

Attitudes of Generation Z students towards partnerships in light of the second demographic transition theory: An example of students from Kielce

Abstract

The aim of the article was to examine the attitudes of Generation Z students, studying in a medium-sized academic centre in Poland, towards formal and informal partnerships and divorce, as well as to determine the relationship between selected socio-demographic characteristics of students (gender, financial situation, parents' social status) and the presented attitudes. The study was conducted on a group of 462 students. A questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale was used, which examined three statements concerning the necessity of formalizing relationships through marriage, acceptance of divorce, and acceptance of cohabitation. The results indicate that Generation Z students mostly support the formalization of relationships through marriage, oppose divorce, and accept alternative forms of partnerships. No significant differentiation of the analysed attitudes was found in relation to the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Keywords

Generation Z • social attitudes • partnerships • divorce • students • second demographic transition theory

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Introduction

Globalization processes that intensified in the second half of the 20th century changed the face of the world, and contributed to the strengthening of mutual connections between nations, cultures, and societies. These processes have influenced almost every aspect of social life, including the structure of the family – the basic social unit. The family, as the foundation of many societies, plays a key role in transmitting traditions, norms, and values. Changing global conditions significantly affect its structure, function, and relations between members. As a result of these changes, we observe a wide range of phenomena: from the redefinition of traditional gender roles to the emergence of new forms of family life organization (Bauman 2003).

In developed countries, particularly in Europe and North America, globalization processes promote an increase in the number of incomplete families, divorce, and new forms of communal life (de Coninck et al. 2021). The traditional nuclear family model, comprising a father, mother, and children, is becoming increasingly less common, giving way to alternative family structures.

From a theoretical point of view, changes in cultural patterns and in attitudes towards partnerships can be understood through the concept of the second demographic transition. Attitudes of the post-war generation (baby boomers) and subsequent generations (generations X, Y) towards family and marriage have been described in the literature and empirically verified (Helweg-Larsen et al. 2011). Currently, the so-called Generation Z is slowly entering adulthood. In the literature, it is often assumed that these are people born between 1995 and 2012 (Barhate & Dirani 2022). Economists predict that this generation will become the wealthiest, and its social values are already beginning to change social and cultural structures.

Currently, Generation Z constitutes about a quarter of the world's population (Patel & Morrison 2019). In Poland, they number around 6.6 million people, which accounts for over 17% of the total Polish population. Some members of this generation are still attending secondary schools and higher education institutions, while others have already entered the labour market.

Studies on the attitudes of young people are undertaken by demographers, geographers, sociologists, and economists. However, the conclusions of these studies are often underestimated as prognostic indicators of future social events. Yet, attitudes towards the family and its formation or breakdown should be particularly important now, when Generation Z cohorts are entering adulthood. The attitudes of students, mainly in smaller academic centres, which for many decades have been experiencing a decline in population potential seem to be especially significant. Authorities of such centres place high hopes in the social, educational, and professional plans of Generation Z students. This social group is often perceived as a “cultural seismograph”, meaning a group that quickly registers and transmits cultural trends in society. Generation Z students do not have to be the first to introduce new standards, but they are the ones who transmit them on a large scale (Johansson & Herz 2019; de Coninck et al. 2021). Furthermore, as stated by Karabacak and Ciftci (2016), young people are the backbone of society and, therefore, their attitudes towards starting a family are extremely important.

In light of the above remarks, the aim of this article is to determine the attitudes of Generation Z students studying in a medium-sized academic centre in Poland towards formal and informal partnerships and divorce, as well as to determine the relationship between selected socio-demographic characteristics of students (gender, financial situation, parents' social status) and the presented attitudes.

In this study, it was assumed that an attitude is a general and stable positive or negative feeling and assessment of certain individuals towards phenomena and objects (Petty & Cacioppo 1981).

Our research fits into the international discussion of demographers, geographers, and sociologists on the attitudes of Generation Z representatives towards different types of family structures. It constitutes an important contribution to the development of scientific knowledge, as it diagnoses the attitudes of Generation Z students studying in a small academic centre and indicates the connections between these attitudes and the socio-demographic characteristics of the surveyed students. These aspects may constitute an important starting point for further research on the dynamics of cultural changes in Poland. The research results also open up the field for further analyses, especially regarding the role of other socio-economic factors such as cultural background, religion, and family experiences in shaping the attitudes of young people. Additionally, comparing the presented results with other regions of Poland may provide a broader picture of Generation Z's attitudes towards partnerships.

Research methods

The research procedure included several stages. First, an analysis of the subject literature was carried out, which served as the basis for identifying the characteristics of Generation Z and constructing the survey questionnaire. It was assumed that the attitudes of the studied generation's representatives towards the nature of partnerships and divorce consist of a set of feelings resulting from the individual perception of selected phenomena described in the theory of the second demographic transition. In the next stage, the survey was conducted. Respondents were asked to indicate, on a Likert scale, their feelings and evaluations regarding the functioning of formal and informal relationships and divorce, based on the statements: S1 – Partnerships should be formalized through civil or religious marriage; S2 – Divorce is acceptable; S3 – The functioning of alternative forms of partnerships (cohabitation) is acceptable.

