

FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION FOR GENERATION Z

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to Jonathan, my love and best friend. I also dedicate this thesis to my parents, Van and Penny, and my grandparents, Michael and Linda, without whom my dreams would not be possible.

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I. GENERATION Z FIRST-YEAR WRITERS

It was at the Rhetoric Society of America conference in Minneapolis (May 2018) when I first heard different scholars present on the supposed poor literacies of Gen Z and on how to teach them. They argued that today's incoming Freshmen are too addicted to technology, their addictions result in inadequate reading and writing skills, and they are far less literate than the generations proceeding them. These presenters were generational "doomsayers" (Lunsford and Lunsford 801), and their comments are echoed by educators and psychiatrists (Zarra; Twenge; Twenge and Campbell) who are convinced that today's college students are less proficient writers, scholars and communicators than students of the past. Their commentary is in opposition to multiple surveys conducted in composition studies over the last one hundred years (Connors and Lunsford 404, 406; Lunsford and Lunsford 785-786, 800), which show that students today make about as many errors as students 100 years ago. The types of errors have changed, but the rate of error has not. Generational analysis, of which Lunsford and Lunsford's might be called a type, involves tracking of groups of people "on a range of issues, behaviors, and characteristics" (Doherty et al. 2), and has implications for writing students specifically. As I explore in my literature review later in this chapter, Gen Z students share key characteristics, which inform how they write, read, and communicate both digitally and interpersonally. They are different from previous generations, but they are not less proficient.

Having been a part of two different generational cohorts in college, Gen Z and Millennial, I experienced first-hand the generational shift that has taken place on college and university campuses in recent years. Students' ideological and political values have

changed, their interests and motivations are different, and their relationships with technology have evolved just as their devices have updated and upgraded. As a Gen Z graduate student and first-year writing instructor, I am particularly interested in how generational difference impacts students' writing and overall literacy. After my experiences of interacting with doomsayers and diversely aged peers as both a faculty member and a student, I resolved to answer: 1) who is Gen Z? and 2) who are Gen Z writing students? and 3) what pedagogical activities might appeal to and challenge Gen Z writers? As the generational cohort that will dominate college campuses until the year 2032 (Seemiller and Grace xiii), how can first-year writing pedagogies adapt with and consider Gen Z?

My scholarship and research to date probes topics relating to first-year composition, Gen Z literacy, generational identity (how generations perceive themselves or are perceived by members of other generational cohorts), and intergenerational competency (the competency of communicating with individuals from generational cohorts different from one's own). Currently, my inquiries and findings have led me to a larger question or problem statement: what is the relationship between generational identity and literacy? Since Gen Z is the most diverse post-war generation and contains the most children of immigrants of any generation to date (Shankar 35), they may struggle with standard American English in first-year writing classes disproportionately as a student body of many first-generation and other under-represented students (Aull 3), which makes understanding the connection between generational identity and literacy uniquely important.

There has been research and scholarship by educational theorists on Gen Z's

identity (Shankar; Zarra; Seemiller and Grace; Mosca et al.), generational learning (Bratianu et al; Seemiller and Grace), student literacy and error-rates (Aull, Threadgill; Connors and Lunsford; Lunsford and Lunsford), and on the relationships between students and their instructors (Geeraerts et al; Bratianu et al.). However, there is insufficient information on Gen Z's literacy as first-year writers.

Statement of the Problem

There is not enough information about who Gen Z is and how they read and write. By investigating the generational identities and learning preferences of Gen Z, I hope to offer insight into who today's new students are and what methods might promote Gen Z literacy motivation and enrich first-year writing classes for them and general populations. Through this endeavor, I propose communication strategies and relationships between students and faculty members by addressing possible concerns about student literacy and identity.

Research Objectives

My research and scholarship attempt to identify literacy identities of Gen Z first-year writing students, and to provide engaging instructional activities for them. I draw upon scholarship, previous research, and my own qualitative research, to provide insight and information that operate at the intersections of composition, education, and generational analysis.

Specific Research Questions

- 1) Who is Gen Z?
- 2) How does Gen Z define themselves in their own words?
- 3) What pedagogical activities might appeal to and challenge Gen Z writers?

Literature Review Introduction

To better understand Gen Z first-year writing students' literacies, I conducted both research and scholarship. I interviewed a random sample of thirteen Freshmen from Texas State University. The interviews were roughly 30-minutes in length, and covered topics relating to self-perceptions of identity, writing agency, and contemporary student life. In addition to this qualitative research, I examined previous scholarship on areas related to Gen Z generally and generational study in rhetoric and composition and used it to interpret and elaborate on findings. The methodology of this research is covered thoroughly in Chapter 2 and includes specific research and interview questions. Following a review of methodology in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 provides results and an analysis of the data findings.

The rest of this introductory chapter reviews literature to contextualize the current scholarly conversation relating to Gen Z literacy in writing students, and to provide a foundation for better understanding Gen Z and the reasoning behind personally interviewing them. The next section begins by detailing who Gen Z is, discussing the relevance of studying their demographic within writing studies, followed by reviewing previous surveys and generational data from rhetoric and composition studies.

Introducing Gen Z

As stated earlier in this chapter, it is helpful to know how students are perceived as individuals and as writers, and how they perceive themselves. I am personally motivated to understand how to better instruct the current generation of students, as a Gen Z graduate student and as a new teacher of writing. My scholarship has shown who Gen Z is and what experiences their generational cohort brings into writing classrooms.

Mosca, et al., defined Gen Z as “those born 1995-2012” in their article “New Approaches to Learning for Generation Z” (66). They also discuss three elements of Gen Z’s learning preferences; 1) Gen Z prefers hands-on learning over lecture-based learning, 2) students preferred working in groups and problem-solving, rather than solitary work or work that relied on memorization, and 3) students “preferred learning in a multimedia rich environment that utilized a variety of activities and hands-on activities to enforce their learning” (Mosca et al. 66-67). Another survey from Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace’s *Generation Z Goes to College* portrays Gen Z as compassionate, thoughtful, open-minded, responsible, determined and unlike any generation that has come before them (8, 9, 10, 11, and 12). Gen Z students have negative perspectives on traditional leadership and politics (Seemiller and Grace 5). They also have an exaggerated sense of their own leadership abilities because they feel a pressure to become experts in fields early in their childhoods and are accustomed to peer-level competition (Shankar 22).

In Seemiller and Grace’s follow-up book, *Generation Z Leads: A Guide for Developing the Leadership Capacity of Generation Z Students*, they characterize Gen Z as “compassionate, loyal, responsible, and thoughtful... money conscious, tech savvy, and entrepreneurial” (xiii). In Ernest Zarra’s book, *The Entitled Generation: Helping*

Teachers Teach and Reach the Minds and Hearts of Generation Z, is a prescriptive pedagogical text about Gen Z. The book describes Gen Z as soft, capitalist, subjective, and as resistant to cultural assimilation (9, 7, 75, 3). Like Zarra, psychologists Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell, who wrote *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*, maintain harsh criticisms against Gen Z and, in their previous research, their own generational—Millennials. They write that Millennials are entitled because “our parents have treated us as royalty since before we were born” (69), and high self-esteem is on the rise, with “more than 80% of recent college students scoring higher in general self-esteem than the average 1960s college student” (13). The authors go on to blame the “self-love” movement (15), and reason that “especially these days, Americans love to love themselves” (13).

Specifically referring to Gen Z, the authors state that they are “safe but not prepared” (304), that they are cautious about driving, drinking, and dating (186), they have a “lack of independence” (112), are more mentally ill than previous generations (111-112), as opposed to being more aware of mental illnesses, and that they spend twice as much time on their phones than students did 14 years ago (52). The issue with Twenge and Campbell’s work is that it contradicts surveys conducted in other disciplines (Seemiller and Grace; Shankar), and like Zarra’s research, it is very pejorative in its representation of Gen Z. In one of her own books on generational difference, Twenge argues that due to social trends of technology, self-love, and independence, the differences between generational cohorts are greater now than ever before (5). While some of Twenge’s observations are particularly interesting and align with current

research, others imply confirmation bias and ageism, damaging the ethos of their work.

Gen Z *are* different as students from other generations. A major distinction between Gen Z and Millennials is their parents; while Millennials were raised by Baby Boomers, Gen Z are the children of Gen Xers. Thus, most Gen Z students are more independent than Millennial students because Gen Xers are said to be more independent than Baby Boomers. Twenge and Campbell offer data charts that detail the rise and fall of narcissism in the last eighty years, and their central argument (in contradiction to other claims they make in the book about Gen Z being not independent) is that Gen Xers are more narcissistic and independent (67), which according to educational researcher Shalini Shankar is why Gen Z is also characterized as having those traits. On Gen X, she writes,

Gen Xers were children at a time when Western society was more focused on adults than on children... They were raised to be more peer-oriented than previous generations, something that they seem to have instilled in their Gen Z kids. They are also more independent than Baby Boomers (Shankar 133).

Gen Xers were latchkey kids who experienced a shift in American values towards divorce and grew up in a transitional time when pensions were disappearing, jobs were being sent overseas and the 1987 stock market crash led to a recession that impacted their opportunities in the workforce and may have contributed to their notorious cynicism (Shankar 133). Contrastingly, Baby Boomers came of age “during the most prosperous time in American history” (135). Of the post-war generations, Boomers are the least diverse, whereas Gen Z is the most diverse and contains the most children of immigrants in American history (Shankar 35). Children of immigrants also compose the largest minority group of Gen Z students (Shankar 32). Because of this, students who enter

college speak varieties of English other than American Standard English (Shankar 78). This may be why, according to Shankar and Seemiller and Grace, Gen Z students are more likely to be interested in lesson plans focused on social justice (Seemiller and Grace 25). Unlike Millennials, Gen Z students are goal oriented and want to participate in projects that “promote sustainable, social change” (Seemiller and Grace 42). Gen Z being so extrinsically motivated contrasts with Gen Xers and Millennials. According to a study published in 2012 that measured both extrinsic and intrinsic values, “All of the items measuring civic engagement and social capital were lower among Millennials than among Boomers at the same age, and all but two were lower among Millennials than Gen X’ers” (Twenge et al. 1056). This suggests that Gen Z first-year writing students might be more engaged with critical pedagogies and materials that promote social change than Millennial and Gen X students.

Generational Analysis

Generational analysis helps researchers understand generations’ attitudes and behaviors and how they are impacted over time (Parment 30). Generational analysis has found that “there have long been significant differences between older and younger people at individual points in time. Cohort analysis of these attitudes illustrates that these differences persist across the generations” (Doherty et al. 6). These differences may relate to the abilities to read and write, too.

A major flaw of most generational analysis is that researchers often “can’t separate the effects of age from those of generations” (Twenge 8), meaning that generational analysis is a form of cultural analysis, rather than a study of age or aging

exclusively. For example, when observing cultural trends and attitudes towards life, collaboration has been shown to be a common value held among older generations (Geeraerts et al. 486), which is consistent with how cooperation is highly valued across the generations (Doherty et al. 6). For example, A survey by Mosca et al. asked college students to answer eleven different questions relating to engagement in the classroom and found that 98% of survey participants reported that they preferred hands-on learning experiences and learning about real-world situations (72). A study over intergenerational dynamics in universities found that cooperation is the highest held value in common between different generational cohorts (Bratianu et al. 16).

These earlier studies on Gen Z in the classroom helped me identify an emerging theme in my own research, which was relatability. To better understand the literacies of Gen Z, it is helpful to note how generations relate to one another and if those relationships affect the learning processes of first-year writing students. Intergenerational learning (IGN) refers to how people of different birth cohorts collaborate and learn from each other. Birth cohorts, referred to as generations, “are shaped by the larger sociocultural environment of different time periods” (Twenge et al. 1045). In “Intergenerational Learning Dynamics in Universities,” the authors discuss how people of different ages innovate, compete, and cooperate with their peers and non-peers differently (Bratianu et al. 14). They add that acknowledging intergenerational dynamics in the classroom is important because “in any department there are several age layers” (Bratianu et al. 11). Like Bratianu et al., Geeraerts et al. study IGN outcomes by outlining what a generation is and how *when* someone is born impacts their cultural identities and learning processes. They define a generation as a culture or discourse community of individuals

who share “social experiences and mutual historical events,” which creates a “generational cohort” among same-aged peers (Geeraerts et al. 480). For example, Gen Z students are the most digitally literate generational cohort (Shankar 103). Zarra suggests veteran professors, including Millennials, are likely to be off put, or threatened, by Gen Z’s digital tendencies (105). Defining literacy and the standards of literacy assessments is difficult. Literacy extends beyond reading and writing—it includes the abilities to evaluate, analyze, synthesize, and revise information (Horning and Sudol 3, 75).

There have been at least two major studies on generational learning within composition studies. The first, “A Frequency of Formal Errors” by Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors surveyed 3,000 Gen X first-year writing students’ essays. They did this in order to determine the kinds of mistakes young writers made in their formal graded assignments, and to see how their instructors assessed those assignments (Connors and Lunsford 539). What they found is that students across the country made consistent mistakes, and that their instructors prioritized marking low-order concerns like grammar and punctuation. A second study, “‘Mistakes Are a Fact of Life’: A National Comparative Study” by Andrea Lunsford and Karen Lunsford, is a response to the first that was published thirty years later, on a different generation of students, Millennials. Both of these surveys are loosely inspired by the Roy Ivan Johnson survey in 1917, the Paul Witty and Roberta survey in 1930 and the John C. Hodges survey from the late 1930s, all of which surveyed student writing to better understand how instructors respond to students through assessments (Lunsford and Lunsford 783).

The most common mistake for Gen X students was placing “no comma after an introductory element” (Lunsford and Lunsford 785). In 1917, the most common mistake

students struggled with was spelling; in 1930 it was faulty connectives, and in the late 1930s students struggled with using commas, followed by spelling (Lunsford and Lunsford 783). In the Lunsford and Connors study published in 1988, the authors survey 300 student written essays for formal writing mistakes; spelling ranked as the most common error, followed by “no comma after an introductory element” (Lunsford and Connors 400). When surveying 3,000 student essays, the most common error was “no comma after an introductory element” followed by “vague pronoun effect” (403). Lunsford and Connors’ study had several implications for generational learning in writing studies. First, teachers’ ideas about “what constitutes a serious, markable error” varied (402). Second, most teachers were found to mark lower-order concerns, and did not mark as many errors as expected (402). Lunsford and Connors hypothesized that this was due to the lack of time teachers had to evaluate papers and how overworked composition teachers remain, because they only marked “43% of the most serious errors” (402). Third, despite the length and difficulty of composing papers increasing, the errors made by students in the 20th century remained consistent (406). While the amount of errors students made did not decrease, they did not sharply rise either, suggesting that literacy in Freshman composition courses did not change during that time period, despite the difficulty of college courses increasing (406-407). However, the shift in the kinds of errors students made suggested that they were becoming less familiar with the written page (Lunsford and Connors 406; Lunsford and Lunsford 785).

