
Decoding Generation Z for Enhanced Hospitality Education: Insights from two Swiss Hospitality Schools

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Abstract

Generation Z, the emerging workforce and learners, often face misunderstanding and undervaluation. The hospitality and tourism sector, including its educational programmes, may struggle to attract this cohort. This article draws upon two years of collaboration with diverse student groups from two Swiss hospitality institutions to illuminate this issue. The primary aim is to offer insights that can help bridge the gap between Generation Z, hospitality educators, and industry trainers.

Key Words:

Generation Z, Gen Z, hospitality skills, generation gap, hospitality industry

Introduction

This article presents the results of educational exercises conducted at two Swiss hospitality schools from 2018 to 2022, involving over 200 Generation Z undergraduate students. It comprises a literature review on this cohort's characteristics, followed by insights from classroom activities at HIM (Hotel Institute Montreux) and SHMS (Swiss Hotel Management School). HIM students addressed stereotypes through blog posts, whilst SHMS students discussed their views on academic modules and acquisition of hospitality skills.

The same lecturer, who is also the author of this article, led both school activities. Despite the differences between the two activities and their consecutive occurrence, the author chose to consolidate the results into a single article. This decision was made as both activities aimed to highlight Generation Z students' perspectives on their own qualities and skills. This article provides valuable insights into adult learning, suggesting ways to enhance teaching methods and curriculum. Moreover, it sheds light on how the hospitality industry can become more appealing to Generation Z.

Generation Z Characteristics

Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, is the second-youngest generation, following Millennials and preceding Generation Alpha. Whilst there's no universal agreement on exact birth years (Jayatissa, 2023), this group is marked by their lifelong exposure to technological advancements, including mobile phones, Wi-Fi, social media, and unrestricted information access. These factors have profoundly influenced their worldview and interactions (Dimock, 2019). Prensky (2001) coined the term "digital natives" to describe this generation, emphasizing their innate comfort with technology. Turner (2015) further elaborated that Gen Z's technological fluency extends beyond mere usage to include an intuitive understanding of digital ecosystems. They've also felt the aftermath of the great recession, observing parental job losses and Millennial siblings returning home. They're acutely aware of the growing wealth disparity and have a clearer grasp than previous generations of financial pressures related to rent and transport. Lastly, the escalating expenses of pursuing higher education have resulted in Generation Z bearing the highest levels of debt (Gomez et al., 2022).

Jayatissa (2023) has outlined Generation Z's defining traits based on various academic sources. These characteristics are categorised into positive or neutral aspects and areas of criticism.

Table 1. Generation Z Characteristics

	Positive or neutral points	Negative points
Communication skills	Tech savvy Creative Informal communication	Short attention span Soft skill Gap Lack of interpersonal skills Inability to deal with emotions and words Bad listeners
Behavioral / attitudes	Self-confident Independent Multi-tasking Pragmatic Adaptable Collaborative Attention to detail	Individualistic Social media-driven. Materialistic
Core values	Environmentally conscious Social activism Loyalty Transparency Mutual respect	Dislike authority and hierarchy
Career	Prefer stable employment Ambitious	Job hopping Dislike routine

Source: Jayatissa's literature review summarised by the author.

Furthermore, the impact of the Covid pandemic on the current generation is significant, as they have endured extended periods of isolation and reduced face-to-face interactions. This has led to a marked increase in mental health issues, making Generation Z the most vulnerable across all age groups (Parker and Igielnik, 2020).

Z.Lab by HIM

The initial class project ran from 2018 to 2021 in a Digital Marketing module for second-year students at HIM. Students were tasked with writing a blog post about their own generation, with the best articles featured on Z.Lab. The subsequent analysis focused on the first fifty articles written by students from 27 different countries.

It's crucial to note that this activity was part of a course module and not a formal research study. The blog posts weren't subjected to in-depth qualitative analysis. The primary aim was to teach students the basics of blog writing. Students consented to their articles being shared and used by the instructor. While some qualitative analysis methods were applied, such as identifying common themes and patterns, the content should not be viewed as the results of a formal research study. Therefore, the feedback and observations presented here are not definitive.

This discussion aims to compare the students' self-perceptions with the findings of a literature review conducted by Jayatissa (2023). Four main themes will be explored.

Generation Z feels unloved.

When reviewing the comments about their generation, the students initially expressed surprise and disappointment at the level of criticism directed at Gen Z, particularly regarding their reliance on social media. However, they also voiced strong disapproval of the older generations who judged

them, highlighting the widespread lack of intergenerational understanding. One student wrote: "*In today's world lecturers think that when the class is boring, displaying a video on a screen will catch our attention. However, the truth is that if we were not engaged since the beginning there is no video on the internet that will make our brains process or even retain the information they want to transmit.*" (Murillo, 2018).

Similarly, another student challenged the importance of CVs in job hunting: "*We don't understand how some companies grade people based on a piece of paper! For me, it's like judging its book by its cover and we all know we shouldn't.*" (Wyngaard, 2019).