A 5-point Likert scale was used, where 1 indicated a clearly negative assessment of the statement, 3 represented a neutral point, and 5 indicated full agreement and a positive feeling.

In similar studies, 5- or 7-point scales are used. Using too large a scale can trigger a tendency to flatten it – that is, to merge individual points and only then attempt to respond. 7-point scales, although they increase the diversity of responses, may also force respondents to choose inaccurate answers that do not reflect their actual feelings regarding the evaluated position (Tarka 2015). It was decided that a 5-point scale would be better. This allowed for a reduction in response dispersion (Sztabiński 2003). A similar approach was used in research by Sonkaya and Öcal (2024).

The research sample was selected using the Convenience Sampling Technique, in which respondents are recruited primarily due to their easy availability. Students from Jan Kochanowski University (UJK) and Kielce University of Technology (UT) were selected for the study.

Kielce is a city located in south-eastern Poland, with a population of approximately 180,000. Since the second half of the 20th century, it has developed into a medium-sized academic centre in Poland. It is home to the two largest higher education institutions in the Świętokrzyskie region. In the 2023/2024 academic year, the number of students at UJK was approximately 9,200, and at UT about 4,500, which accounted for 51% and 21%, respectively, of students studying at higher education institutions in the region. The students selected for the study primarily come from rural areas and towns of various sizes in the Świętokrzyskie voivodeship. Research (Kamińska 2010, 2011) shows that this area is perceived as a region with deeply rooted religious values and conservative attitudes of its inhabitants towards family life.

Despite this, since the beginning of the transformation period, distinct negative demographic processes have been observed in the Świętokrzyskie voivodeship. Between 2002 and 2023, the population decreased by over 127,000 people – or by 11%. This decline resulted from changes in natural population movement and increased migratory mobility. During the 2002–2023 period, the birth rate in the region dropped from 9‰ to 6.17‰, while the death rate increased from 10.3‰ to 12.26‰. Since the early 21st century, there has been a steady rise in natural population decline in the voivodeship, reaching -6.09‰ in 2023. For comparison, the national average at that time was -3.62‰. The unfavourable demographic situation resulting from natural movement has been exacerbated by migration processes. Since the 1990s, the Świętokrzyskie voivodeship has consistently recorded negative net migration, which stood at -3.8‰ at the end of 2023. Additionally, as in the rest of the country, attitudes towards formal marriage have shifted in the region. Societal engagement in this respect has significantly declined, as evidenced by the decreasing number of marriages. In 2002, the marriage rate was 5.5 per 1,000 inhabitants, while, by 2023, it had fallen to 3.3. This was lower than the national average of 3.9‰. Between 2002 and 2023, the divorce rate in the Świętokrzyskie voivodeship more than doubled, increasing from 4.5 to 11.5 per 10,000 people. Compared to the national figure (15.1 in 2023), the divorce rate in the region was lower. This may indicate that residents of the voivodeship remain more attached to the institution of marriage than the average Polish citizen.

The survey was made possible thanks to the rectors responsible for the education process at their respective universities. It was conducted in the winter semester of the 2023/2024 academic year among 523 students (UJK – 364 respondents, UT – 159). After verification, 462 questionnaires were accepted for analysis.

The analyses took into account the following socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents: gender, financial situation, and the selected parent's education level. According to the literature, gender and financial situation are basic explanatory variables for social phenomena (de Coninck et al. 2021; Sonkaya & Öcal 2024). However, gender and financial differences have attracted little interest among researchers on attitudes towards formal and informal relationships. Even rarer are studies showing the relationship between the level of parents' education and attitudes towards partnerships and divorce (Ferraretto & Vitali 2024), even though this is an important indicator of socio-economic status that influences the younger generation's decisions about their future family life (Badolato 2023). The study analysed the education level of one parent – the one whom the respondents indicated as having a higher level of education.

In the gender structure of respondents, women predominated. They constituted almost 64% of the surveyed group. More than 50% of the respondents assessed their financial situation as good, and about 33% as average. Some 10% considered it very good, and about 4% as poor. Considering the education of the parents, about 5% of respondents declared that their guardians had primary education, and about 25% stated vocational education. The largest group was made up of respondents who rated their selected parent's education level as secondary (approx. 35%) or higher (approx. 34%) (Table 1).

In the next stage, the reliability of the survey was verified; this is understood as the stability of its results in the case of the possibility of re-conducting it with the same group of respondents. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used for this purpose, which ranges from 0 to 1. The lower boundary of acceptability for a reliable survey is 0.6 (Hair et al. 1998). In the case of the survey completed by students in Kielce, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.84. This means that the conducted survey research can be

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

Feature	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Women	295	63.9
Men	167	36.1
Financial situation		
Poor	19	4.1
Average	154	33.3
Good	243	52.6
Very good	46	10.0
Selected parent's education		
Primary	24	5.2
Vocational	117	25.4
Secondary	162	35.2
Higher	157	34.1

Source: own elaboration

considered reliable. (The presented reliability results refer to 15 statements included in the questionnaire.) In the description of the research results, percentage compilations of indications on the Likert scale for three statements included in the questionnaire and basic statistical indicators (arithmetic mean, standard deviation) were used.