Generationally, then, there appears to be a distinction between different forms of literacy, like digital literacy, and written literacy. Lunsford and Lunsford note that in the Lunsford and Connors study, students wrote mostly by hand, which changed by the time

Lunsford and Lunsford surveyed Millennial students in 2008. They write that, “the digital revolution has brought with it opportunities and challenges for writing that students and teachers twenty-two years [prior to 2008] could scarcely imagine” (786). The propulsion of technology use has only increased in recent years, with Gen Z often being referred to as the iGeneration because they were born into a world dominated by Apple and smart phones. They have had a greater exposure to technology and digital culture (Shankar 11) and are extremely good at and reliant on technology use (Seemiller and Grace 222; Zarra 34). Seemiller and Grace offer a statistic relating to phone use: “Ninety percent” of Gen Z students said they would be upset without the internet, and “three in four” said they would be upset if not able to text their friends. The authors suggest embracing technology by offering class activities that require technology use through conducting research, which develops information literacy skills (222).

While research relating to the identity of Gen Z is speculative, it is clear in composition studies that generational difference has no effect on the frequency of errors students make, and in fact, over the past one hundred years students have successfully adapted to longer and more difficult assignments without increasing errors. While it is common to prefer one’s own generational cohort, there is a lack of evidence to indicate that today’s students perform worse than previous students. Lunsford and Lunsford write, “contrary to what doomsayers would have us believe, this study confirms that the rate of student error is not increasing precipitously but, in fact, has stayed stable for nearly 100 years” (801). What is known to be unique to Gen Z is their digital literacy. While increased digital literacy may make students less familiar with the written page, it may also make them more savvy researchers. And with social media, texting, and instant

messaging, students are arguably writing more than ever before—it's just that their style is closer to freewriting, and it is adaptive to digital mediums and contexts (Vidergar).

Defining literacy standards in the first place is difficult, and so assigning labels of Gen Z students as being “good” or “bad” readers and writers based on assumptions is both shortsighted and unethical. Literacy is hard to define because “standards” are often biased and dependent on circumstance. As Sudol and Horning remind us, “Literacy standards are sometimes ahistorical and under contextualized, depending on exclusionary racist and classist traditions, heterosexist impulses, ethnic biases, and gender stereotypes” (120). In other words, most literacy standards are outdated and inequitable, which means they serve as imperfect measurements for the abilities of today’s college students. With the rise of digital literacy, these standards become increasingly difficult to define. Students may be able to assess, synthesize, and reflect upon information in an online forum, but struggle to translate those skills onto a piece of paper in standard academic English. If standards are difficult to define, so are assessment criteria and learning goals. Paying attention to the literacies of Gen Z offers valuable information in considering such important definitions.

Understanding who Gen Z is and how they interact with others is a useful foundation for considering the literacies of current first-year writing students. While not all of them may subscribe to being lumped into generational cohorts, and may have unique individualities, they do share a certain number of characteristics (like technology fluency) and personal histories (such as reaching adulthood with Donald Trump as their president, during the #MeToo movement, or during increased societal protesting for civil rights). As Campbell and Twenge put it, “personality does not exist in isolation” (37).

Generation links sociohistorical change with the fact that individuals are born, live, and die (Parment 30). While this thesis investigates different theories from a variety of literatures, it does so with the aim of focusing on Gen Z literacy, and the ways in which the identities and experiences of Gen Z students operate in first-year writing classrooms.

Thesis Organization

The next chapter of this thesis details the methodology and research objectives of interview study with Gen Z students. The results and findings of this study are further elaborated upon in Chapter 3, wherein specific data charts and interview transcriptions will be critically analyzed. Chapter 4 is a discussion of these results and the implications of them in relation to current scholarly conversations in rhetoric and composition literature and pedagogical theory. Here I argue which pedagogical strategies may be more effective for teaching Gen Z students and show that there is insufficient evidence to suggest that Gen Z is less literate than other generational cohorts. In Chapter 5, the conclusion, I reflect on the arguments in my thesis and on the implications of my data, and I investigate the connection between lived experience, or age, and how new writers approach reading and writing.

II. METHODOLOGY OF INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS

My methodology is a qualitative approach that combines interviews with Gen Z first-year writing students with scholarship that probes the intersections of generational and writing studies. My research attempts to identify literacy identities of Gen Z first-year writing students, and to discuss which philosophies of composition pedagogy are the most useful for Gen Z first-year writing students. Through extensive scholarship and qualitative 30-minute interviews with students, I inquire into how generational identity might impact the literacy interests and practices of first-year writing students. There are three research questions that I have formed during my investigation of composition pedagogy for Gen Z students. I want to know 1) who is Gen Z? and 2) how does Gen Z define themselves as writers and readers in their own words and 3) what pedagogical activities might appeal to and challenge Gen Z writers? To investigate these questions, I inductively analyzed my research findings for emerging themes and ideas.

This research was approved as exempt by the Institutional Review Board at Texas State University.¹ The interviews conducted investigated the self-perceptions and literacies of Gen Z first-year writing students, and how their experiences and identities as a generational cohort shape the ways in which they write, read, and communicate. The interviews were structured with the intended goal of giving students a space to advocate for themselves as young writers and scholars. Students were able to represent themselves and the various communities that they came from. They spoke personally about how age, gender, ethnicity, disability, money, nationality, and bilingualism shaped their perceptions of their literacies, and the kinds of reading and writing assignments that they

¹ Institutional Review Board exemption number: 6225

preferred. While first-year writing students offered a limited perspective, specifically because of their relative inexperience, there is value in knowing how they understand themselves as writers and what they consider their relationships with literacy to be. The goal of this research is to provide the student perspective to first-year writing instructors, so that they might better know their students and be better informed about the various dynamics of an intergenerational classroom, especially in relation to Gen Z.

The rest of this chapter details the qualitative research methodology and theoretical frameworks that I use, as well as the theoretical and research literature that I draw upon to inform my methodology and the interpretation of my findings. The chapter begins with sections that offer explanations for why I use qualitative research methods, who I am as a researcher—my positionality--and possible limitations of my research. The rest of the chapter reflects on how data has been gathered, what instruments were used to transcribe and analyze the interviews I had with Gen Z first-year writing students and interpreted the data I gathered.

Statement of Methodology

My methodological frame is informed by theories of composition and qualitative research. My methods are qualitative because they rely on intermittent periods of observational instrumentation followed by reflection. For example, after I observe students' responses and reflect on what they've told me, I observe them a second time by listening to the audio recordings of our conversations, transcribing them, and reflecting on connections that then become apparent after I have written down their words, and turned our conversation into a visual dialogue on Microsoft Word. I observed students a third time when coding the transcribed interviews into Excel Documents and reflected

again. Lastly, I observed and reflected upon students' responses when analyzing and writing about our conversations.

Qualitative research methods made sense to use in addressing these research questions because my questions and the intention of my research are descriptive. Rather than speaking for students, my research attempts to give students the opportunity to act as speakers rather than strictly as audience members. My research questions are qualitative in that they seek to come to a deeper understanding about experiences and identities. Specifically, qualitative research methods “rely on text and image data, have unique steps in data analysis, and draw on diverse designs” (Creswell and Creswell 179). In other words, qualitative research distinguishes itself from quantitative approaches in its emphasis on inductive styles of research that focus on individual meaning, and the importance of reporting the complexity of a situation (Creswell and Creswell 4). Qualitative research occurs in a natural setting, like the meeting rooms on the Texas State University campus where I interviewed students, and the researcher herself is a key instrument that interviews, observes, and examines research participants (Creswell and Creswell 181).

The following are key tenets of qualitative research that I take up in my own study:

- My methods are *inductive*, meaning that themes emerged, and my findings became more apparent often after research had already begun.
- I employed a *holistic account* by identifying factors involved in my interviews with students to develop how I interpreted and presented in Chapter 3.

- I used an *emergent design method*, meaning that the current research has changed and evolved from the initial plan for research based on information that was gathered during the time when interviews were being conducted (Creswell and Creswell 182).
- I reflected a *constructivist approach* and *ethnographic design* by observing the behavior, language, and demographic of participants (Creswell and Creswell 17).
- I am taking an *interdisciplinary approach* to scholarship by looking into how research from the fields of education and sociology can inform composition pedagogies, specifically critical and cultural pedagogies.

I gathered information on how Gen Z students perceive themselves and what attitudes Gen Z students have towards literacy and learning as shown in Chapter 3. The following is a list of key terms and definitions that clarify the language and theories used in this thesis:

- *Generational Cohort*: a group of individuals who were “shaped by the larger sociocultural environment of different time periods” (Twenge 76).
- *Generation Z*: the generational cohort born between 1995 and 2012.
- *Intergenerational competency*: the capacity to communicate effectively with individuals from different generational cohorts than one’s own.
- *Intergenerational learning*: the ways in which different generational cohorts learn from each other.
- *Literacy*: difficult to contextualize and define, literacy standards might be considered the capacity to fluently read and write in a native language.

- *Digital literacy*: the acquisition and use of technology and digital rhetoric.
- *Ethos*: the authority, credibility, and morality of a speaker, writer, person, or group.
- *Empathy-induced altruism*: the idea that performing literacy through reading and writing can prompt a person to feel empathy, and therefore be more likely to perform prosocial actions (Keen 141).
- *Prosocial motivation*: the relationship between empathy, altruism, and community building (Keen 151).

A table with definitions of generations other than Gen Z can be found in the Appendix.

Separate but related theories of composition pedagogy also inform my research: cultural pedagogy offers perspective on the relationships between composition and equality, and critical pedagogy offers ideas on how to challenge inequality and unequitable social hierarchies. generational analysis and studies of experiences and identity can be reflected upon by drawing on scholarship on cultural pedagogy, while scholarship on critical pedagogy might suit this emerging generation of scholars who are politically oriented and motivated by social justice causes. Both theories of critical and cultural pedagogy are qualitative in nature because they seek to teach students about reading and writing by helping them reflect on and learn from their own experiences and identities. Strong literacy skills, like reflexive and critical thinking, reading critically, and being able to compose a message clearly and persuasively for a purpose, help students process and understand active citizenship, social hierarchies, and systems of oppression. I discuss my theoretical framework in more detail in another section of this chapter titled, “Theoretical Framework.”

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical research frames most useful to me in forming the methodology and purpose of my research are generational identity (which I discussed in Chapter 1), critical pedagogy, and cultural pedagogy. These theories informed my overall research and the interpretation of data in Chapter 3 by offering intersecting concepts, such as those relating to identity, literacy, and prosocial action. I argue these theories offer insight into Gen Z college students as writers and what motivates their literacy practices.

Composition pedagogy is “a body of knowledge consisting of theories of and research on teaching, learning, literacy, writing and rhetoric, and the related practices that emerge” (Taggart et al. 3). Pedagogy is the study of the underlying philosophies of teaching (Taggart et al. 5). Composition pedagogy is “an umbrella term, like theory, rhetoric, or literacy... which is why composition pedagogy morphs into composition pedagogies as literacy morphs into literacies” (Taggart et al. 3). In this thesis, composition pedagogy refers to the teaching of literacy, writing and rhetoric, and the theories that draw attention to teaching as a philosophy, in order to inform better pedagogical practices as discussed in the reflection of data results in Chapter 4.

Critical pedagogy is a theory of teaching distinctive in its “usually explicit commitment to education for citizenship” (George 78). Critical pedagogy closely resembles cultural studies “because it encourages students to challenge inequality” (George 77). Critical pedagogy can also be defined as the development and pursuit of a writing pedagogy that “contains a critique of the way discourse conventions reinforce dominant ideological values and promotes resistance to the unconscious reification of

those values” (Hardin 77). Critical pedagogy is, ideally, oriented to promote “dialogue, equality, freedom, and tolerance” (Castro 67). Critical pedagogy, which advocates for using the writing classroom as a space for challenging and articulating socially constructed power structures (George 79), serves as a bridge in this thesis that articulates the relationship between identity and literacy. Critical pedagogy supports the belief that young people are best positioned to inform understandings of their own issues and problems (Satchwell and Larkins 129), that supports giving students a voice in dialogues that involve their educations, which is what my interviews attempt to do. So, for example, in the data in Chapter 3 shows that students are interested in prosocial writing through writing for social justice (critical pedagogy). By employing a critical lens, I am inquiring into whether Gen Z college students are more motivated to perform literacy when they are encouraged to read and write about sociopolitical experiences. In other words, if literacy promotes empathy and prosocial action, can empathy and prosocial action promote literacy in Gen Z college students?

When both authors and readers practice empathy, they create a “concord” which can be a “motivating force to push beyond literary response to prosocial action” where the potential for change exists (Keen 141). In first-year composition classes students are able to read first-hand testimonies from a variety of authors on their experiences, which offers students realistic (as opposed to fictional) rhetorical situations in which to practice writing and reflexive thinking through pedagogical styles that promote empathy, literacy and strong composition skills.

Like critical pedagogy, cultural studies in composition pedagogy is concerned with “the analysis of the interrelationship between culture and power, particularly with

regard to the production, reception, and diverse use of texts” (Giroux 5). I am employing a cultural studies analysis method, generational analysis, to investigate how age identity operates within the spaces that writers occupy, and how their identities impact their literacies as first-year writers. I am specifically investigating age as a cultural identity, to see if the experiences that a generational cohort has in their lifetime impacts how and why they read and write. Like other types of identities, age contributes to a set of “highly impressionable shared experiences” that “embed values” in a group of people (Parment 29). The study of how age impacts literacy falls under cultural studies because age in this context relates to 1) shared lived experiences among a set of people and 2) power dynamics reinforced by age as they relate to invention, ethos, and agency. Age and experience difference reinforce pre-existing power dynamics, making it appear that the confidence and authority of new writers is significantly less than the confidence and authority of more experienced writers.

Critical pedagogy and cultural pedagogy as theoretical frames offer insight into the identities of Gen Z college students as writers. These theories informed my overall understanding and interpretation of the data in Chapter 3 and are referred to again in the reflection and discussion of data in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

Positionality

As a Gen Z graduate student in Rhetoric and Composition, I am uniquely motivated to understand Gen Z as first-year writers. Because I am close in age to the people I interviewed and I was not the Teaching Assistant who instructed their classes, I was able to engage in a peer-like open dialogue with them. This satisfies a goal of critical

pedagogy and cultural pedagogy, which is to support the agency, authority, and power of young writers. Although the direction of the conversations I had with students may have been reflective of my own identity, biases, and interests, the power dynamic between us was mitigated, which helped students have some control in the conversations I had with them. However, my positionality is not absolutely peer-like to anyone that I interviewed. As a graduate student, I had a deeper understanding of the topics that we were discussing, and as the primary investigator it was my task to orient the conversation towards something meaningful. And, while not being significantly older than the students I interviewed, I still had the age and authority difference to be the one interviewing them, rather than being the one who was interviewed.

Other aspects of my positionality to consider are that, as a female, other female students may have been more inclined to speak openly with me, whereas male students may not have. An example of this is how out of the 14 students that volunteered and showed up for interviews, only four were male. Were male students less comfortable having a conversation with me than female students? Were women more comfortable having a conversation with me because I am female? Or, are women simply more likely to participate in extra credit activities outside of class than male students? One aspect of my positionality is my race. Because I am white, students of color may have felt less comfortable expressing themselves with me, whereas white students may have felt more comfortable. For example, a white male student that I interviewed, who I will refer to as Bill, felt comfortable telling me that he did not enjoy reading and writing about issues relating to diversity and sexuality, and that he would prefer to read and write about technology and sports. Would Bill have felt inclined to tell me that information if I were

not white?