Overall, the students expressed a wish for older generations to reassess their own biases and worldviews. One student noted: "*Just because we prefer to hear the news from a quick video rather than a newspaper doesn't mean we have no attention span, just like wearing jeans to the office rather than a suit doesn't make Millennials lazy.*" (Pow-Sang, 2019).

They saw a clear generational gap, believing that older generations should adapt to younger ones: "*It is said that depression and low self-esteem is increasing in our society, and who is responsible for this? Generation Z needs guidance to help them find their own values and not to get lost on the way. They need role models. Older generations are responsible of helping them on their way to success.*" (Lundqvist, 2019).

Generation Z craves meaning and belonging.

In blog posts, this generation often appears cynical about the world, resulting in heightened values. On environmental issues, one student explained: "*My generation is up to date about with every news around the world; we have seen and heard about economic crisis and animals getting endangered. We are a generation that actually cares about sustainability as there might not be much left when we have children or grandchildren.*" (Talapatra, 2021).

Many students shared their career aspirations, revealing that their main priority was finding a company offering job security, personal development, and self-expression opportunities. "*I am looking for a work environment where I can thrive and where I am able to be in psychologically safe teams.*" (Nguyen, 2019). They seemed less interested in large corporations, viewing them as unable to recognise individual employees: "*We don't want to work for big corporations, we don't want to be a number. We value small environments where everyone knows each other and where everyone's voice impacts general decision-making.*" (Frances, 2019).

Contrary to expectations, they portrayed themselves as humble and open-minded. They genuinely want to learn and adapt, whilst also desiring recognition. "*Gen Z wants to do what they feel is right. It does not mean that we are not willing to change according to the feedback we receive. At the contrary, we want to be able to fail and see our mistakes in order to really understand why we are doing things in a certain way. When we learn something and it is recognized, we have a feeling of accomplishment that leads to higher personal productivity.*" (Gullo, 2019).

Generation Z's relationship with technology is multifaceted.

All participants recognised technology's impact on their lives, views, and actions. They demonstrated a deep grasp of these tools' advantages and limitations: "*I know that we want everything RIGHT NOW, but this is how we are used to. With all the advances in technology we don't even need to wait to download any type of files, like it happened with past generations. For us everything happens fast, and everything is on our hands.*" (Gomez, 2019). Some students believe new technologies are their best means to positively transform the world: "*Our generation is hungry for improvement and driven by curiosity. What has happened in the past generations will be completely altered by the Generation Z as we will make huge world improvements, choose clean food over fast food, emphasize on diversity, and create things that may be currently unimaginable for you.*" (Wei, 2019). Nevertheless, they're aware their expectations can be unrealistic, partly due to social media: "*We are addicted to the Internet. We are free and unconventional. We are dreamer that always talking about things that are unrealistic*" (Yu, 2019).

Generation Z is tailored for hospitality.

By 2025, Generation Z is expected to constitute 27% of the workforce (OECD, 2021). A hallmark of Generation Z is their openness to the global community. This cohort travels more frequently than previous generations and shows a strong interest in varied cultures (Pitrelli, 2023). Thus, the hospitality sector is ideally suited to nurture their passion for exploration and cultural immersion. Indeed, Zandotti (2021) noted in her blog article: "*Hospitality is a worldwide industry open to welcome people from all over the world and make of it a melting pot*". Their travel aspirations are linked to their vision of a more equitable world. "*GenZ breaks stereotypes. By travelling in foreign countries, they strive for equality, less discrimination and fairness among each other.*" (Labar, 2020).

This emerging generation possesses heightened emotional intelligence, which, according to Longi (2020), makes Gen Z particularly valuable to the hospitality sector: "*Today older generations find*

mental coaching to be a remedy to those communication skills that have been lacking over decades of theory-based education, instead we have grown in a world that needs us already equipped of 4 emotional intelligences: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social skills."

Generation Z can significantly enhance the hospitality industry, which needs reinvention, as "*The world of hospitality is the last place where we can find magic!*" (Panni, 2019). Gen Z hoteliers recognise their ability to innovate with technology whilst restoring authentic customer relationships. "*Generation Z needs little to no training in technology, which saves valuable time and money.*" (de Rooj, 2019). "*Authenticity through sustainability, the less-is-more concept and even taking a few steps back in order to move forward. We value the real and pure over the fake and plastic versions.*" (Bergerud, 2020).

The students' rationales align with Jayatissa's research on social media dependence, limited resilience, social engagement, and resistance to hierarchies. However, their online journal entries don't reflect a significant lack of soft skills. This cohort actively seeks and values interpersonal connections more than previous generations, possibly due to the scarcity of such interactions in their daily lives.

Soft skills gap:

The author studied soft skills with a new group of hotel management students. The students completed a questionnaire to assess their soft skills and identify which modules helped develop these skills. The author shares a summary of the questionnaire data with the students and instructors. The first group of 68 students was interviewed in January 2023, and the second group of 32 students was interviewed in May 2023. The author selected the soft skills for assessment based on the curriculum and student input. The self-assessment was voluntary and conducted during class time. The author clarifies that the feedback is not from a formal survey and includes anonymous comments from participants.