In the next stage, the students' attitudes towards the nature of partnerships and their dissolution were determined. It was assumed that attitudes can be inferred based on the evaluation of three statements included in the questionnaire. Whether individual statements were rated positively (respondents agree or rather agree with a given statement) or negatively (respondents disagree or rather disagree with a given statement) was examined. The research procedure included the verification of parametric null hypotheses, in which it was assumed that students' attitudes towards the nature of partnerships and their dissolution, determined using three statements, were neutral (the value on the Likert scale was 3). The null hypotheses took the form:

$$H_0: m = 3$$

In the next stage, the following alternative hypotheses were adopted:

$$H_1: m > 3$$

To verify the null hypotheses, the Student's t-test was used. At a significance level of 0.05, and with an appropriate number of degrees of freedom – v ($v = n - 1$, where: n – sample size), this enabled decision-making:

- If the empirical value of the Student's t-test fell within the critical region, the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) was accepted. This indicated that the students' attitudes towards the nature of partnerships

and their dissolution were positive with regard to the specific statements.

- If the empirical value of the Student's t-test did not fall within the critical region, there were no grounds for rejecting the null hypothesis (H_0), which meant that the students' attitudes could not be considered positive in relation to the given statements.

The theory of the second demographic transition (SDT) and the attitudes of Generation Z towards formal and informal partnerships and their dissolution

The theory of the second demographic transition, proposed by Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa (1986), constitutes an important context for the analysis of cultural transformations in partnerships. This theory describes changes in the demographic and social structure that occurred in the second half of the 20th century in developed countries and points to a transition from traditional demographic patterns, based on stable family structures and high fertility, to a model characterized by an increase in the number of informal relationships and divorce. This theory assumes that, as a result of economic progress and democratization, people began to focus more on self-realization than on fulfilling traditional social roles (Lesthaeghe 2010). As Janiszewska (2013) indicates, emotions, feelings, and individual needs began to significantly determine the pace and level of family development.

The described processes of demographic change reached the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, in the 1990s and were directly related to the political and economic transformation (Kurek & Lange 2013). The transformation radically changed the labour market, increasing the importance of education and influencing the growing difficulties in combining the roles of partner and parent.

In the literature on the subject, it is increasingly emphasized that the process of the second demographic transition does not follow a uniform pattern but, rather, reflects significant regional and cultural variation. As Lesthaeghe (2010) points out, the pace and nature of demographic and behavioural changes are strongly conditioned by local social contexts. This allows the persistence of traditional attitudes to be interpreted not merely as a sign of developmental delay but also as the conscious identification with a local system of values.

The concept of the second demographic transition has been repeatedly verified in empirical studies. In relation to representatives of Generation Z, research results indicate various tendencies regarding their life priorities in terms of marriage and attitudes towards informal relationships and divorce. Empirical studies show that, on the one hand, Generation Z representatives consider marriage very important for the functioning of the individual and society (de Coninck et al. 2021; Mostafapour et al. 2025) and declare a strong readiness to enter into marriage (Herawati et al. 2023). On the other hand, this social group is aware that contemporary relationships are more unstable and temporary than in the past. Therefore, among a large group of Generation Z students, marriage is becoming less popular, and these students less frequently prefer it over cohabitation (de Coninck et al. 2021; Mostafapour et al. 2025).

Research conducted in Poland is more unambiguous. Mariański (2023) and Gizicka et al. (2023) demonstrated that the vast majority of young people considered marriage most appropriate for their personal lives. Ruskiewicz's (2024) research also supports the thesis that marriage has not lost its significance among young Poles. The researcher demonstrated that nearly three-quarters of respondents intend to marry in the future, with more than half planning to do so in the form of a concordat marriage – that is, one combining both civil and religious ceremonies. The cited study further indicates that young adults' preferences regarding

personal life arrangements were not significantly differentiated by gender, place of residence, or attitude towards religion. It is worth noting that young Poles' attachment to marriage displays a relatively stable tendency, as confirmed by studies conducted in the early 21st century. For instance, Bakiera (2008) found that, even at that time, a positive attitude towards marriage prevailed among young people. Both women and men primarily viewed marriage in emotional terms, associating it with love, fulfilment, and commitment. Similar conclusions emerge from the research conducted by Szafraniec (2011), who emphasized that a successful marriage, family life, having children, and personal happiness were among the most highly valued life goals for young Poles. Every second Polish respondent aged 18–29 indicated that a successful marriage was a prerequisite for a successful life. Numerous studies (Máriański 2011; Szafraniec 2011) show that these trends are differentiated and largely shaped by status-related and environmental factors. Rural youth tend to emphasize traditional family values more strongly, whereas urban and well-educated youth exhibit greater behavioural liberalism. Women, while generally more family-oriented than men, also display a more liberal approach towards alternative forms of marital and family life (Świątkiewicz 2016). A positive attitude towards religion also plays an important role, as it is closely linked to a stronger attachment to family life and traditional values.

Studies also showed that Generation Z is very open to the diversity of family relationships, and legal marriage is not seen as the only option (de Coninck et al. 2020). Modern partnerships are shifting from traditional marriages to more diversified forms such as cohabitation. In recent decades, cohabitation has become increasingly common across various societies and cultures, especially among Generation Z (Sassler & Lichter 2020).