Other aspects of my positionality include my class upbringing, my lack of physical disabilities, and the fact that, unlike some of the students I interviewed, I am not a first-generation immigrant or college student. As someone who grew up middle-class, I didn't personally agree with Bill when he asserted that Gen Z, like their grandparents, were spoiled. As an investigator, I asked questions to better understand his viewpoints, but as a middle-class Gen Z I struggle with the notion that Gen Z students are lazy or spoiled. In contrast to Bill, I also interviewed students like Vicky, who came to the United States from Mexico as a first-generation college student. She described her family as supportive, but regressive in their ideas of what she could accomplish as a woman and as a student. She described a dinner that took place when she visited her family in Mexico last year,

The meal was ready, and then I was sitting, I got my plate and everything, and then I sit, I sat with my grandpa and my uncles, and it was me, the only woman. And I was eating like real, like good, like I was happy. And then my aunt came and she said, "Oh well, there's another man at the table." And she looked at me, and she pointed at me, and like she laughed. And I didn't get it honestly, but after a while, like I realized that they don't, they don't sit with the men. Like women shouldn't sit with men and eat. They should wait for the man and be done, and then they can go eat. So, because I ate before with them it was different. And I don't live with them. They live in Mexico. I'm here. I have different perspectives, and she didn't get that, and she wanted me to be the same as her. And yeah, so that's different, people are more conservative, and they have different ideas.

For Vicky, the microaggression she experienced felt regressive and symptomatic of her aunt's generational cohort. While Vicky overcame more adversities than most of the students I interviewed, she wasn't the only one who had worked hard for her opportunities.

My positionality was the most apparent to me when interviewing Bella, who is a hearing disabled student. To accommodate the student, she requested that she use an interpreter via a phone application, and that I record our conversation that way. Because I could not see the student visually, I had to listen closely to when the student was communicating with me and when it was appropriate for me to communicate with her. Our conversation went well and yielded interesting information, as it was helpful to consider her perspective as a bilingual student, and how digital rhetoric and narrative writing were the most accessible ways for her to practice literacy in her non-native language.

As an able-bodied white woman, I do not universally represent the Gen Z community, which is why I believe giving students the space and means to represent themselves is important—hence, my qualitative methodological approach. Likewise, in coding my data, I tried to represent students' voices and opinions by transcribing their responses and keeping count of how many students offered duplicate responses (as shown in Chapter 3).

My positionality relating to my theoretical framework is that I am a feminist, an activist, and a scholar. I am interested in how critical and cultural pedagogies critique hierarchal power structures because of my own experiences and identities, as someone who experiences both privilege and oppression in varying circumstances.

The positionality of the students I interviewed is that as first-year writing students they are young and new to college, and there is a lot that they do not know yet about higher education and adult life. When I ask students in interviews to define their generational cohort some of them do not know they are not Millennials despite being born in the year 2000 or 2001. When I ask them to describe their classroom preferences or their ideal professors, many of them reference experiences from high school. The current direction of my research mirrors the conversations I have been having with students; they respond to some questions from the script in more detail and with more clarity than others. They often have a lot to say about generational identity, commonplaces, social justice, and their personal relationships but have very little to say when asked to define words or how technology can be incorporated into the classroom. One limitation of my research is that only 28.6% of interview participants were male. However, answers between male and female participants did not differ enough for there to be evidence that there is a significant disparity between the male and female perspective.

Gathering Data and Instrumentation

I began my research by interviewing Gen Z first-year writing students.¹ The goal of this research was to promote an open dialogue between students and instructors regarding learning outcomes, generational identity, and literacy. My research inquiries were based in my own desire to understand Gen Z as first-year writing students, stemming from my curiosity as a new composition instructor. The interviews were roughly 30-minutes in length depending on how much the students wanted to tell me. The interviews were

qualitative and inductive, with themes, categories, and possible implications becoming clearer as I spoke with more students.

I interviewed a random sample of students on their pedagogical preferences and opinions on composition. My goal was to have interviewed twenty students by the time my thesis was finished. Due to complications from Covid-19 making it difficult to meet with them, I was only able to interview fourteen students. I recruited students by personally soliciting Freshman composition sections of ENG 1310 and 1320 at Texas State University and corresponded with them via email to arrange a conversational environment wherein they might feel comfortable expressing themselves and elaborating on their answers. Most of our interviews took place in room 302 in Flowers Hall. Some took place in my graduate student office, room 125, during off times when my colleagues were not there, and the rest took place in a private suite, room 302.

Most participating instructors offered their students extra credit for volunteering. I used a handheld audio recorder to record an MP3 of each interview. I prepared a script of ten open-ended questions. I kept a clipboard and pen to take hand-written notes of any emerging findings and to annotate the interview script as needed. I transcribed each interview and analyzed them inductively by looking for themes and possible connections. The three themes I identified were 1) relatability, 2) ethos, and 3) social justice. Additionally, I organized my findings in Excel documents.

Each student signed an Informed Consent Form. Each Informed Consent Form, date of birth record, and the annotated interview are stored on a personal desktop computer and on a private USB stick. Once the research is completed the interviews and related documents will be encrypted and then stored for up to 5 years.

The original ten questions that were scripted during the beginning of my graduate studies are listed with detailed descriptions below. Upon conducting my research, different research patterns emerged that led to the kinds of follow-up questions I would ask and the overall direction of my thesis.

Question 1: *How eager are you to work in groups during class?* Because the first question from the interview script asks students about their collaboration preferences, students reflected on why they did or did not like working together in and outside of class. Their answers related to those of the sixth question, which asks students how comfortable they are expressing themselves in their writing and in class. This is when “narrative” and “autoethnography” arose as keywords. Figure 4 in Chapter 3 shows that students reported feeling comfortable or even eager sharing personal ideologies, stories, and ideas with their peers and professor. From this keyword, I became interested in the concept of student ethos, and students’ confidence levels when relating to their own capacities as meaning-makers.

Question 2: *Define “relatable.”* Question #2 is the weakest question and the one that students responded to the least. This is likely because it is reflective of an earlier phase of this project before more data was collected and the direction of the research changed. Previously, this project focused on intergenerational dynamics within writing classrooms. However, students responded to some questions more than others, and their responses led to the project’s new focus: Generation Z first-year writers’ literacies.

Students struggled to define the term “relatable.” This question proved to be the least interesting and useful from a research perspective. It is reflective of the beginning of the research process, but by the end of the process this question did not serve a real

purpose.

A follow-up question I asked was, “What other key terms or concepts do young people your age use that you think older generations should know or be aware of?”

Students also struggled to come up with follow-up terms. Many failed to answer the question, and others suggested texting acronyms as a possibility.

Question 3: *Are you interested in learning what professional scholars of Rhetoric and Composition do?* This question would gauge how interested students were in writing studies, particularly from a composition perspective. Their responses contextualized the rest of our conversations. If they were not interested in writing studies, they generally preferred lighter reading assignments that were focused on aspects of student or early adult life, rather than on composition or writing theory and mechanics. A follow-up question I asked students was, “Are you interested in learning about what professional writers do?” to which they responded with mixed results as shown in Chapter 3.

Question 4: *How can we use technology productively in and outside of class?* Some students suggested using apps like GroupMe to keep in contact with their classmates and voiced that they would be more comfortable approaching their professors for help if the setting were casual, like a text message. A follow-up question I asked was, “Would texting through an app make you feel more comfortable contacting your professor for help?” I discuss whether using texting as a medium makes students more comfortable approaching their professors outside of class in more detail in Chapter 3.

Question 5: *Are reading materials and class durations too long? Explain your answer.* I used this topic as an opportunity to ask students what their major areas of study were. In doing so I sought to inquire if there was a relationship between students’

personal interests in reading and writing and whether they were prepared for class. I also inquired into if their interests impacted what they considered to be long or short assignments. Students' answers to question number 5 were often reflective of their majors. Results in the following chapter will show that most liberal arts students read more and prefer writing more than most non-liberal arts students.

Question 6: *Are you comfortable expressing your personal identity or views in your writing and during class?* This question was particularly interesting to me, because it led to investigating the types of writing assignments first-year composition students prefer. For example, autoethnography, which I discuss in Chapter 4. In Chapter 3 the results indicate that most students prefer writing personal narratives over other kinds of writing assignments. Their following top choices were research papers and autoethnographies. At Texas State University, where I teach, the teaching assistants are encouraged to teach autoethnography in the second semester of first-year writing. Because of this, many students were assigned personal narratives and had the vocabulary to explain autoethnography and why they liked it.

Question 7: *Should your professors be allowed to express their own ideological views, and if their views are different, would you still feel comfortable taking their class?* Students' answers to this question provided insight into how they wanted to connect and communicate with their writing professors. Some follow-up questions I would ask were, "would knowing your professor personally impact your participation in class?" and "what's your favorite part of your professor's personality?" the responses to which are shown in Figure 5.

Question #8: *How do you think a Gen Z and a Millennial are different?* Some

Gen Z students had a difficult time identifying key differences between their own generational cohort and Millennials, and it was often because they thought they were Millennials. Since these particular students could not provide information on their perception of Millennials, my follow-up question would ask about Gen X and Baby Boomers instead, which meant that students who could not distinguish characteristics of Millennials could provide data on their perceptions of a different generation. This enabled me to make two graphs for Question 8 in Chapter 3, one that shows Gen Z students' perceptions of Millennials, and another that illustrates their perceptions of Gen X and Baby Boomers.

Question 9: *What makes Gen Z special?* This question provided an opportunity for students to describe how they wanted other generational cohorts to perceive them. Students used honorific language to describe what they believed to be their best qualities. Unlike in other questions, where students provided overlapping and repetitive answers, nearly every student provided a different adjective for themselves, with forty-one descriptions being provided by the 14 interview participants. When students struggled to answer this question, I would elicit a response from them by asking, "are there any other key characteristics of Gen Z?"

Question 10: *Are there negative stereotypes of Gen Z that bother you? What are they?* Students responded by mentioning the kinds of pejorative statements that they had heard other generational cohorts use to describe them that they found particularly hurtful or inaccurate. This question usually did not warrant further inquiry from me as the interviewer. After hearing students' perceptions of themselves from their responses to Question 9 and Question 10, I drew clearer connections between their literacy and their

literacy identities, which I expand upon in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.

After collecting answers to the above ten questions and subsequent follow-up questions, I transcribed the interviews. When analyzing the transcriptions, I took an inductive approach to look for themes and categories. Three major themes consistently arose in my interviews with students: 1) ethos, 2) social justice, and 3) relationships with instructors.

After analyzing inductively for themes of interest, I created visual charts (found in the Appendix) of the interviews to give me an idea of how many times each student had a similar response or idea. After creating these illustrations, I made a document that pulled quotes from the student interviews and separated them into relevant categories. I then used this document to find and analyze quotes together, which is reflected in the synthesis of my research findings in Chapter 3.

In the following chapter I interpret my findings with an analysis and discussion grounded in the theoretical (Taggart et al; George; George et al; Giroux; Hardin; Villacañas de Castro) and research literature mentioned in Chapter 1 and Chapter 4 (Creswell and Creswell; Lunsford and Connor; Lunsford and Lunsford; Seemiller and Grace; Twenge and Campbell; Shankar; Zarra). The research literature that I draw upon are pieces of scholarship on composition pedagogies, primarily but not limited to theories of generational identity and rhetorical theory.

III. FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH GENERATION Z FIRST-YEAR WRITERS

To promote best practices in the writing classroom, it is important to consider the generational identities of our students, the majority of whom are still developing into confident writers and adults. Based on the research questions in Chapter 2, I interviewed them to discover 1) who is Gen Z? and 2) how does Gen Z define themselves as writers and readers in their own words and 3) what pedagogical activities might appeal to and challenge Gen Z writers? In interviewing Gen Z, I have found a possible connection between Gen Z's identity, their perceptions of themselves in contrast with the perceptions of them, and possible pedagogical theories that could motivate them to build on their current literacy practices, while also challenging them to further develop the critical analytical dimensions of their writing.

Research Findings and Analysis

This chapter offers an extensive analysis and discussion of my research findings organized as themes. (The charts that I created to illustrate and analyze my research findings can be found in the Appendix.) Throughout this chapter I use quotes from students that I interviewed to discuss the themes that emerged in our conversations. The three primary themes that emerged were 1) ethos, 2) social justice, and 3) relationships with professors. I use aliases to maintain the anonymity of the research participants. The top findings can be found in the table on the following page.

Table 1. An overview chart of the top answers that participants provided to interview questions.

Interview Questions #1-10	Interview Answers	
"How eager are you to work in groups during class?"	Yes, participating in groups during class is enjoyable.	7
"Can you define the word 'relatable'?"	No, there are not terms other generations should know.	7
"Are you interested in learning what professional scholars of Rhetoric and Composition do?"	Writing is enjoyable.	9
"How can we use technology productively in and outside of class?"	Interested in learning about what Rhetors and writers do.	9
	Technology for writing or doing research outside of class.	10
"Are reading materials and class durations too long?"	Reading is not enjoyable.	8
	Reading materials are the correct length.	8
"Should your professor be allowed to express themselves?"	Yes, your professor should express themselves.	14
"How are Gen Z and Millennials different?"	Less techy savvy	5
"How is Gen Z different from Baby Boomers or Gen X?"	Less techy savvy	4
"What makes Gen Z special?"	Tech savvy.	11
"What negative stereotypes of Gen Z bother you?"	Not hardworking.	4
	Use phones and other technology too much.	4

Theme 1: Gen Z Cares About Relatability

The first theme that emerged in my conversations with students was relatability. The Gen Z students I interviewed reported that having positive relationships with their professors and classmates and being able to relate to a given reading or assignment, benefits their abilities to succeed in class. For example, Marie told me that when professors are open about themselves it makes it easier for her to talk to them about her grades, and she touched on wanting to relate to her professors. The theme of relatability that appeared in my conversation with her was also came up in response to the second interview question, which specifically asked about the term “relatability.” In response to the interview question on if there were key terms or concepts that other generations should know Evie said,

Yeah, for sure. Like being relatable and being one of those things, because with

Gen Z students we all know, you know, we're here to work hard and you know a lot of us are here to make our parents proud, you know, graduate with a degree and get a good job whatever. But with, um, professors, they're different so with their topics it's more geared towards, you know, just the lesson instead of you know incorporating, hey here's what you could do to make this more interesting or relatable.

Like Marie, Evie mentions relatability as a kind of connection and mutual understanding between individuals or things (I investigate this connection more and relate it to the theory of mimesis in Chapter 4).

One thing that has led to Gen Z's increased interests in relatability and sustaining relationships is globalization, because proximity no longer plays a prominent enough role in their socialization (Seemiller and Grace 88). Because technology has had such an impact on the relationships of Gen Z (Seemiller and Grace 94) and the recent impacts of Covid-19 have led to increased online learning, promoting relatability and individualized communication between faculty and students is more important, and perhaps difficult, than ever. Gen Z students "prefer friends they can relate to: shared values and shared hobbies are the most important factors for them" (Seemiller and Grace 88). With increased rates of homeschooling, largely caused by the independent inclinations of GenXers, it is reported that Gen Z value maintaining close relationships to friends and family (Seemiller and Grace 89). This could contribute to why Gen Z is such a caring generation that values having individual or peer-like relationships with the people in their lives, including their writing instructors.