Team Player

Despite slight variations in feedback across different cohorts, it is intriguing to observe that despite considering themselves as proficient team players, students tend to have a preference for working independently. They assert that it is during hands-on serving and cooking classes that they acquire the most valuable insights into teamwork. Nevertheless, their inclination towards self-reliance leads them to favor working alone. "*Most people are very united. But there are always one or two very lazy and irresponsible ones.*"

The results validate Jayatissa's examination of literature, portraying Generation Z as self-sufficient and self-reliant. The students interviewed further elucidated this characteristic by articulating their reluctance to depend on the ineptitude of others.

Adaptability and Flexibility

The practical classes are also those which helped them develop their adaptability and flexibility: "*In kitchen practice we often don't have enough ingredients to make the dishes, so we need to change something.*" In general, they demonstrate a willingness to collaborate with individuals of

diverse backgrounds and possess the ability to adjust accordingly. This observation aligns with the traits previously outlined: Generation Z is known for its collaborative nature and adaptability.

Working under pressure

Furthermore, the students perceive the service class and the development of their restaurant concept as valuable experiences that have taught them to effectively handle high-pressure situations. A significant number of students expressed their appreciation for the supportive and instructive nature of their instructors. *"First service practice was scary, and I felt very nervous and pressure since it is the first time doing the service run despite Mr Thompson and Mr Florent guiding us."* Effective supervision plays a crucial role in helping students cope with stress. However, this assertion contradicts the findings of the literature review.

Dealing with problems & Solving conflicts

The practical courses provide a valuable opportunity for students to develop conflict resolution skills. Many students perceive themselves as proficient problem solvers and attribute conflicts to a lack of

effective listening skills. *"Sometimes during our group work, we had some different opinions and views and not all people choose to solve them easily."* In addition, group projects in other disciplines are also an opportunity for them to face difficulties and resolve them. *"There's a lot of difficulties during group projects so I have to stay alert and be tough when something unexpected happens."* Members of Generation Z exhibit a pragmatic mindset and are adept at leveraging their soft skills to tackle challenging situations.

Active listening

The module "Art of Employability" significantly contributed to the enhancement of their active listening abilities, as it provided them with the necessary tools to create compelling CVs and cover letters, as well as to refine their interview skills. Through engaging in personal development activities, both on an individual and group level, they were able to gain valuable insights into their own selves and others. Once student wrote: *"It was very enjoyable to hear a very good student share his experience."* Students believe they can influence peers through active listening, contradicting Jayatissa's review of Generation Z's poor listening skills. This raises the question of whether this generation can listen attentively when motivated.

Communication

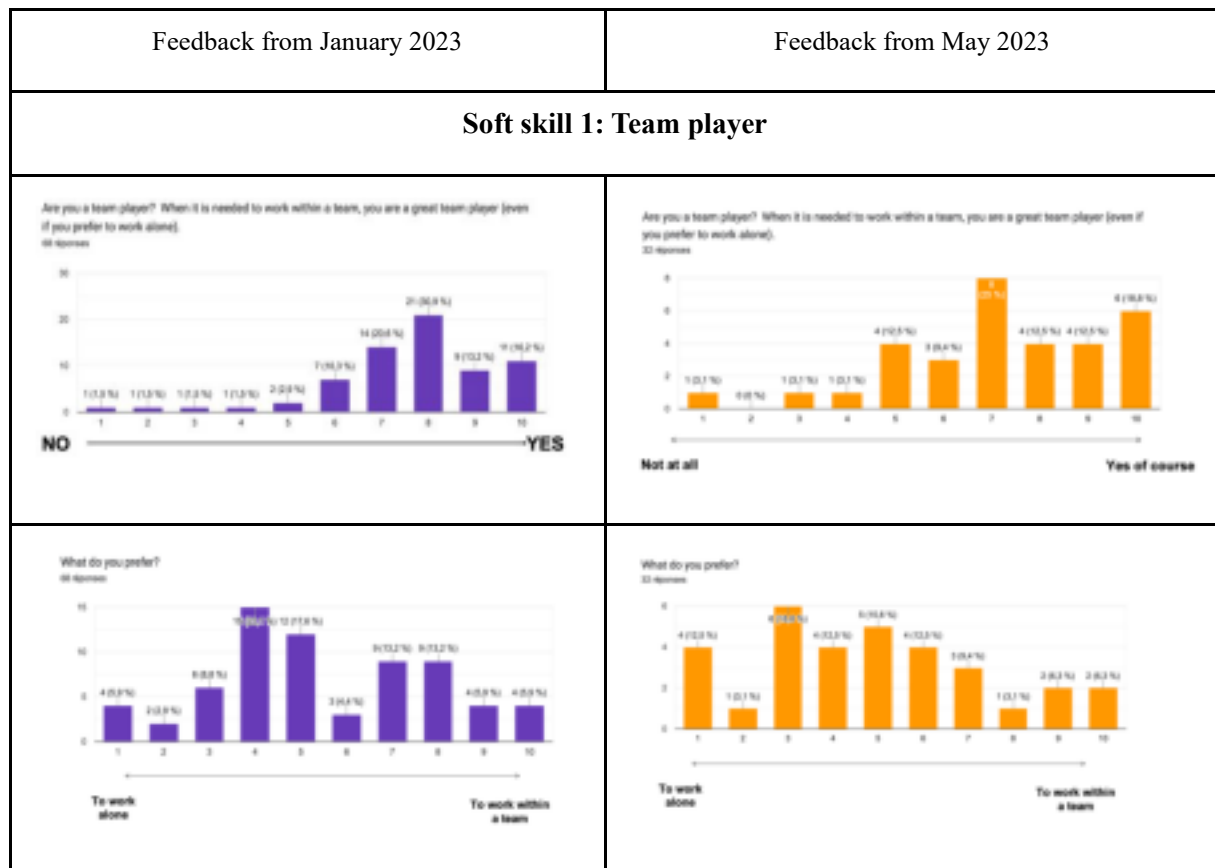
Students have expressed that the Business & Academic Communication module has been instrumental in enhancing their comprehension of professional communication, not only with their instructors but also with their peers. They noted the difference with high school: *"Here you learn to talk to people in a professional environment, different from high school, day to day classes"* Their incorrect usage of words seems to be a result of insufficient explanation and context: *"I got to learn more about the theory behind effective communication in this class, which helped me learn how to better communicate in real life."* It is crucial to offer a framework and avoid assuming that Generation Z possesses knowledge about the habits and customs of the professional world.