In Polish literature, there is a noticeable lack of studies on the attitudes of Generation Z representatives towards informal relationships. Mynarska and Bernardi (2007) indicated that most surveyed Poles treat cohabitation as a trial period before marriage, allowing partners to get to know each other and avoid future conflicts, or as a natural step in relationship development resulting from increasing involvement. Additionally, the authors stated that marriage in Poland is perceived as a sign of greater commitment and stability and that Poles have a strong attachment to Catholic values, which means that marriage is viewed as more binding than cohabitation. However, more recent studies confirm greater tolerance among young people towards informal partnerships. In Poland, the belief still dominates that marriage is the only lasting foundation for a stable family (Janiszewska 2022). Although tolerance towards cohabiting relationships has been steadily increasing, young people generally do not consider this to be their preferred model of partnership. According to research conducted by Ruszkiewicz (2024), only 17% of young Poles surveyed expressed a desire to live in such a relationship model in the future. Similar conclusions were drawn by Szczygalski (2017), who studied students from two Catholic secondary schools in Szczecin. More than half of the respondents evaluated cohabitation either rather negatively or strongly negatively. A positive attitude towards this form of partnership was declared by one in four respondents, while one in five was unable to assess the phenomenon. It seems that the profile of the schools (Catholic) where the study was conducted had a significant impact on respondents' attitudes towards cohabitation. A different perspective on cohabiting relationships emerges from research carried out as part of the project *Stosunek do związków partnerskich (Attitudes Towards Civil Partnerships 2024)*, which explored opinions on the legalization of heterosexual civil partnerships. In this study, 90% of respondents expressed support for the legalization of such unions. Furthermore, between 2011 and 2024, the percentage of respondents supporting the legalization of heterosexual

partnerships increased from 83% to 90%. The findings also revealed statistically significant differences in opinions based on gender (women tend to be more liberal), size of place of residence (with the largest discrepancies observed between rural areas and metropolitan centres), and socio-economic status (individuals in poorer financial conditions tend to hold more conservative views, whereas those better off are generally more liberal). However, the strongest divisions concern political and ideological orientations, including political affiliation (left-wing vs. right-wing), engagement in religious practices (with the most pronounced differences between those actively practising religion and those who are less religious or not practising at all), and party preference. The most sceptical attitudes towards civil partnerships were observed among supporters of *Law and Justice* and *Confederation*, while the most liberal views were found among supporters of the *Civic Coalition*, *The Left*, and *Third Way (Stosunek do związków partnerskich 2024)*.

Divorce is directly related to formal relationships. Generation Z grew up during a period of increased divorce rates in their parents' generation, so it can be assumed that they are "accustomed" to this issue (We, The Family... 2021). However, research in this area is also inconclusive. For example, Mostafapour et al. (2025) argue that Generation Z students have a negative attitude towards divorce, viewing it as a sign of failure and shame. On the other hand, research by de Coninck et al. (2021) indicates that Generation Z students have a more positive attitude towards divorce than those of the previous generation.

Research conducted in Poland shows that young people are aware that marriage is not absolutely permanent, but it is significantly more socially accepted than informal relationships. Young people relatively often agree with the statement that "when planning a marriage, one should consider the possibility of divorce" (Gizicka et al. 2023). According to the report *Stosunek Polaków do rozwodów (Poles' attitudes towards divorce 2019)*, in Poland, the number of strong supporters of divorce is nearly three times higher than of those strongly opposed to it. Only one in eight respondents (12%) declared themselves to be firmly against divorce, while one in three stated that if both spouses decide to dissolve their marriage through court proceedings, there should be no obstacles to doing so. However, the largest group (52%) consists of moderate supporters – those who do not generally endorse divorce but consider it acceptable under certain circumstances. Over the past decade, the percentage of those who support divorce has increased by more than half (from 20% to 32%). As noted in the report, the most significant factors influencing attitudes towards divorce are ideological in nature, particularly religious beliefs (measured by participation in religious practices) and political orientation. Supporters of divorce are primarily individuals who either do not practise religion or do so infrequently, as well as nearly half of those who identify with left-wing political views. Opponents of divorce, on the other hand, are more likely to hold right-wing political views and to participate regularly in religious practices. Acceptance of divorce tends to rise with the size of the respondent's place of residence and with an increase in per capita income. Divorce is also more frequently accepted by individuals aged 18 to 24 and, in terms of socio-professional groups, by clerical workers, students, and unskilled labourers. Conversely, complete opposition to divorce is most commonly found among individuals who regularly participate in religious practices, those over the age of 64, persons with only primary education, individuals dissatisfied with their financial situation, and those with the status of pensioner or unemployed (Stosunek Polaków do rozwodów 2019).