The theme of relatability also came up when discussing collaboration with

students, with participants indicating that interacting with their peers during group work increased their abilities to learn. In the first interview question students were asked how they felt about collaborating in groups. The question was often followed up by asking if the material being graded affected students' eagerness to collaborate on projects. Students were evenly split on whether they preferred to work in groups. Cody said, "I actually like working in groups way more... just because it brings more intelligence like to whatever you're working on. I mean, well, it's just better. It's more interaction. More communication. Stuff like that." Harrison felt similarly, telling me he was "very eager to work in groups" and that he feels when he is with a group, he "can get a lot more work done quickly and efficiently." Bella, who is a bilingual student, is eager to "work in groups and to contribute ideas, you know, when I work independently, I sometimes have writing barriers, but when I work in groups everybody has different perspectives." For her, having a collaborating on projects made writing in a language other than her first language more accessible.

Conversely, Bill told me he "wouldn't call myself eager to work in groups, but like I do enjoy it. So, whenever the opportunity's presented I'm fine with it, and fun, but I wouldn't say that I'm eager to work in groups." Another student, Debbie, struggled with groupwork because she considers herself a very introverted person who has a difficult time making her voice heard in a big group setting. She said, "I don't like being in a big group. Because I'm really quiet and I don't like giving my opinion a lot. So, and I like, like listening to people giving their opinion, but also I want to put my work on the group, and because I don't talk I feel like it's a waste of time me being there." My findings indicate that roughly half of students find collaboration of any kind to be beneficial.

More notable is that most students reported feeling comfortable expressing themselves to their classmates in and outside of class and being expressed to by their classmates and professors.

Whether professors should be allowed to express themselves in class was the only question that all 14 students gave the same response to. Overwhelmingly, students were okay with expressing themselves to their professor and their classmates, and to also have their classmates be expressive. For example, about this, Harrison told me “Yes, I really think they should be allowed to express themselves. That should not just be limited to the students. I think everybody should be able to freely express themselves in a respectful manner, of course in a respectful manner, and everyone else who’s listening to that opinion or expression should be able to.” Most students felt that if they had a relationship with their professors where they felt like they really knew each other, that they would be more willing to go to contact their professors outside of class by going to office hours or emailing them. As Harrison put it, “If I knew the professor like more personally it would be a lot easier for me to go there to talk to him or her. I’d feel more comfortable if I had a problem knowing that I’m more than just a student.” Most students also reported that they would feel more comfortable contacting their professor via text rather than via email. They favored the idea of having a group message, through an app like GroupMe, to ask their professors about matters relating to class.

Students were split over whether professors should make their biases and political preferences clear to their students. Those who were in favor of knowing their professors’ biases and politics said it was because it would help them be more strategic in how they presented themselves to their professors, both in their writing and in person. One student,

Evie, said professors should be present in class “not with their bias, with their views” and that “they should always be there as a mediator.” Students cited valuing the experiences of their professors, with some mentioning that knowing their professors’ views helps them shape their own. No students reported that they felt their professors could push their ideologies onto students. While students appreciated knowing about their professors, they did not like the idea of losing their autonomy in forming their own opinions or having their grades be jeopardizing because of their contrary viewpoints. For example, Peter said he was comfortable with his professors expressing themselves if they do not participate in “really just coming at someone for believing what they believe, and saying ‘oh, that’s wrong.’ They shouldn’t be, there should never be someone who’s wrong, they should just be like well I respect your views, and you respect mine.” For Josey, it felt obvious that her professors should be able to express themselves personally. She said, “I feel like it could bring just more better conversation since you’re, you know where they’re coming from or your personality and stuff like that. I think it would definitely be easier to talk to somebody if you actually know like who they are.” The Gen Z students I interviewed wanted their professors to know them as individuals, and likewise desired to have ideas of who their professors were as individuals, too.

Adding to this topic, Marie said that she feels professors who are personal and relatable are “more welcoming to like talk. Usually professors who don’t talk about themselves are just like, ‘Come see me about your grade,’ all of them. They’re never like, ‘Come see me if you have questions about anything,’ you know?” The Gen Z students that I interviewed desired improved working relationships with faculty members. Students reported feeling comfortable having open professors and being open with their

peers, so wanting more casual relationships with their professors. There may be similar reasons behind students wanting to feel more comfortable approaching faculty members, and their desires to be perceived as peers by individuals that they identify as already being knowledgeable and able to participate in public discourse in meaningful ways—which are traits they strive for when wanting to be informed. They may want to feel comfortable approaching their professors, and to be perceived as authoritative individuals, which is how many of them try to treat their peers.

Regarding expressing themselves to their classmates and being expressed to, almost every student was comfortable sharing about themselves and learning more about others. They cited their generation's "openness" and "acceptance" for why they felt comfortable with their peers. Cody told me he was willing to talk about difficult or personal topics if it would ultimately lead to a meaningful or productive conversation. He said,

Yeah. I would feel comfortable. I just don't like talking about that stuff with other people, like politics, I hate talking about politics with other people just cause I feel like a lot of people just talk instead of... They talk from what they hear, instead of from what they know. And it just kind of pisses me off cause all that stuff that they say is completely wrong. And like, I don't know, but yeah I could definitely talk to people. Um, about that kind of stuff without it interfering with me or me getting mad and saying something to them, I think, especially if you're gonna have like a good conversation.

For many of Gen Z, learning about someone's identities or cultures is not controversial. A lot of them have only known a world of acceptance and have a very idealized sense of

how progressive their country is. As Harrison put it,

We're definitely the first generation to really not see people by their color, by their race, what they look like, who they are. We see everybody as the same people, you know as human beings, who eat, sleep. No background prejudice or anything like that. But I think that defines us.

Gen Z may feel comfort expressing themselves and being expressed to, because their perception of the world is that needs to be a progressive, fair, and safe place for everyone and many of them live like it is their civic and social responsibility to make that true. They may desire stronger interpersonal relationships with their professors because they want to have the same kind of relationship with them that they would have with their peers. This may be because professors are often stereotyped as being socially progressive, so students may expect their professors to have the same social views as them.

Feeling comfortable with expressing themselves might be part of why 64% of the students I interviewed reported that they like writing. When asked if they wanted to learn more about what professional writers and scholars of rhetoric do specifically, 57% reported yes. These results are interesting in comparison with the findings which indicate that while most students enjoy writing, only 21% reported that they enjoy reading. Overwhelmingly, students reported that they enjoyed writing and researching about themselves (their experiences, identities, and personal interests). Amber said, "I can express myself fine in my writing if I'm writing about something that I like. Like I love the writings that we've had so far, they've been very open-ended, and I've been able to like do my own sort of thing with them, versus like having a serious strict prompt where we have to right about exactly this." She echoed these sentiments when she told me that

she might like reading if her assignments had a lot of “passion in them, you know? Like, they’re not just writing this to tell you what’s going on, they’re writing this because they care about it. And you can hear it in the readings.” Students like Amber might feel more engaged reading evocative pieces, or pieces that relate to two of the three themes: social justice and relatability. Relatability may contribute to what makes students feel so comfortable reading the writing of others, sharing their own writing, and getting to know the people that occupy their first-year composition spaces (their professors and their classmates).

Theme 2: Gen Z is Concerned with Ethos

In my conversations with students they referenced themselves as being technologically savvy researchers who were already capable of detecting ethos and credibility. As a researcher in rhetoric and composition I see a strong connection between students’ abilities to write at the college level, their debuts in public discourse, and their own perceived ethos. The “crisis of youth” refers to how young people achieve markers of success and independence—especially economic—and the ability to meaningfully participate in civic life (Duggan 80). Gen Z is experiencing the crisis of youth, and they are experiencing it during times of protest and social unrest. Each student I interviewed mentioned being “informed” as important to them. Being “informed” may be what motivates students to read independently. As Ariel put it, “I like reading, like articles and different things. I like to be informed about what’s going on.” The students I interviewed were not English majors reading for fun; they read to become active citizens, establish their own adult identities and to boost their authorities in public discourse.

It is also notable that there is an immediate difference in tone when students describe themselves versus how they are described in literature (Twenge and Campbell; Zarra). While “sensitive” is a word student used to describe themselves, the meaning behind the word is different generationally. One student, Miley, disregarded the pejorative version of “sensitive,” saying, “we’re not babies,” implying that her generation is unfairly infantilized for their sensitivity. The adjective “sensitive” normally operates within a male/female binary as a feminine description, which has connotations of being lesser. Gen Z has flipped “sensitive” into an honorific word. It is good that students are sensitive because it means that they are open and respectful. I surveyed the language used during the interviews to describe Millennials to investigate Gen Z’s perspective on other generations.

Maria told me, “Millennials are more traditional,” and that “My reaction and like an older person’s reaction would be very different.” Lizzie was one of the students who said that Millennials were “super” strict, and who shared sentiments that Millennials were unlike Gen Z students who are “very go-and-get-it.” Amber felt the difference between Gen Z and older cohorts are that she feels like “people matter more than in other generations.” Charlotte went as far as to say people older than her still have a “view of black and white.” Or, to put it bluntly like Harrison did, “There is a big difference between old people and young people.”

When asking students about other generational cohorts I saw a pattern emerge of words associated with credibility and authority. The language students used in my interviews with them suggests a lack of ethos, and the desire for ethos may be a primary reason that Gen Z reads. Reading for Gen Z, then, is not just about pop culture references

and following trends. For Gen Z, reading is about forming an authoritative identity and being able to participate in the public discourse around them. Evie associated her generation's desire to be informed with their interests in social justice. As she puts it,

I like to think of us as informed, a lot of us. Some of us definitely not (laughs), but most of us try to be, whatever's coming will affect us. So, things like, you know, presidential just because we know that elections that are coming up and um, just, not even that, but just like other things that will affect our future. Just like, you know, global warming... How to decrease the consequences from that, so we're already thinking, you know, going vegan, or things like that, and, yeah. And sometimes stuff isn't as serious. You know, like, people who don't think of themselves as a gender or people who think of themselves as different genders. Whatever, you know I'm not too informed on that myself, but I know people who that matters to who they are, so, I mean, that's another just skill of branching out too, cause not a lot of Millennials are like that either.

For Evie, being informed is important because she wants to be an informed voter and a credible participant in public discourse. In other words, she wants to have ethos. She also does not identify generations other than her own as sharing her values, which may be why many of her generation feel that being informed and social justice is their responsibility—they may not view other generations as socially or politically responsible, or as particularly selfless. Because of this, Gen Z may think that they must be those things. The desire to be informed may stem from a concern with ethos, which would be a seemingly normal concern for young adults who are in the process of joining public discourse and forming their own identities to have. To participate in public discourse,

students need to be proficient at reading and writing critically and with rhetorical fluency.

Students who do not like to read or write may struggle with generating and perceiving ethos the most. Despite Gen Z students wanting to be informed, I began to understand early on in our interviews that some of them simply did not like reading or writing. For example, Evie told me she did not care to learn about writing of any kind; “I don’t even know necessarily about learning. I can listen, for about, whatever. I’m not much about learning about writing.” Peter said “I’m not really a fan of writing. I just like reading literature and analyzing literature.” Some students enter first-year composition classes with no desire to read or write, and therefore, do not read before class or only read when an assignment interests them. As an instructor, motivating students who do not want to practice literacy can feel difficult, if not impossible. Amber told me she does not read *because* it is for a class. She said,

Okay, I’m not going to lie, because in my English classes I don’t do the readings... I never go on the websites. It’s like, I just don’t do the readings. They’re boring. They’re not very entertaining, and even if they were I probably wouldn’t do them either way. They sound boring. You know? I guess it’s just because it’s a class.

Some students are unmotivated to practice literacy and complete assignments. Other students have negative relationships with literacy, and these are the students who may struggle to have ethos or to feel confident about their writing. An example of this is what Cody said, “I hate writing. And I do it just because I have to. I just, I don’t have the patience to sit down and just brainstorm and yeah, I just can’t do it. I don’t like enjoy doing that.” When I asked him what his interests were, he said “Math was my favorite

subject. I love math. I love math.” To me as a first-year writing instructor, this tells me that I cannot please every student with what I assign, although some assignments might be more likely to motivate students and promote improved relationships with literacy (like autoethnography, which I discuss in Chapter 4). Interestingly, when I asked students what they considered a long or short assignment to be, their responses varied greatly with no consistent responses happening. And whether students thought a 3-page reading assignment was long or a 15-page reading assignment was long had no real impact on whether or not they read for class, because most students said they were comfortable with the reading loads they were assigned. This appeared consistent even with the students who reported that they only sometimes or never read before class.

Other students liked reading and writing and indicated that they enjoyed practicing literacy in various genres. Miley said she has “always been interested in writing. If I wasn’t a Business minor, then I would probably do something English related. Because, like, I like writing and I do like reading and different pieces. It’s always good to see different writing styles and how they speak in their writing.” For Merrill, the ethos of who she read was important to her, and reading and writing was the most relevant to her when she felt like it impacted her preparedness for her future career. She said it would “put me ahead, and like really like get the, like the format of it like recognizable, to where like I’m learning it now and I’ll have that skill until like the end of my career.” For Bill, like it was for Amber, what made writing enjoyable was creative freedom. He preferred narratives and assignments that were “open-ended,” unlike the comparison essay that he had been assigned, which he struggled to come up with his own ideas for.

No student reported wanting to write rhetorical analyses or comparison essays, and only two said they wanted to write fiction or poetry or to perform technical writing. Three students said they preferred autoethnographies, and four students said they would prefer research papers. The most preferred writing assignment was the personal narrative, with eight students reporting it as their favorite writing genre. Harrison, who preferred narrative writing, explained that he liked assignments that

Are really loose about the certain topics. Like let's say on an exam I was given multiple choices that I was able to write about. Something that, a writing assignment that gives me more freedom to really write about what I want to write about. Something that gives me more variety and options.

This data suggests that autoethnographies would be a favorable assignment because they incorporate both scholarly research and personal narrative to explore a variety of topics that are personally relevant. Autoethnography assignments facilitate students writing in ways that they find enjoyable, while also promoting the research rigor and rhetorical standards of a traditional first-year writing assignment. Additionally, autoethnographies are an accessible way for students to identify their own ethos as writers, and to practice viewing themselves as credible and authoritative. I define autoethnography and reflect deeper on it as a pedagogical tool in Chapter 4.

While most students preferred writing narratives, three wanted to study workforce composition, and one said that he was interested in the mechanics of writing. As a student majoring in engineering, Harrison told me that he appreciates knowing the formal written rules of the English language. "I think writing is essential, especially when you're in the STEM community, and any of that, any of that sort of genre like writing is essential. In

like scientific papers and writing, we have to know like what's, what is right and like what's wrong. The rules about it." Harrison was one of the students who said he preferred personal narratives. He wants to write more creatively, and with more technically prowess.