Receiving feedback

Jayatissa's literature review underscores the fundamental values of Generation Z, emphasizing transparency and mutual respect. The ability of GenZ members to embrace feedback is closely tied to these values, as they acknowledge the significance of acquiring knowledge and seeking advice to enhance their performance. The author's study reveals that practical service and kitchen courses, along with hospitality design courses, were particularly effective in supporting this developmental process. *"For my design project I had put much effort and thought but sadly my way to presentat lowered impacted my grade. Receiving feedback and seeing the critical thinking of the professor lead me to work more on this skill, which was the first step to many other personal and professional improvements."*

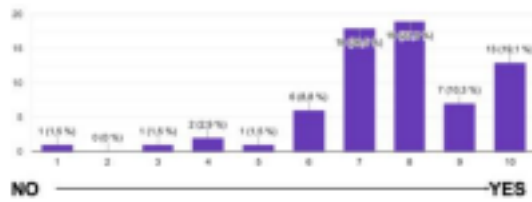
Creativity

Hospitality design is the preferred module among students as it provides them with ample opportunities to nurture their creativity. It is intriguing to observe the teacher's role in fostering self-confidence among the students, as evident from the comments. *“In the module the professor showed how there is no necessary artistic background to be called creative, being presentable and innovative will give you the freedom to be considered creative.”* The students who were interviewed showed a certain level of uncertainty towards creativity, which contradicts Jayatissa's literature review. They have a unique perspective on the world compared to previous generations, yet they seem to lack confidence in suggesting original solutions.

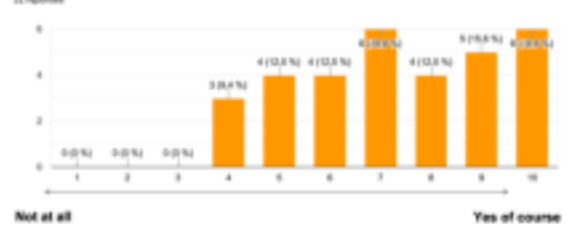


Soft skill 2: Active listener

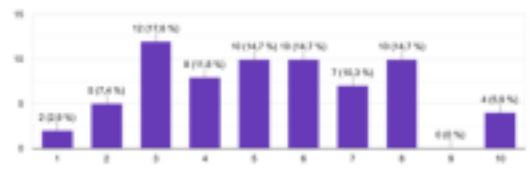
Are you an active listener? Do you know how to truly listen to others (without interrupting, judging or thinking about your answer)?
44 responses



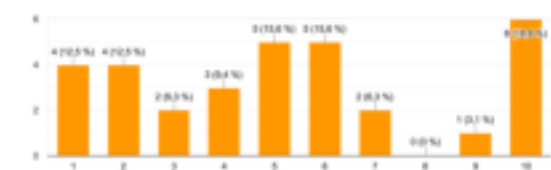
Are you an active listener? Do you know how to truly listen to others (without interrupting, judging or thinking about your answer)?
22 responses



During this semester, how often did you change your mind about people (meaning that you misjudged or misunderstood someone)?
44 responses

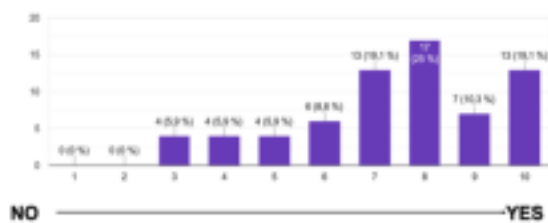


During this semester, how often did you change your mind about people (meaning that you misjudged or misunderstood someone)?
22 responses

