect. There is no one distinguished generational label that 16–29-year-olds consider to be valid for themselves. The interviews show that Generation Z is the most prevalent, and the survey shows that a relative majority (35%) accept Generation Z as a valid label, with Generation Y being 15%.

Somewhat differently from our expectations, the COVID generation (7%), the crisis generation (6%) and the climate generation (4%) are much less reflective of young people 'self-definition. Overall, therefore, the most prevalent approaches are those of the letter generation, as voiced in the media and used in the scientific literature.

For our research group, however, the issue was less about the use of the letter-generation divide than about identities beyond it. As we can see, about 25 percent of them consider the label beyond the letter generation to be typical, i.e., a quarter of 16–29-year-olds define their generational self primarily in terms of their understanding of a changed world, but only one sixth of them use generational labels related to crisis phenomena. Results that differ from our preliminary expectations are also important because one in three families had a COVID-related death, and one in two 16–29-year-olds were directly affected by the epidemic, either as a morbidity or at least as a symptom. In this context, the acceptance of the COVID-generation label among those directly affected by the epidemic is higher, at 8–9%, but there is no overwhelming difference. It is important to reiterate, however, that generations are constructs, usually assigned to a generation *ex post* (Déri, Szabó 2021).

If we also interpret generational identity as a media effect, a kind of construct (Kiss, Szabó 2013), we can rightly claim that letter-generation designations, once they dominate everyday communication, reach young people more easily and effectively. And the lead time of crisis-related nomenclature is likely to be significantly longer than that of the favorite categories of the science popularization literature (generations Z, X, Y).

The results of the social listening showed that one of, if not the biggest divides between young and older people is the skill level in using the digital world. The conversations showed that young people quickly realized that digital solutions could make their time at home more comfortable and enjoyable, and that digital social experiences can free them from quarantine, giving them a positive sense of fulfilment and freedom. In times of confinement, online entertainment was one of the best antidotes to boredom, and it became easy to find inspiration for offline hobbies and activities. It was widely recognized that this period was a time of confirmation of many of the digital effects and phenomena that were commonplace for them and often criticized by older generations. Moreover, the digital world is also a facilitator of collaboration and cohesion, as these mutually supportive platforms could also operate almost exclusively on digital platforms. Digital solutions and opportunities can provide a perspective, whether it is about planning for the future, self-improvement, self-education, autonomy, managing affairs, finding a job or asking for help.

All in all, if the COVID generation is created, it can be based on the social solidarity and solidarity felt during the epidemic. The differences between generations, according to young people, are mainly cultural and technical. Lastly, young people and this generation are characterized by a very strong sense of insecurity, and the lasting consequences are perhaps the most serious in terms of psychological and mental problems.

### Conclusion

The online sphere offers us a lot of opportunities to complement the increasingly uncertain survey methods and to get a more nuanced picture of how young people understand the world and its phenomena. Earlier comparability and representativity is ensured by the survey, while Big Data prevents or significantly reduces the distortion effects caused by such factors as the respondents' conscious misinformation or social pressure. So, while Big Data can serve as the control of the information collected from the survey answers, the survey's "representativity test" can be provided by Big Data. Just as the various social media platforms have become increasingly dominant in terms of how youth gather information, communicate, build and maintain contacts and spend their free time, social scientists have increasingly accepted the idea that user attitudes and social media activities may be an accurate reflection on these individuals' offline actions and world views. The network space registers every connection, action or interest, which allows us to study them. Social scientists must reconsider their traditional data collection techniques and use of terms and must learn to understand and use the ever-growing data stream.

Conceptualized in this spirit, our research sought to answer the question: can we talk about a COVID generation? The data collection was based on methodological triangulation, i.e., two traditional data collection techniques, qualitative and quantitative, were used in addition to a new, big data- based social listening methodology. We first conducted NET-focuses and interviews with young people and then applied the NET-nography method. That is, we used a big data-based social listening methodology to collect online conversations for the period 2020–2022, i.e., over a relatively long period of time. Using technology specifically programmed for the present research, it is possible to understand the individual-level changes, experiences, traumas, activities, and perceptions of reality caused by the COVID virus that may have been captured as the core experience of the emerging new historical COVID generation. Finally—and this also shows that we do not discard traditional social science methodologies—we conducted an online survey of 1,000 respondents aged 16–29.

Our results suggest generational restraint, without denying the possibility that there may be, and indeed are, historical events that allow for generational shaping.