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that, in light of the theory of the second demographic transition (SDT), which posits the growing importance of post-materialist values, individualism,

Table 2. Results of the verification of null hypotheses regarding the functioning of formal and informal partnerships against the socio-economic characteristics of respondents

Statement		S1	S2	S3	
Category	Critical value of the Student's <i>t</i> -test (<i>k</i>); Significance level- 0.05; m=3	Empirical value of the Student's <i>t</i> -test			
	Overall	1.96	27.95	-7.10	9.97
Gender	Women	1.97	28.72	-4.89	9.38
	Men	1.98	11.52	-5.41	4.36
Financial situation	Poor	2.1	9.51	-1.80	2.99
	Average	1.98	12.68	-5.11	3.93
	Good	1.97	22.74	-4.88	8.56
	Very good	2.01	10.79	-0.81	3.84
Selected parent's education	Primary	2.07	3.71	-2.50	1.27
	Vocational	1.98	21.90	-2.87	6.41
	Secondary	1.97	18.11	-3.77	6.80
	Higher	1.97	12.68	-5.24	4.65

Bold indicates empirical values of the Student's t-test not falling within the critical region

Source: own elaboration

and personal autonomy, Poland occupies an intermediate position between Western Europe and South-eastern Europe. The processes associated with the SDT in Poland are unfolding in an asymmetrical and spatially differentiated manner, as confirmed by numerous studies (Slany 2002; Kotowska 2009; Kurek & Lange 2013). In many regions – particularly rural and peripheral areas such as the Świętokrzyskie voivodeship – there is a stronger attachment to traditional family patterns and lower acceptance of alternative family arrangements and divorce. Conversely, in large cities and academic centres, there is a greater tendency to move away from the institution of marriage, which is reflected in the more frequent acceptance of cohabitation (Kotowska 2009; Slany 2002; Janiszewska 2022). Poland does not represent a uniform case of the SDT but, rather, a mosaic of regionally specific modernization models – some resembling scenarios typical of North-western Europe (e.g. the Netherlands, Sweden), while others remain rooted in traditional patterns, as seen in parts of Italy, Spain, or Greece (Lesthaeghe 2010; Sobotka & Toulemon 2008).

Results

The conducted procedures for verifying the null hypotheses allowed us to determine that the surveyed Generation Z students agreed with statements S1 (Partnerships should be formalized through civil or religious marriage) and S3 (The functioning of alternative forms of partnerships (cohabitation) is acceptable). However, they did not agree with statement S2 (Divorce is acceptable). This means that the respondents' attitudes towards the functioning of both formal and informal partnerships were positive, while their attitude towards divorce was negative (Table 2). Only respondents who identified their selected parent's education level as primary did not agree with statement S3. It can be stated that their attitudes towards informal partnerships, unlike those indicating a parent's higher education level, were negative (Table 2).

More detailed information on the variation in the attitudes of Generation Z students from Kielce towards formal and

informal partnerships and divorce can be obtained by analysing the shares of respondents who agreed or disagreed with the analysed statements.

The Kielce students showed great enthusiasm towards formalizing partnerships through marriage. A significant majority of respondents (over 82%; 4.32 on the Likert scale) declared a positive attitude towards formalizing relationships (statement S1). A negative attitude was represented by about 8% of respondents, and about 10% had no opinion on the subject (Table 3).

A favourable attitude towards marriage was shown by a significantly higher percentage of women (approx. 88%; 4.52 on the Likert scale) than men (approx. 71%; 3.96 on the Likert scale). Men more often than women represented a negative attitude towards the formalization of a relationship (approx. 13% and 6%, respectively). Among them, there was also a higher share of respondents who had no opinion on this subject (men approx. 16%; women approx. 6%).

Considering the self-assessment of their material situation, the highest share of respondents favourably assessing the formalization of relationships was observed among those who perceived their material status as the lowest (approx. 89%; 4.5 on the Likert scale). In groups with better self-assessed financial positions, this share was lower (from 76% to 85%; from 4.16 to 4.44 on the Likert scale). Among people with the lowest self-assessment of their material situation, none had a negative attitude towards marriage. In the remaining groups, who described their financial status as very good, good, and average, the share of respondents unfavourably disposed towards formalization ranged from approximately 7% to approximately 12%.

Considering the education of parents, the largest group of marriage supporters consisted of students who described their guardian's education as vocational (approx. 92%; 4.61 on the Likert scale). The smallest group was made up of those whose parent's educational level was primary (75%; 4.0) and higher (approx. 75%; 4.13). The highest percentage of opponents of formal relationships was characterized by students who described