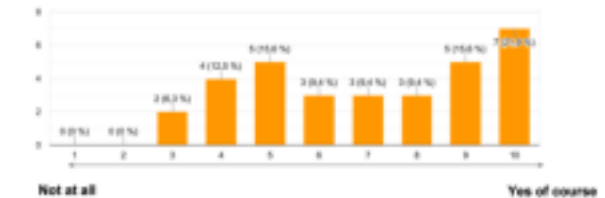


Soft skill 3: Adaptability / Flexibility

Are you flexible? Do you adapt yourself to new situations or people?
44 responses



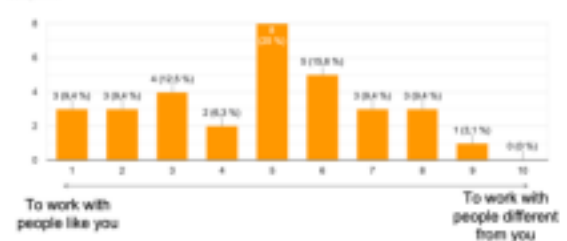
Are you flexible? Do you adapt yourself to new situations or people?
22 responses



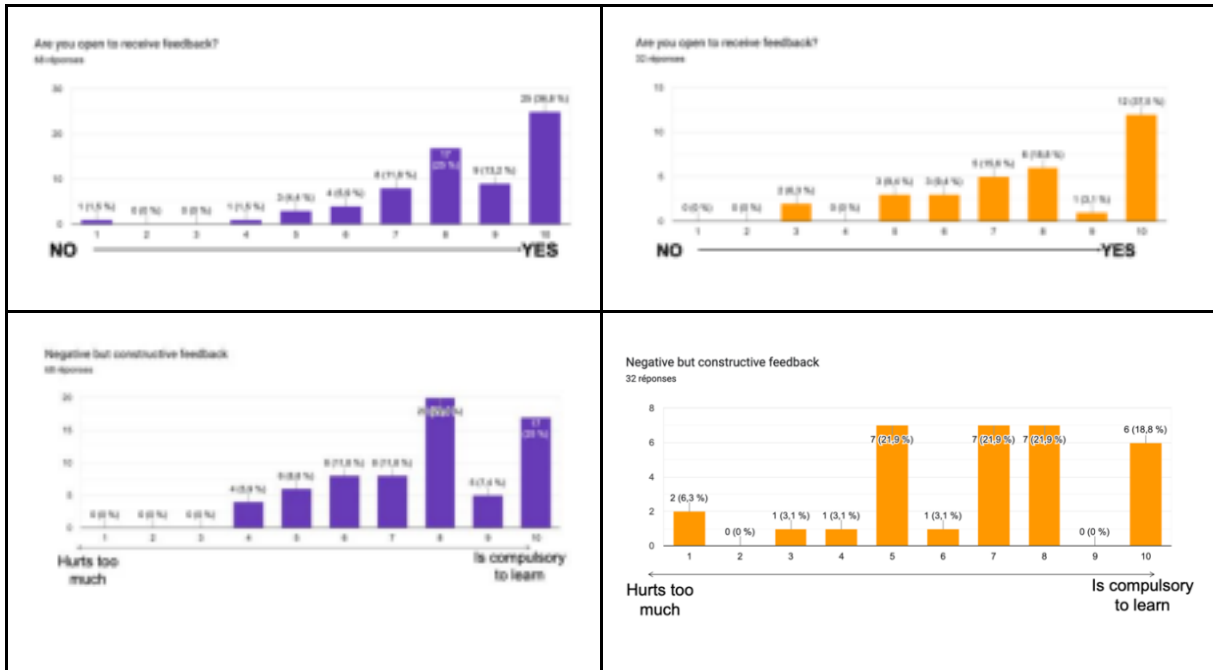
Do you prefer to work
44 responses



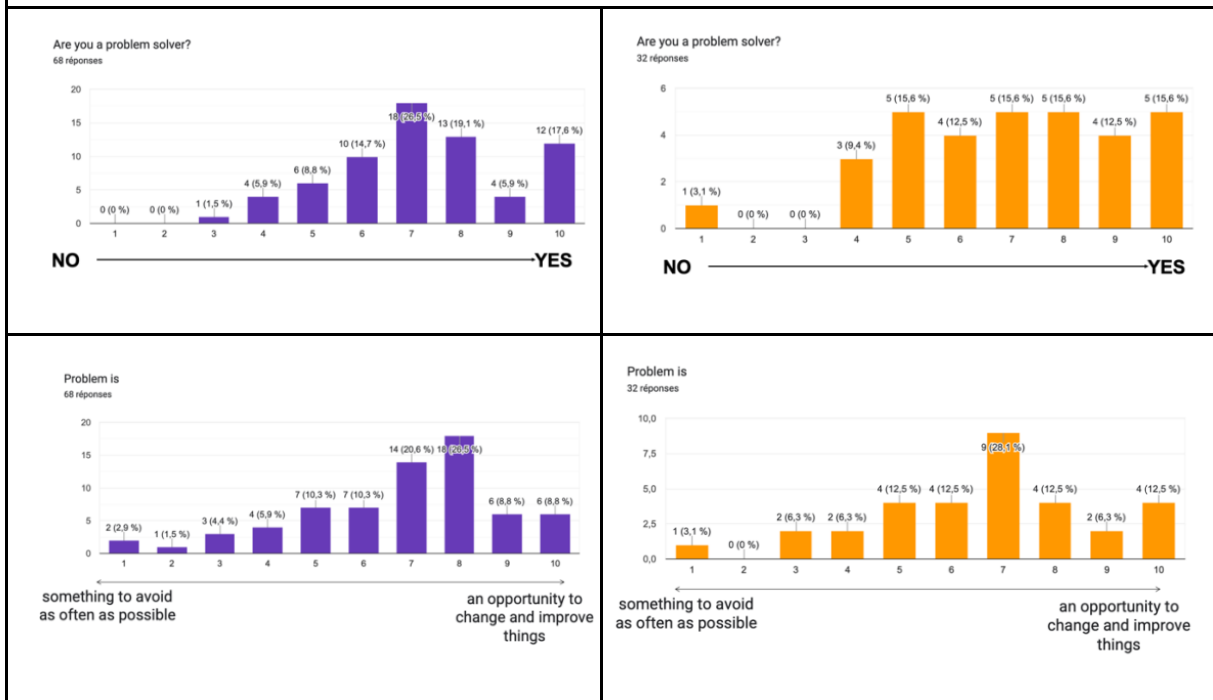
Do you prefer to work
22 responses



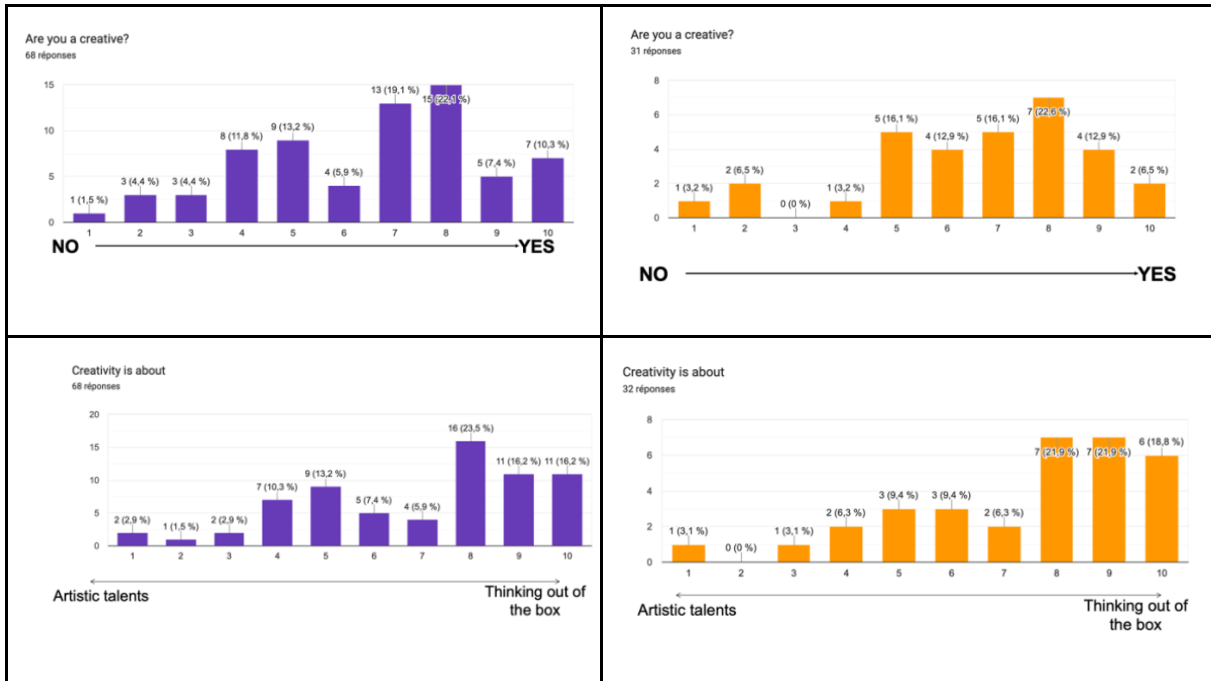
Soft skill 4: Receiving Feedback



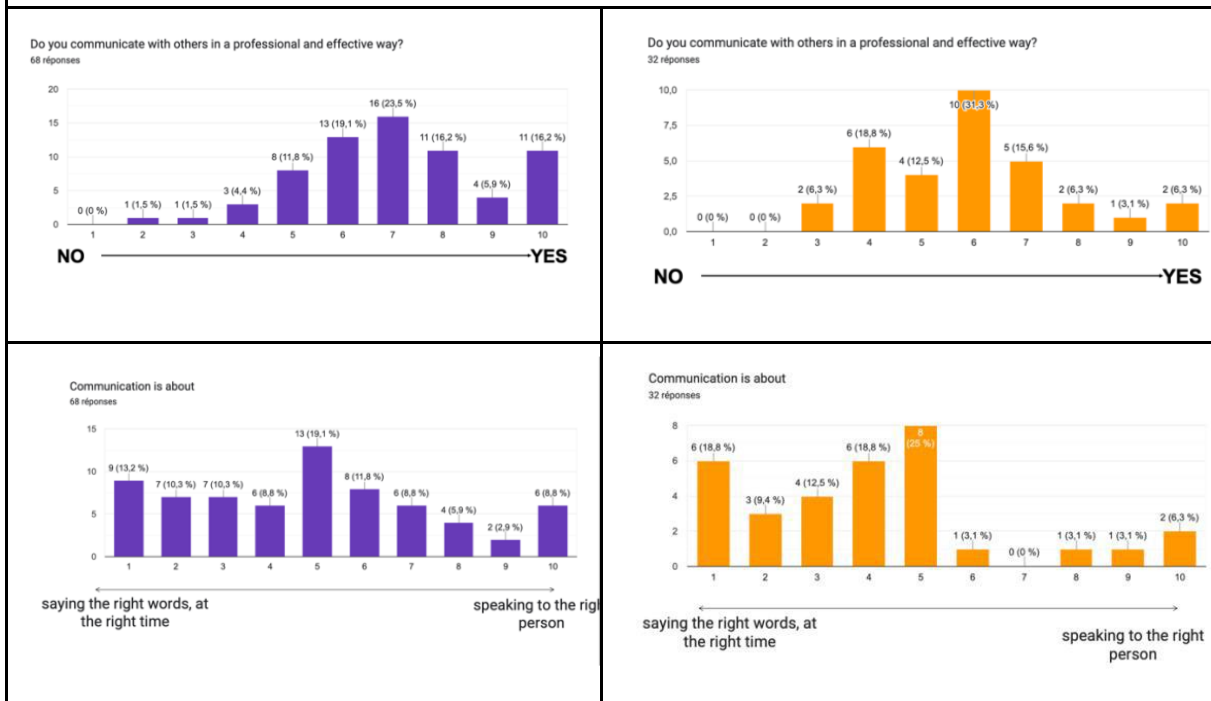
Soft skill 5: Problem Solving



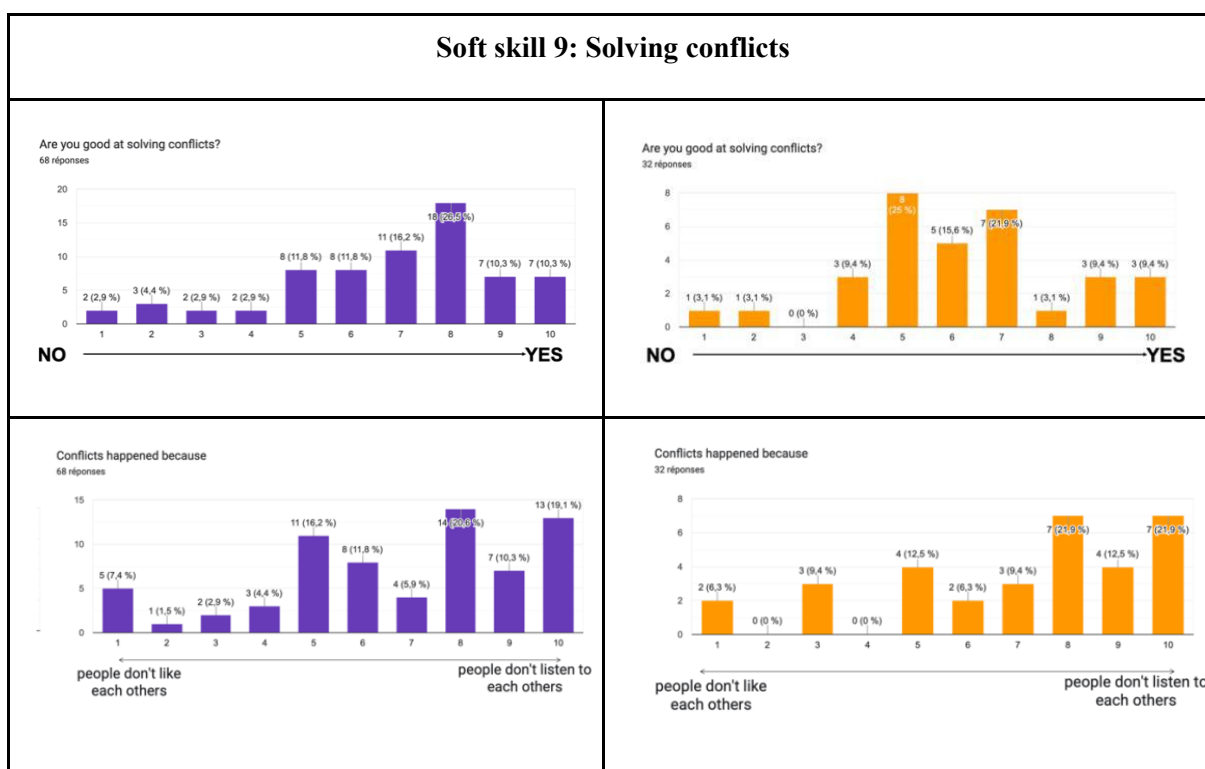
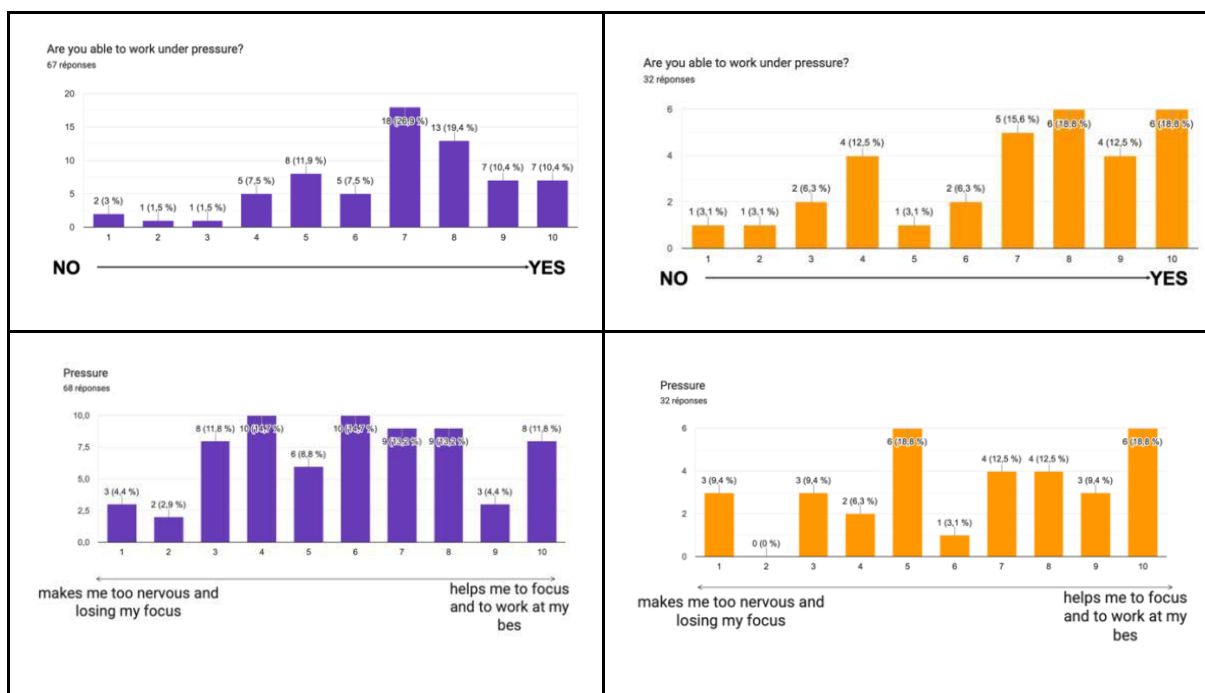
Soft skill 6: Creativity



Soft skill 7: Communication



Soft skill 8: Working under pressure