Further studies are needed to establish with greater certainty whether this generation has or has not occurred. In the light of the present results, the term COVID generation would, for the time being, certainly only add to the confusion in generational terminology. It would be inadvisable to use a term without the researcher having knowledge of how, for example, Generation X, Y, or Z (let us accept these terms for now) experiences are different in the light of COVID, how COVID fits into or intersects with these categories.

In our extremely fragmented age, social cognition must think in terms of a social science that is not yet experienced and practiced, integrated in its methodology, envisaging interdisciplinary transitions and joint work, whose task is perhaps “only”; not to construct facts whose inadequacy seems clear when confronted with other facts.

### Funding

This study and the supporting research were conducted in the framework of Project No. 19/2021, Identifying generations with Big Data logic in the post-pandemic period, as part of the tender “Support the research of post-COVID phenomena” issued by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

### References

- Andolina, M. W., Jenkins, K., Zukin, C., & Keeter, S. (2003). Habits from Home, Lessons from School: Influences on Youth Civic Engagement, *PS: Political Science & Politics* 36(2): 275–280, DOI: [10.1017/S104909650300221X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909650300221X).
- Beck, U. 2008. *World at Risk*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beck, U., Giddens, A., & Lash, S. 1994. *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bernstein, B. 1958. Some Sociological Determinants of Perception: An Enquiry into Sub-Cultural Differences, *The British Journal of Sociology* 9(2): 159–174.
- Bourdieu, P. 1979. Public Opinion Does Not Exist, in: A. Mattelart, S. Siegelau (Eds.), *Communication and Class Struggle* 1, International General, pp. 124–130.
- Böcskei, B. & Német, Sz. 2021. *Toxikus technokultúrák és digitális politika. Érzelmek, mémek, adatpolitika és figyelem az interneten*. Napvilág.
- Cantijoch, C. M., Cutts, D., & Gibson, R. 2018. Does mode matter? Measuring the effects of different types of online political engagement on offline participation, *Comunicação, Mídia e Consumo* 15(43): 206–236.
- Castells, M. 2009. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Hoboken, NJ.: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Chapman, H. & Coffé, H. 2016. Changing Facebook profile pictures as part of a campaign: who does it and why? *Journal of Youth Studies* 19(4): 483–500.
- Cook, J. 2016. Young people’s strategies for coping with parallel imaginings of the future, *Time & Society* 25(3): 700–717.
- Csutorás, G. Á. 2021. “Ratio Generationis”—Szempontok a felelős generációkutatáshoz, *Metszetek* 10(2): 104–126.
- Cuervo, H., Wood, B. E. & Black, R. 2022. Fresh Understandings and Challenges for Youth Studies Research, *Journal of Applied Youth Studies* 5(1): 275–279.
- Déri, A. & Szabó, A. 2021. Generációs kihívás a poszt-Covid időszakban, *Szociológiai Szemle* 31(4): 4–27.
- Desseuffy, T. & Mezei, M. 2020. Fans and politics in an illiberal state, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 32. Available: <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/1757/2383>.
- Fekete, M. & Nagy, Á. 2020a. *Q vagy Q?—Generációs választak . Kultúra es Közösség* 11(3): 63–68.
- Fekete, M. & Nagy, Á. 2020b. Megszólal-e az új csendes generáció? Avagy mit várhatunk az Ifjúság 2020 adatfelvétel eredményeképp?, *Szociológiai Szemle* 30(1): 98–106.
- Ford, S., Green, J. & Jenkins, H. 2013. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture (Postmillennial Pop)*. New York: NYU Press.
- George, J. J. & Leidner, D. E. 2019. From clicktivism to hacktivism: Understanding digital activism, *Information and Organization* 29(3): 1–62.
- Hung, A. 2019. Political socialization on Xbox Live: a sociocultural linguistic approach to adolescent identity, *Journal of Youth Studies* 23(5): 596–612.
- Leonard, D. 2003. Live in Your World, Play in Ours’: Race, Video Games and Consuming the Other, *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education* 3(4): 1–9.
- Leonard, D. 2006. Not a Hater, Just Keepin’ It Real: The Importance of Race- and Gender-Based Game Studies, *Games and Culture* 1(1): 83–88.
- Kiss, B. & Szabó, A. 2013. Konfliktus, generáció, identitás, *Politikatudományi Szemle* 22(4): 97–115.