Table 3. Comparative summary of response variability by respondent group

Category		Strongly disagree (%)	Somewhat disagree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Somewhat agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Likert scale mean	Standard deviation
S1 - Partnerships should be formalized through civil or religious marriage								
Gender	women	2.03	3.73	5.76	16.61	71.86	4.52	0.91
	men	1.80	11.38	16.17	29.94	40.72	3.96	1.09
Financial situation	poor	0.00	0.00	10.53	26.32	63.16	4.50	0.67
	average	3.25	8.44	12.34	20.78	55.19	4.16	1.13
	good	1.65	5.35	7.82	22.22	62.96	4.40	0.96
	very good	0.00	8.70	8.70	17.39	65.22	4.44	0.90
Parent's education	primary	8.33	8.33	8.33	25.00	50.00	4.00	1.29
	vocational	1.71	1.71	4.27	17.95	74.36	4.61	0.79
	secondary	0.62	6.79	9.26	24.07	59.26	4.35	0.94
	higher	2.55	9.55	13.38	21.66	52.87	4.13	1.12
Total		1.95	6.49	9.52	21.43	60.61	4.32	1.01
S2 – Divorce is acceptable								
Gender	women	25.42	29.49	18.98	10.85	15.25	2.61	1.37
	men	31.14	26.95	20.96	8.38	12.57	2.44	1.33
Financial situation	poor	31.58	26.32	21.05	10.53	10.53	2.44	1.31
	average	31.82	23.38	23.38	9.74	11.69	2.45	1.33
	good	24.69	32.51	18.52	9.47	14.81	2.58	1.34
	very good	26.09	26.09	13.04	13.04	21.74	2.82	1.48
Parent's education	primary	37.50	20.83	20.83	4.17	16.67	2.30	1.34
	vocational	22.22	29.91	23.08	9.40	15.38	2.65	1.33
	secondary	25.93	27.78	20.99	11.73	13.58	2.60	1.34
	higher	31.85	29.94	15.92	8.92	13.38	2.43	1.36
Total		27.49	28.57	19.70	9.96	14.29	2.55	1.36
S3 - The functioning of alternative forms of partnerships (cohabitation) is acceptable								
Gender	women	8.81	10.51	18.64	25.08	36.95	3.70	1.30
	men	13.77	12.57	17.37	25.75	30.54	3.47	1.39
Financial situation	poor	5.26	10.53	15.79	31.58	36.84	3.83	1.18
	average	14.29	14.29	14.29	25.32	31.82	3.45	1.42
	good	8.64	9.47	20.99	25.93	34.98	3.70	1.27
	very good	10.87	10.87	17.39	19.57	41.30	3.76	1.32
Parent's education	primary	12.50	25.00	12.50	25.00	25.00	3.35	1.31
	vocational	8.55	8.55	17.95	28.21	36.75	3.75	1.26
	secondary	8.02	12.96	17.90	25.31	35.80	3.69	1.29
	higher	14.01	9.55	19.75	23.57	33.12	3.52	1.39
Total		10.61	11.26	18.18	25.32	34.63	3.62	1.33

Source: own elaboration

the level of their parent's education as primary (approx. 17%). In the remaining groups, the share of those unfavourably disposed towards marriage was smaller and ranged from 3.4% (vocational) to 12% (higher).

Generation Z students from Kielce mostly (approx. 56%; 2.55 on the Likert scale) declared a negative attitude towards divorce (statement S2). A positive attitude was represented by approximately 24% of respondents. One in five respondents had no opinion on this subject (Table 3).

Considering the gender of respondents, negative feelings towards divorce were more often declared by men (approx. 58%; 2.44 on the Likert scale) than women (55%; 2.61). A greater percentage of women (approx. 26%) positively assessed the possibility of dissolving formal relationships than men (approx. 21%).

Considering the material situation of respondents, negative attitudes were most often characterized by those who assessed it as poor, average, and good (approx. 58%, 2.44; approx. 55%, 2.45; approx. 57%, 2.58). In the group assessing their material position as very good, the share of people with a negative attitude towards divorce was only slightly lower and amounted to approximately 52% (2.82 on the Likert scale). The highest percentage of respondents who had a favourable attitude towards divorce (almost 35%) was recorded in the group that assessed their financial status as very good. In the remaining groups, less satisfied with their financial situation, this percentage was lower, and ranged from 21% to 24%.

Referring to the education of the selected parent, it can be stated that the highest share of opponents of divorce was characterized by students who declared a higher level of education (approx. 62%; 2.43 on the Likert scale). A smaller percentage of those who negatively assessed the possibility of dissolving formal relationships was noted in the groups of respondents whose parent had primary (approx. 58%; 2.3), secondary (approx. 54%; 2.6), and vocational (52%; 2.65) education. Considering the parent's education, positive feelings towards divorce were most often represented by respondents whose guardian had vocational or secondary education (25%). In the remaining groups, the share of those favourably disposed towards divorce was smaller. In the case of primary education, it was 21%, and of higher, 22%.

Among Generation Z students from Kielce, it was found that they mostly (approx. 60%; 3.62 on the Likert scale) had positive feelings towards alternative forms of partnerships (statement S3). Negative attitudes towards cohabitation were declared by less than 22% of respondents. Over 18% had no opinion on the functioning of informal partnerships (Table 3).

Considering gender, a positive attitude towards cohabitation was more often shown by women than men (approx. 62% of women, 3.7; approx. 56% of men, 3.47). A higher share of opponents of informal partnerships was recorded among male respondents (approx. 26%) than among women (approx. 19%).

Considering the financial situation of students, the highest percentage of those with a positive attitude towards cohabitation was found in the group with the lowest financial status (approx. 68%; 3.83 on the Likert scale). Among those who better perceived their material situation, the share of those positively assessing informal partnerships was lower and ranged from approximately 57% (average) to approximately 61% (good and very good) (from 3.45 to 3.76 on the Likert scale). In terms of their material situation, the highest percentage of respondents with negative attitudes towards informal partnerships occurred in the group defining it as average (approx. 29%), and the lowest in the group that rated it as poor (approx. 16%).