As mentioned previously, students reported that they like writing, and they dislike reading. This may be because of the type of reading assignments they are assigned. As Cody put it, "Like just that all the readings are over like writing techniques and stuff like that. If I like, I'd rather read something that like a, like an actual story. Like an actual, it has actual meaning behind it, and you know what I mean? Like an actual narrative or something. But yeah." While it may not be ideal for students to read literature in first-year composition, assigning autoethnographic material could cater to the students' desires to read things that are evocative, while also being more closely related to research-based and rhetorical pieces in its composition methods (I elaborate on this idea in Chapter 4). Students preferred reading personal narratives and contemporary pieces, with only one student reporting wanting to read literature. Most students were comfortable with their assigned reading loads and reported only reading three to five pages per class, although what students considered to be long and short reading loads were relatively divided. This suggests that what defines a long or short assignment is personal to students, and it would be difficult for an instructor satisfy the expectations of every student at once. Despite saying they were fine with the reading load, 5 of the 14 students said that they did not keep up with assigned readings. They cited their ;ack of interest in the readings and a lack of time management as to why they did not read. However, most students did report reading the news.

No students reported reading the news in print or watching by television—many of the students reported reading the news through their cell phones. Because most students are accessing their news through social media, they have limited access to local news. The implications of students believing they can detect fake news because they read so much online are dangerous. Students believe they are skilled at finding credible information, yet their access to unbiased news that is not funded by a major corporation is limited. And, if students are getting all their news from social media, they may trust a source that is not credible simply because a friend posted it. So, while students value being informed, many of them struggle to perceive ethos. This adds to the suggestion that students are concerned with ethos by implying that, in addition to being concerned, they may struggle to detect the credibility of their sources or to estimate their own abilities

Theme 3: Gen Z is Interested in Social Justice

Across the board, participants shared that they are interested matters relating to social justice. Social justice is important to Gen Z because Gen Z cares about each other, to the point where allyship becomes a civic responsibility for a lot of them. Many Gen Z are motivated simply by knowing that “what they are doing in any aspect of their lives is making a difference for someone else” (Seemiller and Grace 10). Gen Z is idealistic and considering those aspirations could be beneficial in teaching them because aspirations often serve to navigate, describe, and define the lives of young people (Duggan 85). Some Gen Z feel that the people politically in charge and who affect social change do not represent their views or the values of their generation. Harrison said,

Yeah, I just think that the government is just run by people who are maybe just

way too old, but they're running in office. And there is a big difference between older people and younger people. Younger people like us tend to be more open-minded, and they're, they see much of like the problem based on like color, race, or anything like that. I always just like, yeah they're really hard-headed out there. It is not surprising for any generation to feel more progressive than the generations that proceed them. For many of Gen Z, they see their opinions as radically different from those of their parents or of the people in charge. Peter described the perceptions of Gen Z held by other generations as, "People call people like twinkie or something like that. Like they're young. They're too soft. They're not as, they're not raised as the great era was. They're too soft, they're too caring, they don't have to be that openly accepting to everyone." Although acceptance may not seem like a radical idea, some of the Gen Z students I interviewed came from very conservative backgrounds that they felt did not represent them their values or ideals. The most striking example of this was my conversation with Debbie, who said her family supported her ambitions, but did not understand how or why she went to college. Telling me a story she said,

Last summer I went to Mexico and I was going to, well, I, the meal was ready, and then I was sitting, I got my plate and everything, and then I sit, I sat with my grandpa and my uncles, and it was me, the only woman. And I was eating like real, like good, like I was happy. And then my aunt came, and she said, "Oh well, there's another man at the table." And she looked at me, and she pointed at me, and like she laughed. And I didn't get it honestly, but after a while, like I realized that they don't, they don't sit with the men. Like women shouldn't sit with men and eat. They should wait for the man and be done, and then they can go eat. So,

because I ate before with them it was different. And I don't live with them. They live in Mexico. I'm here. I have different perspectives, and she didn't get that, and she wanted me to be the same as her... They are more conservative. Like my, my grandma and my uncles and aunts, they think that I should be getting married and like, well my grandma, that I should get married and have children and like cook for the husband. And uh, I'm school. Yeah. They don't think, some of them don't think that I should be here.

Part of what stands out about Debbie's story are her desires to be respected and included, which appeared to be a common trait among the Gen Z students that I interviewed. What is also noticeable is that she holds her beliefs and views to be radically different from her aunts, uncles, and grandmother. Her perceptions of her family as traditional contrast with how she and other students view their professors. She reported feeling more comfortable expressing herself to her peers and instructors than to her relatives. This story is an example of the disparity that many Gen Z identify between themselves and older generations, which is part of why they feel social justice is their generation's responsibility.

Miley described this responsibility as "Just like the drive they have to change the world, I guess. Cause like, I feel like now, like, they're trying to be more informed and trying to fix something, like, even though like they're kinda failing and stuff (laughs). They're trying to like makes things better for them in the future." For Miley, making "things better" was not about helping future generations, it was about paying attention to the social and political issues that she feels were dumped on her generation. Young people serve a purpose in public discourse: "Within the broader discussions of the 'good

life,' the future is—either implicitly or explicitly—a core concern of popular and policy attention towards young people” (Duggan 78). Gen Z is feels responsible for social justice and progressive movements and thus wants to join public discourse, because they are aware that what happens now affects their futures. Therefore, Gen Z students may be engaged by critical and cultural pedagogies because those pedagogical theories consider social justice and inequality and offer rhetoric and literacy practices as a toolkit to meaningfully engage in public discourse.

Seemiller and Grace reported that Gen Z consider “making a difference” to be the second most important criteria for choosing a future career, followed by “enjoying the work” (10). Similarly, making a difference is what attracts many Gen Z to public discourse. Bill identified key characteristics of his generation as being fueled by political activism. He said,

We don't take no for an answer... I do know that like our generation doesn't give up on rights that we believe in. Like so many school shootings, and there are people our age who protest and continue to protest. And you can see that people don't give up. And it's a lot of young people, and I respect that a lot about our generation. That like things that were acceptable back then are not acceptable today and we're not going to let that happen again. So, I would say like a lot of Gen Z has a, a lot of people have a firey heart, like a passion for justice and stuff, which is a big stand out for us.

Bill is right, and his sentiments are echoed by Gen Z's current involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement. Gen Z is a generation that feels nervous contacting their professors unless they know them personally but will protest violence and police brutality

even during a global pandemic. This is indicative of how socially driven many Gen Z are. They are about each other so much that it motivates many of them to action. Instructors might find critical pedagogy (which I discuss in Chapter 4) and topics relating to social justice to be very interesting to Gen Z, because many of them believe that challenging social hierarchies is their civic duty. For these reasons, explaining that inequality exists to Gen Z students may be difficult. Even if they believe you, a lot of them have idealized what society and justice should be so much that they do not understand why inequality persists and may view discussing it as humoring it. For instructors, this means that informing students that inequality exists may come off as redundant. For students who view it as redundant, it may be helpful to give them productive composition and discourse strategies for enacting social justice.

Many Gen Z have an idealized vision of what society is and what it should be, and so they hold themselves up to a high standard and disagree with those who do not also uphold that standard. Participants did not like when people stereotyped them as “potheads,” “partiers,” are too “soft,” and too “sensitive.” Evie said, “people sometimes say that we, we’re too sensitive,” and that other people are “just making up things at this point.” Four students said they did not like when people said they were not hardworking, with another four saying they do not like when they are accused of using technology more than other generations do. Another student, Bella, said she does not like when people claim that “we don’t work hard enough as far as being you know out with people or in the virtual world. I feel like, you know, I do a lot for the community, like I’m involved and I’m gonna make sure, that, you know, society’s in a better position.” Miley described the negative descriptions of Gen Z as their strengths. She said, “Our generation

is softer, but it also kind of makes us who we are.” Miley’s point is that, if her generation is overly soft and sensitive, then it is that sensitivity that enables them to engage in reflexive thinking and to become advocates for meaningful change.

Sociopolitical events in the early 2000s (particularly the presidency of George W. Bush and the events of September 11, 2001) shaped the early childhoods of Gen Z (Shankar 6-7). They have only known three presidents, their country has almost never been at war, their schools strove for no child left behind, and they have always had digital devices for gaming, learning, and socializing. For these reasons, Gen Z are keenly aware of public discourse, they are a globalized and digitally native generation, and many of them feel civically and socially responsible for each other. For Gen Z, critically reflecting on the values of social justice and resistance should help promote “what Burke calls the dialogic: a place where ‘positive’ utterances are not the only ones in play. The realm of the dialogic is the realm of rhetoric, of dispute and writing” (Kennedy 23). Promoting students’ abilities to engage the dialogic benefits their literacies and their rhetorical fluencies, and for this reason critical pedagogies might be especially palatable to Gen Z.

Gen Z is an exciting new wave of students, and although they are still forming their adult identities, they are already distinctive as writing students. Generation Z students are “keenly aware” that passion plays a major role in their perceived happiness (Seemiller and Grace 8), so it would make sense if passion played a role in their literacies as well. By detailing who our students are and what motivates them, I hope to begin a practical conversation within writing studies that includes the voices and perspectives of Gen Z and other generational cohorts. In the following chapter I offer a further discussion of the data presented in this chapter, with specific attention to how autoethnographies

might be palatable reading and writing assignments for Gen Z students.

IV. AUTOETHNOGRAPHY FOR GENERATION Z

This chapter examines how critical and cultural pedagogies might appeal to Gen Z first-year writing students, by considering those pedagogies alongside the findings and analysis presented in Chapter 3 and with current literature on composition pedagogies (Castro; Ceraso; Chang; Dalton; George et al; George; Gere; Hardin; Hill; Huhn; Kennedy; Smith). Specifically, this chapter discusses how autoethnography assignments based in critical and cultural pedagogies might be especially palatable to Gen Z students. Briefly, I will argue that autoethnographic writing projects are ideal for meeting the needs of Gen Z students, while also challenging them to practice scholarly composition, research, and other higher-level literacy skills.

What is Autoethnography

A genre that might appeal to Gen Z in particular because of its exploration of identity and power is autoethnography. Autoethnography is defined as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze [graphy] personal experience [auto] in order to understand cultural experience [ethno]” (Ellis et al. 273). It combines scholarly research with cultural studies and self-narratives, which refers to “a wide range of written accounts about the self, representing diverse genres, authorship, themes, and writing styles” (Chang 41). In other words, Autoethnography incorporates self-narrative but is also distinct from it. Autoethnography “stems from the field of anthropology” (Chang 43) and transcends self-narrative by combining “cultural analysis with and interpretation with narrative details” (Chang 46). Texts by autoethnographers

are expected to perform reflection, analysis, and interpretation of broader sociocultural constructs (Chang 46).

As Chang emphasizes, autoethnographers reflect on culture and identity to come to a greater understanding of social constructs. For this reason, Autoethnography supports cultural pedagogy in its exploration of identity and culture and might appeal to Gen Z students who, as I demonstrated in Chapter 3, are interested in research that relates to their identities and personal experience.

Cultural studies is defined through analysis of the “interrelationship between culture and power, particularly with regard to the production, reception, and diverse use of texts” (Fitts and France 5). Like critical pedagogy, cultural pedagogy investigates the relationship between the experiences of individuals and the socially imposed power constructs that those individuals inhabit. Cultural studies emphasizes “the ties of writing instruction to the democratization of higher education” (George et al. 97). This means that, like critical pedagogy, cultural pedagogy is inherently political and concerned with ideals of liberal democracy. Also, like critical pedagogy, it promotes better understandings of how individuals exist in public life and in public discourse. Given the students’ stated interest in social justice, writing projects that engage with ideas of self and critiquing power constructs might be interesting. Specifically, autoethnography could be a useful genre for students to begin engaging in public discourse, practicing research and analyzing the cultural and societal constructs that actively affect them. In writing autoethnographies, students could use their own voices and experiences to help form rhetorical arguments and promote scholarly research methods. This idea caters to Gen Z’s preferences as discussed in Chapter 3, with those preferences being to read more personal

narratives and contemporary pieces, and to write assignments that give them authority and creative freedom.

Why Autoethnography Addresses Gen Z Writing Preferences

A benefit of autoethnography is the creative freedom and autonomy that it offers students: Gen Z would be able to engage with matters that are especially meaningful to them. Additionally, it actively engages cultural pedagogy in that it uses personal experience to illustrate and better understand “facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders” (Ellis et al. 276). For Gen Z, this means that autoethnography can help them critically write about their own cultures, identities, and experiences in meaningful ways. And Gen Z students who are serving as audience members for autoethnographies written by their classmates and by published authors, they can gain a better understanding of and connection with the people and issues around them.

Although autoethnography is not explicitly meant to analyze hierarchal power constructs, it is a natural genre for societal critiques and criticisms of power. So autoethnography assignments could also serve in classes with critical pedagogical approaches. The goal of critical pedagogy is to “support the empowerment of students” by encouraging them to access their own power to critically challenge the power structures around them. Critical pedagogy contains a critique of the way discourse conventions reinforce dominant ideological values and that promotes resistance to the unconscious reification of those values (Hardin 77). This is relevant to themes emerging from my interviews with Gen Z: ethos, social justice and relatability.

Social justice imperatives speak to Gen Z's sense of social responsibility, acceptance, and desire to create change. Critical pedagogy might appeal to Gen Z's sense of social justice because it aims to "revitalize students' conceptions of freedom and inspire them to collectively recreate a society built on democratic values and respect for difference" (George 80). It holds that the concepts of composition are inherently political and exist in social contexts that are affected by the socially and legislatively imposed hierarchies that exist:

Writing is an answer to another voice, another place, another time. It can never be, for instance, *only* expository, or *only* expressive, with no political strategic, or argumentative undercurrents. It exists in a web of interactions that exert influence or force on each other (Hill 11).

All pieces of composition function within given rhetorical situations and are informed by the pieces of composition that proceed them. Because of this, writing is inherently social. Since writing is social, it is also inherently political and concerned with power as composition teacher Carolyn Hill suggests in the above quotation.

Autoethnography could be a useful for Gen Z students to engage with reading and writing, especially if it is assigned in a way that helps Gen Z students explore their interests in exploring the self's relationship with power sociopolitical constructs and in social justice. Ideas of critical pedagogy support that "the written and oral discourses of both students and teachers might hold more ethical and political force if principles and beliefs opposing their own were welcomed into their minds for generous negotiation" (Hill 101). There is also an ethical component of critical pedagogy that might appeal to Gen Z as social justice advocates, which is its push towards dialogue, equality, freedom,

and tolerance (Castro 67). This ethical component compliments cultural pedagogy, which uses open dialogues of cultural identities and experiences to promote similar ideas of equality, freedom, and tolerance.

As I discussed in Chapter 3, four students specifically mentioned being interested in current sociopolitical climates, and another two students said that they are politically active. Some students described themselves as advocates for change and as being community oriented. The passion that Gen Z feels may be why they view Millennials as “lazy.” Lisa described the differences in the following way:

I feel like, we’re like, my reaction and like an older person’s reaction would be very different. So, there would be like, they would probably get more of a reaction out of them, just because, well then again there’s, there’s like an age difference. But, like, you would kind of be like, “Okay, well it’s probably going to change tomorrow, too. And the next day, too.” And then, then they plan like, “No, we have to stop this right now,” like kind of like, just like fixed, maybe?