- Mannheim, K. 2000 [1928]. A nemzedékek problémája [The Gproblem of Generations], in: K. Mannheim, *Tudásszociológiai tanulmányok [Essays]*. Budapest: Osiris.
- McEvoy-Levy, S. 2017. *Peace and Resistance in Youth Cultures: Reading the Politics of Peacebuilding from Harry Potter to The Hunger Games*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Molyneux, L., Vasudevan, K., & Gil de, Z. H. 2015. Gaming social capital: exploring civic value in multiplayer video games, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20(4): 381–399.
- Mortensen, T. E. 2016. Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate, *Games and Culture* 13(8): 787–806.
- Mutz, D. C. 2016. Harry Potter and the Deathly Donald, *Political Science & Politics* 49(4): 722–729.
- Mutz, D. C. & Nir, L. 2010. Not Necessarily the News: Does Fictional Television Influence RealWorld Policy Preferences?, *Mass Communication and Society* 13(2): 196–217.
- Prensky, M. 2001. Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, *On the Horizon* 9(5): 1–6.
- Raby, R., Caron, C., Théwissen-LeBlanc, S., Prioletta, J. & Mitchell, C. 2017. Vlogging on YouTube: the online, political engagement of young Canadians advocating for social change, *Journal of Youth Studies* 21(4): 495–512.
- Russo, S. & Stattin, H. 2017. Stability and Change in Youths’ Political Interest, *Social Indicators Research* 132(2): 643–658.
- Salganik, M. J. 2019. *Bit by Bit: Social Research in the Digital Age*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Snee, H., Hine, C., Morey, Y., Roberts, S., & Watson, H. (Eds.). 2016. *Digital Methods for Social Science An Interdisciplinary Guide to Research Innovation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Soler-i-Martí, R. 2014. Youth political involvement update: measuring the role of cause-oriented political interest in young people’s activism, *Journal of Youth Studies* 18(3): 396–416.
- Strauss, W. & Howe, N. 1991. *Generations. The history of America’s future, 1584 to 2069*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Sütő, A. 2021. Merre tovább, netgeneráció? A magyar fiatalok életstílus-alapú szegmensei, *Metszetek* 10(3): 124–142.
- Szabó, A. & Déri, A. 2022. Asteroid-effect in Society: The Formation of a Mannheim-type Historical Generation Post-COVID-19, *Polish Sociological Review* 3(219): 315–330. DOI: [10.26412/psr219.03](https://doi.org/10.26412/psr219.03)
- Way, A. K. & Redden, S. M. 2017. The study of youth online: a critical review and agenda, *Review of Communication* 17(2): 119–136.

\*

<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/oct/17/english-council-urges-parents-not-to-allow-children-to-watch-squid-game>

<https://globalnews.ca/news/8286026/squid-game-quebec-schools-concerns/>

<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/24/entertainment/squid-game-children-netflix-wellness-ccc/index.html>

#### *Biographical Notes:*

Balázs Böcskei, political scientist, political analyst, public policy consultant. Strategic director at the IDEA Institute, assistant professor of Milton Milton Friedman University, advisor at Institute of Political Science of HUN-REN. His research interests include voter behaviour, digital politics, contemporary ideologies.

ORCID iD: [0000-0002-7524-2720](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7524-2720)

E-mail: [Bocskei.Balazs@tk.hu](mailto:Bocskei.Balazs@tk.hu)

Mariann Fekete (Ph.D.), sociologist, assistant professor, acting head of department at the University of Szeged, Department of Sociology. Teaches sociology of youth and education, and also methodology. Her research interests: cultural consumption in the digital age, cultural consumption in the digital age, generational leisure activities, youth leisure spaces.

ORCID iD: [0000-0002-6357-5931](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6357-5931)

E-mail: [fekete.marianna@szte.hu](mailto:fekete.marianna@szte.hu)

Ádám Nagy (Ph.D.), researcher on education and youth, science communicator, editor-in-chief of *Civil Review* (Civil Szemle). Previously he was a research professor at several universities, and former Bolyai Fellow of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. CEO of the Excenter Research and Development Center. His research interests include extracurricular activities, leisure and camp pedagogy, youth affairs, youth policy.

ORCID iD: [0000-0001-7009-2228](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7009-2228)

E-mail: [adam@nagydr.hu](mailto:adam@nagydr.hu)

Andrea Szabó (Ph.D.), sociologist, political scientist. Director of the Institute of Political Science of HUN-REN, assistant professor at the ELTE. Editor-in-Chief of the *Political Science Review* (Hungary), secretary general of the Political Science Society for two cycles. Former secretary of HAS Political Science Committee. Her research field is political participation, political socialization, voter behavior, social integration processes and young people.

ORCID iD: [0000-0002-7181-287X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7181-287X)

E-mail: [Szabo.Andrea@tk.hu](mailto:Szabo.Andrea@tk.hu)