Considering the education of parents, the highest percentage of people with a positive attitude towards alternative

forms of partnerships to marriage was characterized by the group where vocational education was indicated (approx. 65%; 3.75 on the Likert scale). In the remaining cases, the values were lower. They ranged from 50% (3.35) for primary education to approximately 61% (3.69) for secondary education. The highest share of students with negative attitudes towards cohabitation was recorded in the group where the parent's education was primary (approx. 37%), and the lowest where it was vocational (approx. 17%).

Discussion

Attitudes towards formal partnerships

The obtained research results allow us to conclude that Kielce students of Generation Z expressed clearly positive attitudes towards the formalization of partnerships through marriage. This confirms the findings presented in studies by, among others, Sonkaya and Öcal (2024), Waters and Chaney (2023), and Fiskin and Sarı (2021), which indicate that Generation Z students show a high readiness to enter into marriage. It also supports the theses in the works of Mariański (2023), Gizicka et al. (2023), and Ruskiewicz (2024), who observed that, for Polish youth, marriage is the proper form of personal life. Although young people evaluated informal relationships positively, marriage remains, in their minds, the prevailing model of cohabitation between a man and a woman. On this basis, it can be concluded that the attitudes of students in Kielce towards formal relationships are similar to those of other young people in Poland. However, we did not confirm the hypotheses presented in the works of de Coninck et al. (2021) and Herawati et al. (2023), which suggest that Generation Z students' attitudes towards marriage are becoming less favourable.

The study showed that women had more positive attitudes towards marriage than men. Our findings do not confirm the earlier conclusions of de Coninck et al. (2021), who discovered that women have a more negative attitude towards traditional family types than men. We also did not confirm the conclusions of Fiskin and Sarı (2021), who noted that women are more sceptical about marriage than men. These authors argued that increased socio-economic activity and participation of women in the workforce may contribute to more negative attitudes towards marriage compared to men. It can be assumed that Generation Z students studying in a medium-sized academic centre in Poland have not yet fully adopted the patterns of their peers from Western Europe. Greater attachment to Catholic religious values may be relevant in this case, though this thesis requires further research.

Considering the financial situation, the most positive attitudes towards formalizing relationships were shown by individuals who described their situation as poor. Our results in this regard relate to the conclusions of other researchers. As studies indicate (Sonkaya & Öcal 2024; Ferraretto & Vitali 2024; Hardie 2022), career aspirations and financial independence have become key factors influencing Generation Z's decisions about marriage. As young people achieve a higher financial threshold, they prioritize marriage less. On the other hand, a poor financial situation compels young people to take steps towards quick family and financial stabilization (Ferraretto & Vitali 2024). Marriage may then be seen as a stable foundation that, through joint income, offers a greater sense of security.

Based on the analysed values, it is difficult to clearly determine the relationship between the level of the selected parent's education and attitudes towards marriage. We were unable to confirm or reject the thesis that highly educated parents are likely to encourage their children to explore various life paths, thereby influencing delays in marriage, remaining in cohabitation, or choosing to live alone (Amett 2000). Our research does not indicate that young people whose parent has a low

socio-economic status (measured by education level) follow non-marital family paths more often than their peers from better-educated families (Billari 2022; van den Berg 2023). Nor did we confirm the thesis that individuals whose parents have a higher socio-economic status are less likely to follow family-oriented paths than those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Badolato 2023).

Attitudes towards divorce

The survey results indicate that, among Kielce students, a conservative attitude towards divorce prevails. Most respondents expressed a negative opinion on the subject. Only about a quarter expressed a positive attitude, most often women and those with the best financial standing. The results are consistent with conclusions by, among others, Mostafapour et al. (2025), who found that Generation Z youth generally have negative feelings towards breaking formal relationships. Our research also shows that Kielce students have a different view on divorce than Polish youth in general. According to Gizicka et al. (2023), Polish youth already consider divorce as a way to solve potential family problems at the stage of planning a marriage. The report *Stosunek Polaków do rozwodów (Poles' attitudes towards divorce 2019)* also indicates that the majority of Poles support divorce. The differences in attitudes towards divorce between Generation Z students in Kielce and young people in Poland as a whole may stem from the more traditional perception of the family model prevalent in the Świętokrzyskie region, as well as the significant role of the Catholic religion, which upholds the principle of the indissolubility of marriage.

Men showed a slightly more conservative attitude towards divorce than women. This may be explained by the perception of men as heads of households, for whom divorce symbolizes failure in that role. It may also stem from the fact that in Western societies, men benefit more from marriage than women (Christensen 2014), as there is a persistent asymmetrical division of responsibilities between spouses. Women are responsible for most domestic and family duties (de Coninck et al. 2021). However, it should be noted that our findings did not unequivocally confirm earlier research conclusions (Day et al. 2011; de Coninck et al. 2021) suggesting that women are more tolerant of divorce than men. The differences on the Likert scale are minimal and do not allow for such conclusions.

The analysis suggests that the students' financial situation may influence their attitudes towards divorce. The least financially stable respondents, being aware of the financial consequences of divorce, were the least supportive of it. This may indicate pragmatic considerations in the evaluation of formal relationship dissolution by Generation Z youth.