Lisa’s use of pronouns indicates that she is referring to me as Gen Z when she mentions “you,” while “they” represents a group of people or someone who is older than Gen Z. To Lisa, people older than Gen Z do not care enough about creating change. This apathy and lack of action are a type of laziness to Lisa, who sees advocating for social change as the responsibility of individuals. For students like Lisa, it might be effective to implement cultural and critical pedagogies—both of which I argue are implicit in autoethnography—which come from the ideological assumption that individuals serve as parts in the construction of reality, in which individual existence is a social existence (Castro 79). Critical pedagogy connects composition with Marxist theory (Castro 69),

offering students who care about social justice a rhetorical toolkit for creating change.

Autoethnography supports critical pedagogy in that it offers a strategy for challenging social hierarchies and power structures by investigating how the individual (writer) fits into their sociocultural context. It aligns with composition pedagogy as it uses ethnography for “disciplinary knowledge-building” (Gere xvii). Thus, critical pedagogy can be seen to be compatible with autoethnography, by offering an understanding of the links between society, politics, and power. Additionally, autoethnography challenges students to uphold rigorous research and analysis (Hardin 81). By upholding this rigor, autoethnography could be used as a tool to help Gen Z reflect on their own experiences and beliefs in a meaningful way that challenges social hierarchies.

Together, when critical and cultural pedagogy manifest in autoethnographic projects, the theories might engage students’ interest in ethos, another theme that emerged alongside social justice in student interviews. Briefly, I define ethos as the authority and confidence that students have as writers, scholars, and citizens. In Chapter 3, students indicated that they like to explore ethos by stating that they preferred to write about their own personal experiences, and on topics that they already felt knowledgeable in. More than half of students mentioned that they prefer reading and writing personal narratives, with their second preferred genre being the research paper. A benefit of autoethnography is that it values students’ lived experiences, in addition to enabling students to explore those experiences and interests in ways that, as I’ve already discussed, promote research and literacy practices. Students feel the most confident writing about subjects that they already have experience in, and additionally, they are more motivated to

write about topics that are relevant to them personally and about which they desire to be informed. This desire relates to William Hogarth and Erich Auerbach's definition of mimesis as the affinity between a subject and an eye (Huhn 12). I analyze this to mean that the affinity described by mimesis is the kind of intellectual and emotional connection that students want to feel when they read and write. In Chapter 3 students reported wanting to write about themselves and enjoying reading narratives and researching about people and topics that interested them personally. Mimesis is what causes one to develop personal and intellectual feelings for an object, story, or event. If more students are engaged with topics that are personally relevant to them through reading and writing assignments, they will be more likely to develop mimesis, which may promote their overall literacy skills (because if reading and writing assignments are enjoyable, students may be more intrinsically motivated to perform literacy).

Another way to engage mimesis with Gen Z students who want to use literacy practices to feel connected to others could be to assign autoethnographies as reading material. The empathetic connection that students feel when they read autoethnographies written by others encourages them to think reflexively, to articulate what makes experiences meaningful, and to make sense of their own identities (Carter and Thelin 21-22). This connection could be especially useful to Gen Z students, who are interested in understanding and participating in conversations about society and social justice. For these reasons and the reasons previously mentioned in this section, I believe autoethnography to be an especially engaging and effective way to teach Gen Z first-year composition and scholarly research skills.

Autoethnographies could be assigned as a semester long research project that

takes place in a series of steps that culminate into a larger paper. For example, at the start of an autoethnographic project, students might be asked to write a personal narrative that reflects on their own experiences. Later, building on the first step of the autoethnography, students can begin to research primary and secondary sources. They might write ethnographies or perform ethnographic interviews (Chang 105), write a literature review, or a synthesis of secondary sources. They could write a synthesis or analysis of a primary piece of evidence, such as a cultural, textual, or other artifact (Chang 80, 107, 109) that are relevant to the personal memory of the writer (Chang 71). Artifacts can be formal and informal texts, official documents, journals, photographs, or videos (Chang 107, 109). Finally, students would merge their work together and write a reflective autoethnography that analyzes and examines contexts of lived experiences with research.

Autoethnography is an interesting and palatable way to engage Gen Z first-year writers with literacy. Autoethnographies are often evocative and personal, which can make them compelling to read and may cause students to develop an affinity for who or what they are reading about. After examining my research questions and current literature on theories of composition, I believe that autoethnography assignments and course material informed by critical and cultural pedagogies may be valuable in instructing Gen Z first-year writing students. The following chapter of this thesis is a reflection on the data findings from this chapter and Chapter 3, along with a discussion of possible implications presented by my research findings.

V. CONCLUSION: REFLECTION AND IMPLICATIONS

I am a member of Generation Z. This has given me an insight into the lack of productive conversation surrounding Generation Z within writing studies, which I first noticed during the summer of RSA 2018. I was eager to position myself within my new disciplinary home. During a handful of panels on first-year writing pedagogies, I observed that the presentations were still about Millennial students. Additionally, the language used to describe students, particularly their literacy identities, were pejorative and counterproductive. Upon leaving the conference, I again wondered what my place was within advanced composition studies. I am Gen Z, a university graduate, and in addition to being literate, I love literacy. I felt invisible. This feeling of invisibility, however, led me to my current interest in understanding Gen Z literacy and what rhetorical theories might best supplement those literacies in first-year composition. While working on my thesis and interviewing students, I tried to include Gen Z and listen to them in the same way that I have wanted to be listened to. As I contemplated my own place in higher education as a Gen Z faculty member, I wondered what the places of Gen Z students were.

In the previous chapters, I laid out my research questions, the statement of a problem surrounding the lack of knowledge about Gen Z literacy and what motivates them to read and write, and explained why I chose to investigate Gen Z in the context of composition and rhetorical studies. I introduced who Gen Z was and explained how generational analysis can be, and has been, connected to writing studies. I detailed the methodology of my research and the research literature and theoretical framework that

informed my work. I detailed my own positionality as a primary investigator, my instruments, and how I gathered and interpreted my findings. I provided information on generational analysis, rhetorical theory, and autoethnography for Gen Z. I explored the connections between ethos, social justice, relatability, and Gen Z literacy. I hope to have shown the importance of promoting open dialogues between students and instructors. Just as writing is social and does not happen in a vacuum, neither does teaching. When students are not included in the conversations that are about them, those conversations risk alienating them. In this chapter, I discuss two possible implications from my research findings 1) implications for administrators, and 2) implications for first-year composition instructors. Following this is a call-to-action for more research on Gen Z first-year writers' literacies.

Implications for Administrators and Instructors

For administrators, it may be helpful know more about which rhetorical theories benefit Gen Z students so that they can account for these theories in preparing instructors to teach first-year writing. Since many new instructors have never studied composition theory or generational identity, how can they know the best pedagogies to teach Gen Z rhetoric and literacy skills? Additionally, some instructors and students need to realize that Millennials are no longer the majority of college students. This thesis has aimed to provide pedagogical ideas for Gen Z, who as mentioned in Chapter 1, will dominate college campuses until the year 2032. I also hope to have promoted involving students in conversations about their own literacies and educations.

After speaking with students, the themes that emerged were 1) ethos 2) social

justice and 3) relatability. The composition theories that might appeal most to Gen Z based on these themes are critical and cultural pedagogies. This information emerged from synthesizing and discussing my interviews with Gen Z first-year writing students. It is important to listen to students and to be as informed as possible about the best ways to educate them. This includes being aware of how Gen Z perceives themselves, and what concepts, ideologies, and beliefs intrinsically motivate them. If Gen Z students desire to be political activists, advocates for change, or social justice warriors, then that should be considered in designing courses for them. This is especially true of teaching writing because writing is the primary tool through which disempowered people can empower themselves. Writing is inherently connected to self-expression, empathizing with the experiences of others, and promoting social, political, and artistic change. Most of Gen Z likes to write, as shown in Chapter 3, which means that Gen Z may thrive in and appreciate writing classes that seriously consider their personal interests and experiences. Writing is an essential skill and toolkit that Gen Z needs to be proficient in if they want to create meaningful change.

For writing program administrators this means providing pedagogical ideas that might better appeal to contemporary students to instructors who may not have studied composition theory before. English departments recruit first-year writing instructors from a handful of different disciplines, so it may be helpful for these instructors to be provided with reading materials on composition theory for them to think about. Because of Gen Z's interests in social justice and in being informed, credible speakers, they may find critical and cultural pedagogies that challenge inequality particularly interesting. Cultural pedagogy compliments Gen Z's interests in investigating their own identities and roles in

society, while critical pedagogy offers a platform for Gen Z to critically explore their interests in social justice and in dismantling unfair power hierarchies.

Additionally, it is important for administrators to remember that it is increasingly probable that their student body and incoming faculty will be Gen Z, and that Gen Z is not terribly different from the generations that precede them; rather, they are a continuation of the generations that preceded them. Gen Z are so inclusive, accepting, and tech-savvy because of the efforts of generations that came before them, not despite them. The rates of their errors have not increased; they have changed. Similarly, Gen Z is not illiterate or overly sensitive; rather they are the products of their sociopolitical environments. Acknowledging this is important, because writers are often shaped and motivated by such events, and because writing itself is such an important tool for sociopolitical change. Because Gen Z is a continuation, they need to be included in conversations that involve them as students and as faculty members and composition pedagogies should be adjusted to reflect the generational progress and growth that Gen Z marks.

For instructors, it should be helpful to know more about what students want. It is important to know that students want their professors to be approachable, and that they identify this approachability as impacting their abilities to ask questions or to ask for help. While Gen Z does not want ideologies pushed onto them, they do want to know more about who their professors are as individuals, and to feel as though they are seen as individuals also. It is also helpful to know who our students are and what interests them. Generational identity does impact who our students are as readers and writers, and it impacts us as teachers as well. Our experiences have shaped our own interests, and the

sociopolitical events that surrounded us impacted our opportunities, struggles, and responsibilities. Likewise, Gen Z is being actively formed by the sociopolitical events that are happening right now. They have and are coming of age in a divided political climate, wherein rhetoric has become a tool of the oppressors rather than the oppressed, news is untrustworthy, and protests are happening in their towns and campuses. A lot of Gen Z are confused, and they are angry, but they feel so strongly because they genuinely care about each other.

Gen Z students may appreciate a platform for articulating and challenging the sociopolitical climates that are affecting them, and that they may feel they have no control over as young adults. Instructors can use reading and writing assignments (like autoethnographies) as a platform for students to practice engaging in sociopolitical discourse in meaningful and productive ways so that they might gain the confidence and experience that they need to create real change.

Continuing Research

Gen Z is an exciting wave of writers who are increasingly innovative, tech-savvy, diverse, and inclusive individuals. Further research should be conducted with Gen Z first-year writers to explore the connection between composition theory and generational analysis. The goal of this research was to respectfully determine why students read and write, and to include their voices in conversations about their literacy and writing. As a Gen Z undergraduate student, I connected with writing as a means of self-expression, empowerment, and as an avenue of positive change. In this thesis I have outlined pedagogical theories and activities that might appeal to Gen Z students and have provided

information about Gen Z that could be helpful to other instructors. Gen Z students deserve active listening and pedagogical consideration. During my conversations with Gen Z I learned who they were as people, which better prepares me to teach them and to engage in the kind of interpersonal relationship with them that students indicated desiring from their professors in Chapter 3. I am seeking to empower the literacy agency of students by making additional space for their voices to be heard. In doing so I hope to help other Gen Z students and faculty understand their place in higher education and in rhetoric and writing studies.

There needs to be more research on Gen Z first-year writers and their literacies. While my research may not provide conclusive answers on who Gen Z is and how to teach them, it has promoted a dialogue about Gen Z literacies and how generational identity operates in first-year writing. This thesis has shown that there is information to be learned in investigating Gen Z first-year writings that can be beneficial for instructors and administrators. There will always be more to learn about how to teach first-year composition, because we teach a new wave of students every semester. It is important to continue discussing pedagogical ideas and lines of inquiry for our ever-changing students.

APPENDIX

Generation Name	Births Start	Births End	Youngest Age 2020	Oldest Age 2020
The Lost Generation—The Generation of 1914	1890	1914	105	130
The Interbellum Generation	1901	1913	107	119
The Greatest Generation	1910	1924	96	110
The Silent Generation	1925	1945	75	95
Baby Boomer Generation	1946	1964	56	74
Generation X—Baby Bus	1965	1974	46	55
Xennials	1975	1985	35	45
Generation Y—Millennials	1986	1994	26	34
Generation Z—iGen/Gen Z	1995	2012	8	25
Generation Alpha	2013	2025	<1	7

Figure 1. Generation Chart adapted from the Pew Research Center (Dimock); University of Bucharest (Barreiro and Bozutti 133-134).

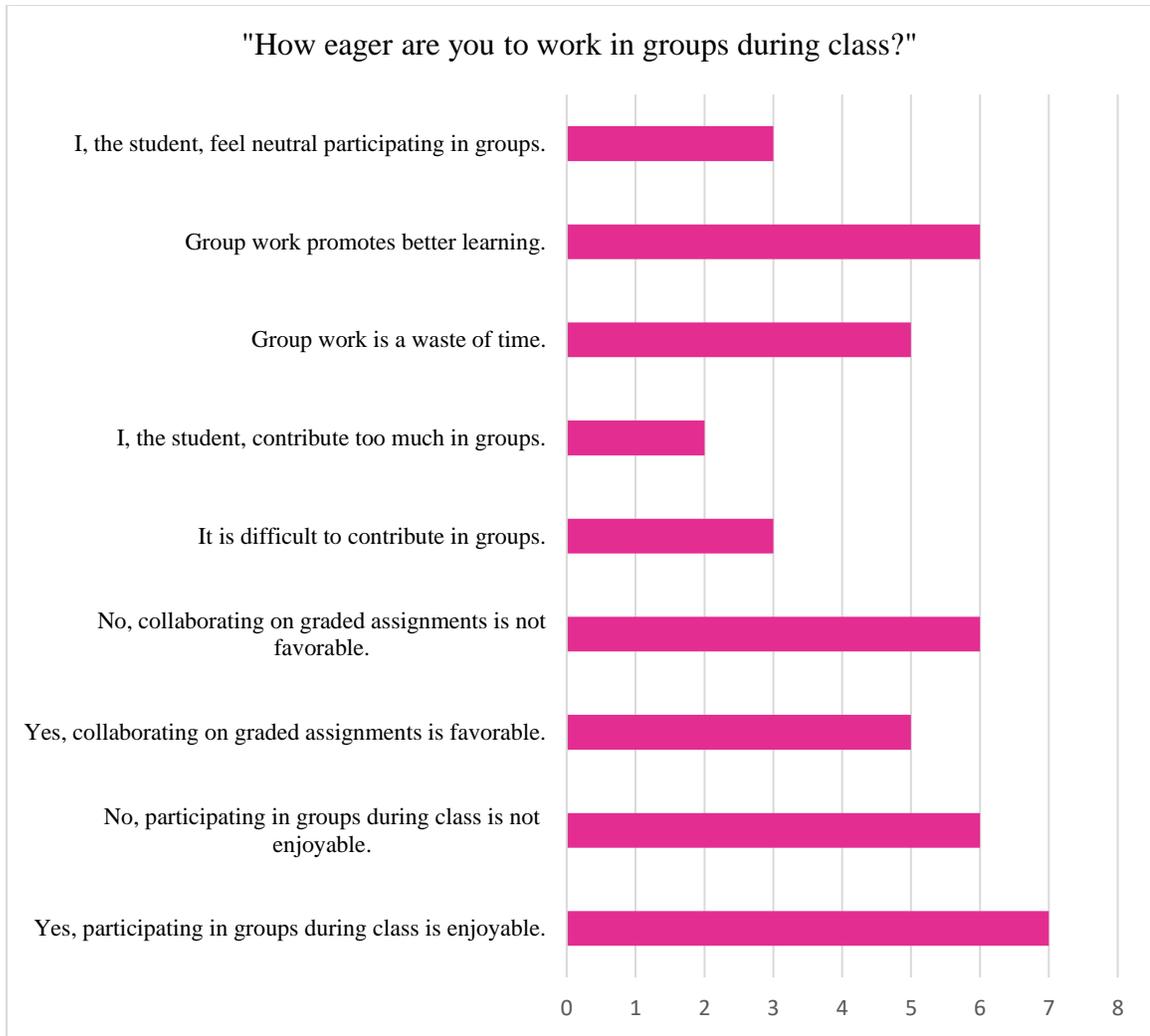


Figure 2. Question 1 answer chart on collaboration preferences and if being in or outside of class or if the assignment being graded impacted those preferences.