Source: Author's findings

Limitation:

The results compiled in this paper primarily consist of information gathered in class during various activities. These data were not originally intended to be used as a subject of research. However, given the diverse nature of the information collected, the author deemed it beneficial to share these findings

in a more formal manner with the academic community, particularly within hospitality education. The author observed that many analyses regarding Generation Z often fail to provide these young individuals with an opportunity to express their perspectives. To further this exploration, it is essential to adopt a more structured pedagogical approach utilizing a formal academic methodology. The author fully acknowledges that this paper may be viewed as a preliminary study leading to more extensive research endeavors.

All participants in these activities who agreed to have their texts published on the blog are students from hospitality programs. This introduces a bias in the responses, given that these individuals are generally more aware of soft skills, interpersonal communication, and cultural diversity than their peers in Generation Z.

Conclusion:

The analysis of findings reveals a clear generation gap, often stemming from misunderstandings. The tendency to frequently change jobs is primarily linked to Generation Z's desire for workplaces that value loyalty, mutual respect, and environmental consciousness. While renowned for their creativity and technological prowess, this generation may struggle with emotional management and professional communication. It's evident that they require guidance and clarification, seeking more substantial support from older generations without unfounded assumptions. Generation Z displays a complex mix of traits, blending individualism and pragmatism with collaboration and flexibility.

These results can be viewed as a strong incentive to maintain vocational training initiatives: students favor experiential learning, tangible skills acquisition, and social engagement. This is precisely what hospitality institutions provide in their curricula. Highlighting vocational programs is an excellent strategy to attract young individuals to the hospitality industry.

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