A relationship was found between students' attitudes towards divorce and their selected parent's education level. The least favourable attitudes were shown by respondents who indicated their parent's education as primary. This may be due to traditional values and norms in families where the parent's educational level is low, which emphasize the permanence of relationships and negative attitudes towards their dissolution.

Attitudes towards cohabitation

The attitudes of the surveyed academic youth from Generation Z towards informal partnerships turned out to be liberal. The obtained results confirm conclusions from the works of de Coninck et al. (2020, 2021) and Sassler and Lichter (2020). These authors observed a high openness among Generation Z representatives to relationship diversity. Moreover, our results may confirm the thesis of Thornton et al. (2008) that, due to the rising number of divorces, many Generation Z members favourably view cohabitation. Our conclusions are also consistent with Waters

and Chaney (2023), who studied American Generation Z members. They noted that they have a positive attitude towards cohabitation and consider marriage unimportant. Our results also align with earlier Polish findings. As Janiszewska (2022) showed, Polish society is becoming more tolerant of non-marital partnerships. It can, therefore, be assumed that the dominant conservative views, based on the Catholic religion, in the Świętokrzyskie region do not translate into liberal attitudes towards civil partnerships among Kielce students of Generation Z.

Women were more supportive of cohabitation than men. Our findings, therefore, confirm earlier conclusions from studies such as Andersson (2016) and de Coninck et al. (2021). Based on the analysed values, it is difficult to clearly determine the relationship between the students' financial situation and their attitudes towards cohabitation. However, it was noted that the level of the selected parent's education may influence the perception of alternative forms of partnerships. Students who indicated their guardian's education as primary showed negative attitudes towards cohabitation and disagreed with the statement: "The functioning of alternative forms of partnerships (cohabitation) is acceptable."

Conclusions

Our study shows that Generation Z students studying in Kielce mostly exhibited positive attitudes towards the formalization of partnerships through marriage. This means that, despite the growing popularity of alternative forms of relationships, the traditional model of the family remains important for this group, as it does for other young people in Poland. These attitudes may result not only from strong cultural traditions and religious values prevailing in the Świętokrzyskie region but also from the pace of diffusion of cultural patterns described in the theory of the second demographic transition. These patterns only began to dynamically permeate Poland at the turn of the 21st century. Perhaps this is not a sufficient period for Generation Z to fully adopt them, especially those representatives of this generation who were raised and grew up in rural areas or small towns of the traditional, religious Świętokrzyskie region.

Representatives of Generation Z in the studied group showed clearly negative attitudes towards divorce. This result may be surprising, considering the increasing number of divorces in Poland and growing social tolerance for such solutions, including among the younger Generation Z. The result suggests that despite awareness of the greater flexibility of contemporary relationships, divorce is still perceived in the Świętokrzyskie region as a life failure.

The research showed that most Generation Z students in the Świętokrzyskie region, similar to other young people in Poland, evaluated alternative forms of civil partnerships, such as cohabitation, positively. It can be observed that the dominant conservative attitudes among the inhabitants of the Świętokrzyskie voivodeship did not have a significant impact on the respondents' attitudes towards this form of relationship. This is in line with global trends indicating growing acceptance of diverse forms of interpersonal relationships. However, it cannot be unequivocally stated that, in line with the theory of the second demographic transition, the surveyed students are experiencing a weakening of norms and values characteristic of the traditional family. This is not supported by the very positive attitude of the students towards marriage. It can be assumed that the positive attitude towards cohabitation relates only to forms preceding marriage: preparation for marriage or a prolonged engagement.

There was no statistically significant variation in attitudes towards formal and informal relationships or divorce based on the examined socio-demographic characteristics. However, it can be noted that the selected parent's education level may have

influenced perceptions of cohabitation. Respondents whose parent had primary education, unlike others, exhibited negative attitudes towards informal partnerships.

It can be stated that the attitudes of the surveyed Generation Z students towards forms of civil partnerships show great uniformity and similarity to those of other young people in Poland. This is a generation that derives information mainly from internet sources. It can be assumed that their use has a greater influence on the formation of the considered attitudes than material status, parental education, gender, or the dominant views of other members of society. However, this thesis requires further in-depth research.

When comparing the obtained results within the Western European context, it is worth noting that, in countries with a high level of secularization and egalitarianism such as the Netherlands, Belgium, or Germany, the attitudes of young adults towards civil partnerships and divorce are characterized by significantly greater openness, which is the result of long-term cultural changes, pro-equality policies, and a religion-neutral public discourse (Lesthaeghe 2010; Sobotka & Toulemon 2008). Against

this background, the attitudes of students from the Świętokrzyskie region appear particularly cognitively interesting – showing the persistence of family norms and conservative values, including among young people who, in theory, should be carriers of postmodern transformation.

Limitations to our interpretation of results

There are limitations to our interpretation of results in this study for two reasons. First, the study was conducted in a single academic centre (Kielce), which limits the generalizability of the results to the entire Generation Z population in Poland. Second, the use of the Likert scale means that responses may be subjective and dependent on the participant's current mood. Moreover, social attitudes may change dynamically, and the study reflects the situation at a specific moment in time.

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