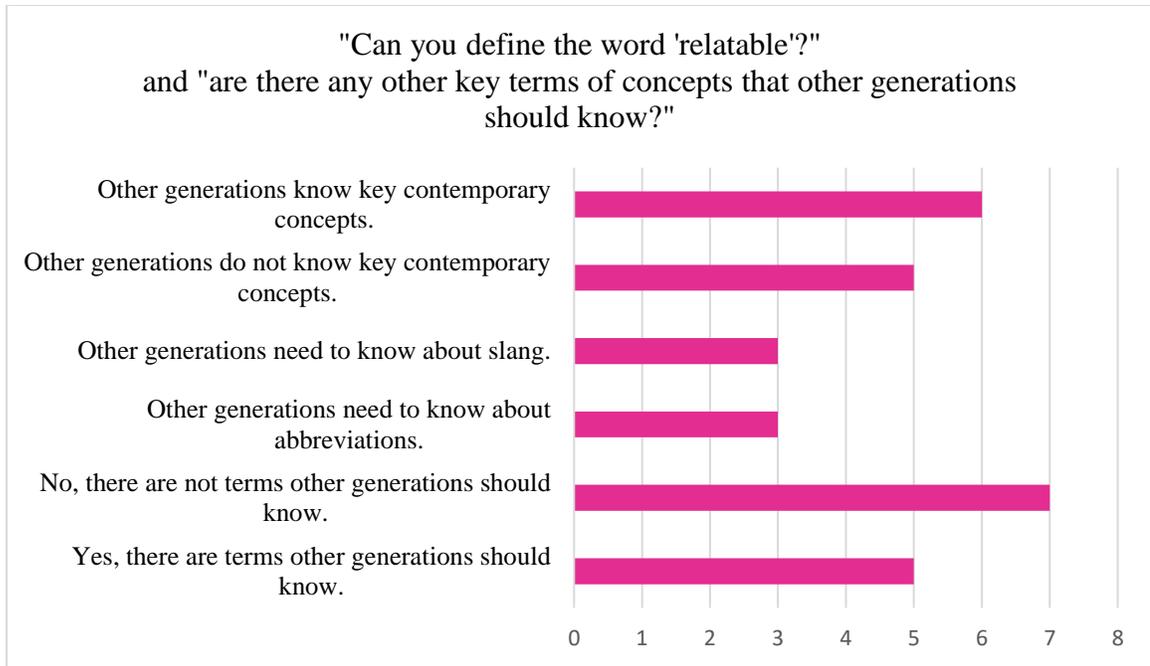


Figure 3. Question 2 answer chart illustrates whether students felt there was any language Gen Z used that other generations should know. These findings emerged from another question which asked students to define “reliability.”

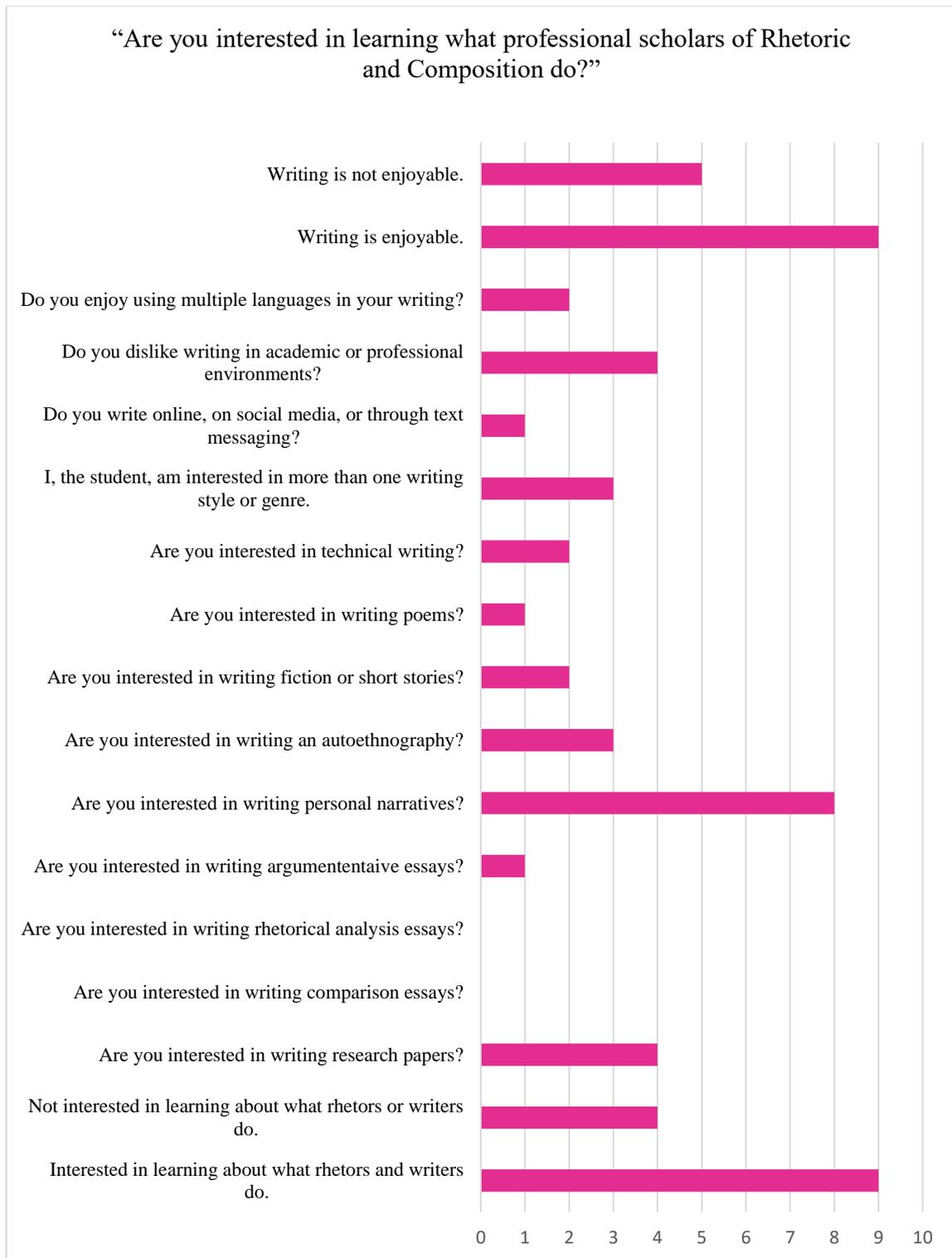


Figure 4. Question 3 answer chart asking if students who interested in learning more about rhetoric and composition, if they liked writing, and what kind of writing assignments they preferred.

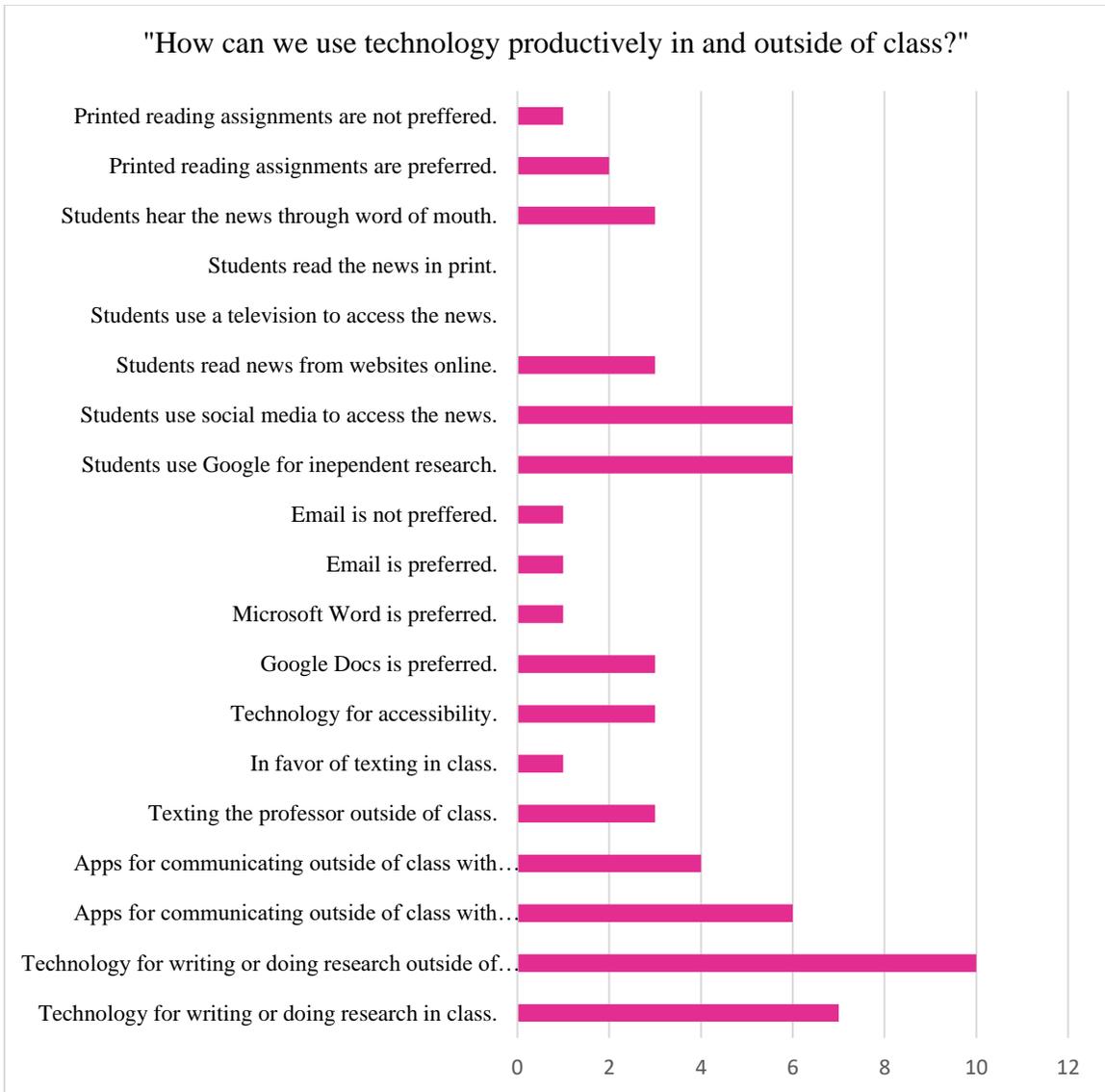


Figure 5. Question 4 answer chart related to how students use technology in and outside of class, and how they accessed the news.



Figure 6. Question 5 answer chart on reading materials and class durations. This chart also illustrates what students believed to be short or long reading assignments, and whether the length of reading assignments impacted if they read before class.

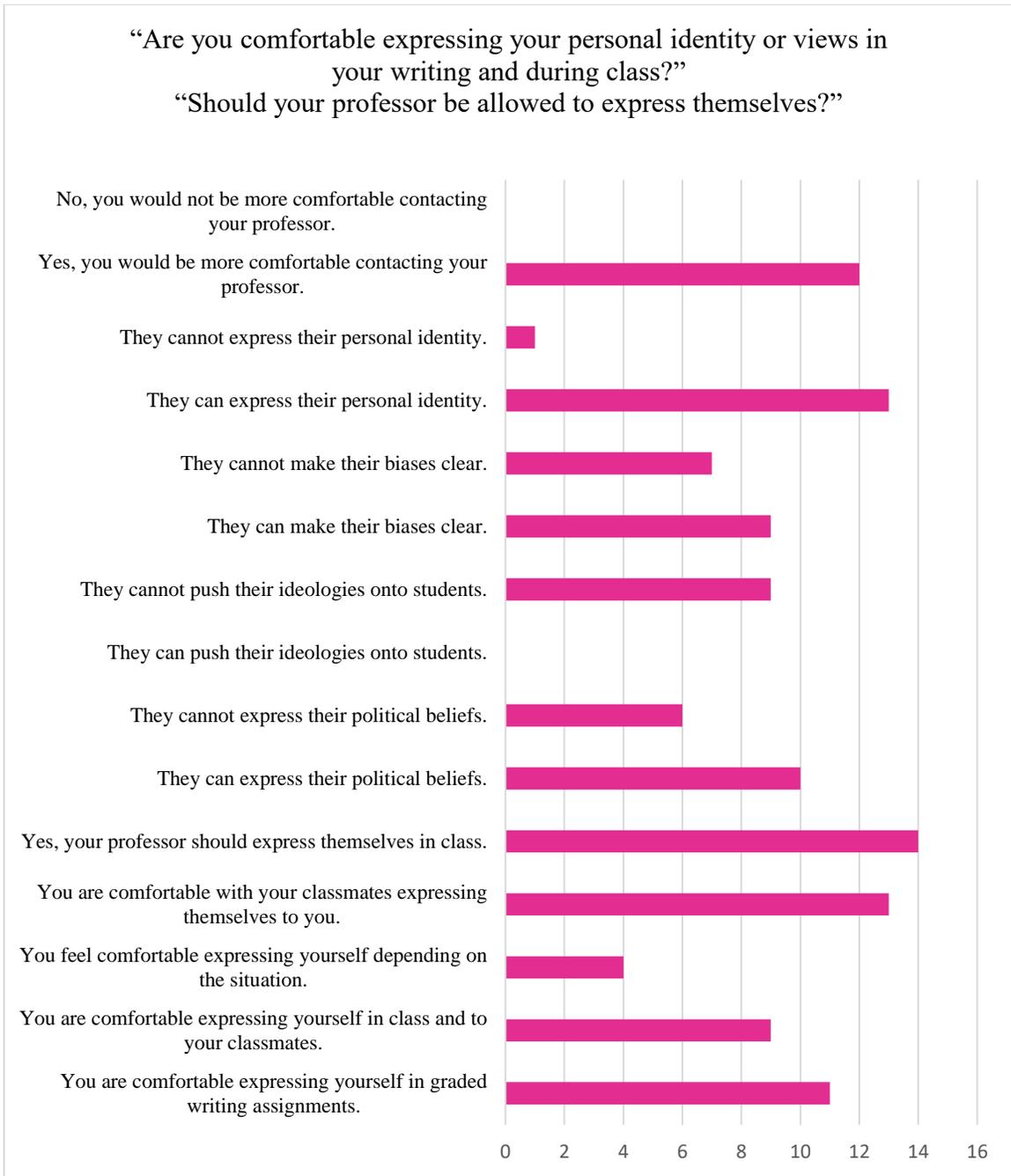


Figure 7. Questions 6 and 7 answer chart on the self-expression of students, classmates, and instructors.

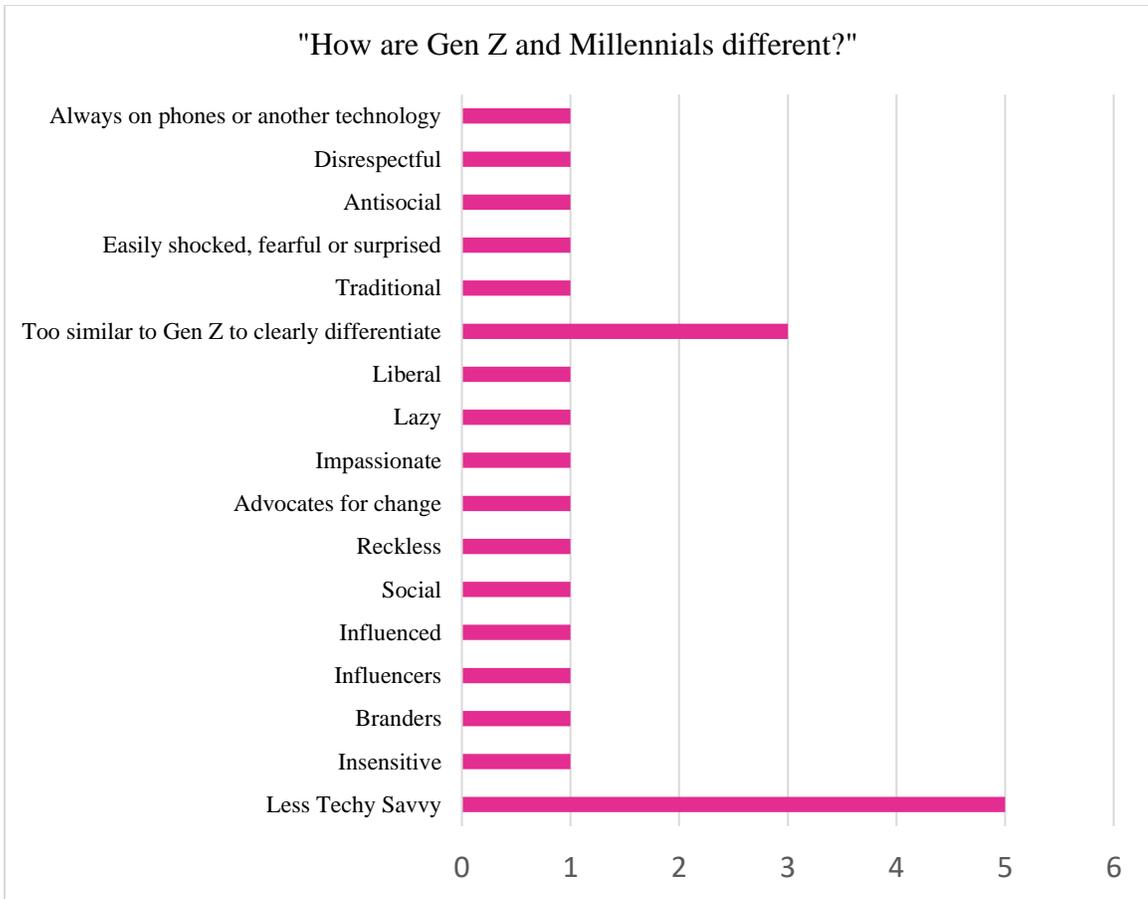


Figure 8. Question 8.1 answer chart detailing the words Gen Z students used to describe how Gen Z and Millennials differ.

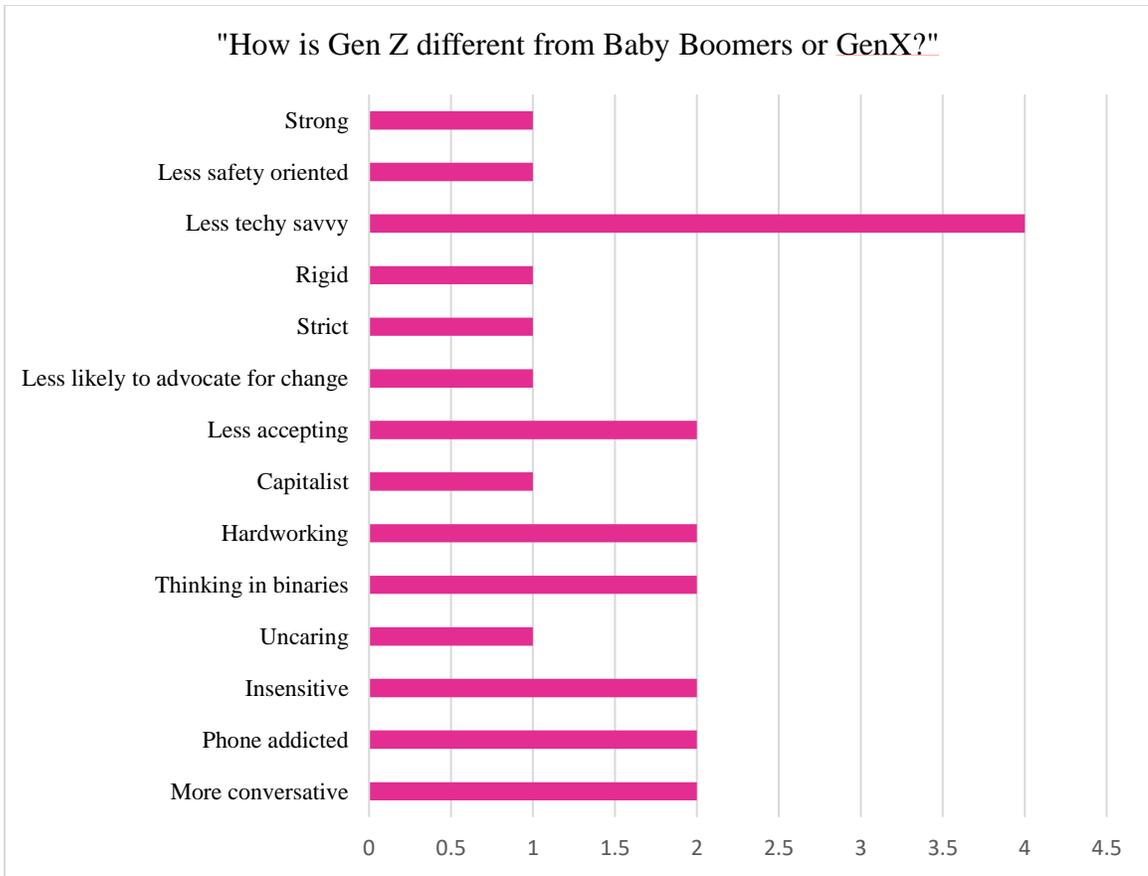


Figure 9. Question 8.2 answer chart detailing the words Gen Z students used to describe how Gen Z are different from Gen X and Baby Boomers.

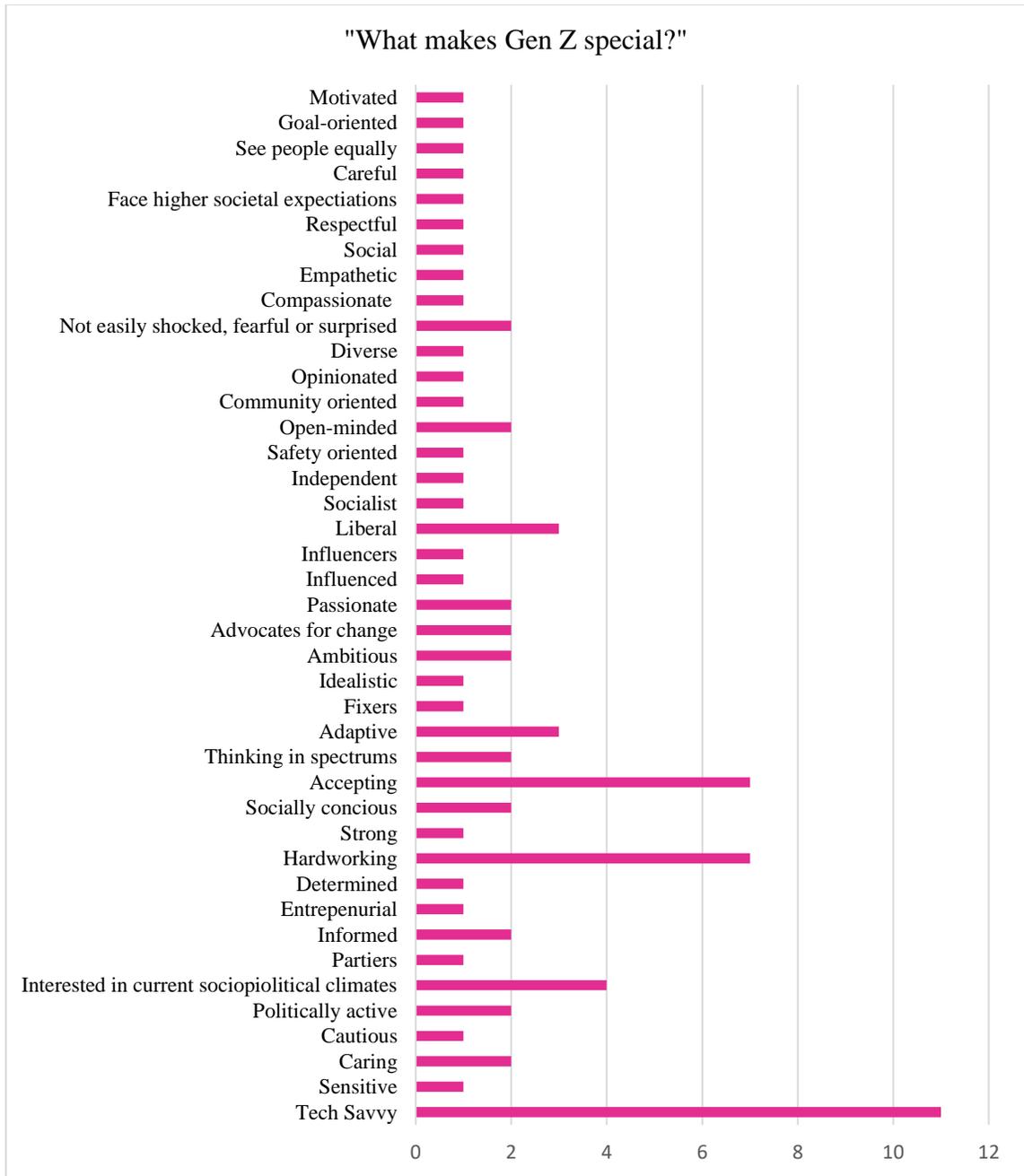


Figure 10. Question 9 answer chart listing the adjectives that Gen Z students used to describe their own generation.

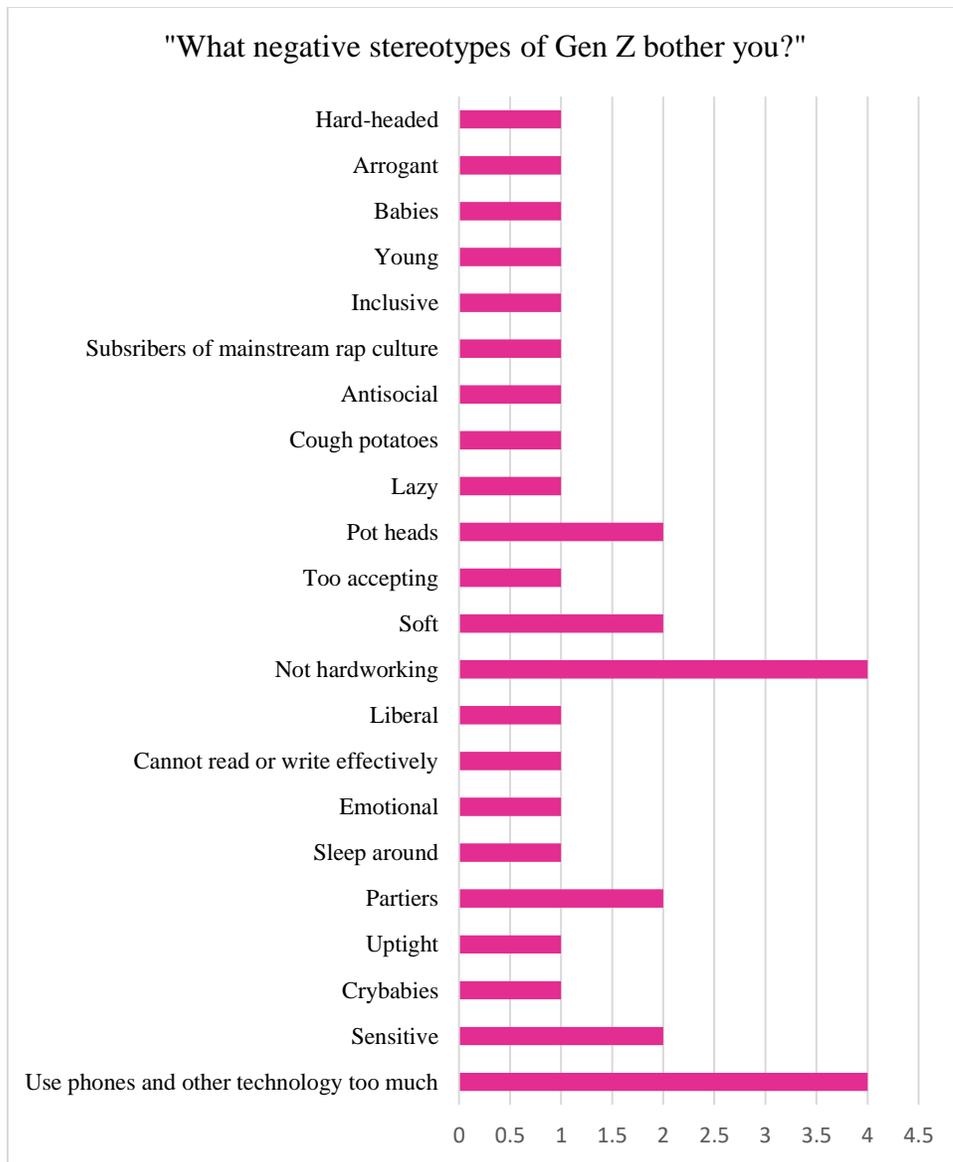


Figure 11. Question 10 answer chart listing the negative stereotypes of Gen Z that the students I interviewed had heard before which bothered them.

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