PRZEGLĄD PSYCHOLOGICZNY – THE REVIEW OF PSYCHOLOGY
2026, VOL. 69, NO. 3, 121–136
DOI: 10.31648/przegldpsychologiczny.13338
Received: 29.11.2025 ● Revised: 9.07.2026 ● Accepted: 17.08.2026

The Organisational Behavior of the X, Y and Z Generations When Faced With Negative Acts at Work: Does Aggression Breed Aggression, and in Whom?

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Abstract

Aim: Employees of different ages – belonging to Generations X, Y, and Z – have different attitudes toward work, motivations, and organizational behaviors. According to social exchange theory, experiencing negative acts (such as bullying) at work, increases counterproductive work behaviors and decreases organizational citizenship behaviors. The study investigated the moderating role of age in the relationship between experiencing negative workplace acts and engaging in various types of organizational behaviors.

Method: A cross-sectional, anonymous study was conducted in northern Poland in the spring of 2025. The study involved 285 employees from various professions and used the *Counterproductive Behavior* and *Organizational Citizenship Behavior Questionnaires*, as well as the *Negative Acts Questionnaire* (NAQ).

Results: Exposure to negative acts was positively correlated with engaging in counterproductive work behaviors and negatively correlated with organizational citizenship behaviors. The relationship between experiencing negative acts and engaging in counterproductive behaviors was moderated by age; it was the strongest among Generation Z employees and the weakest among Generation Y employees.

Conclusions: Employee age, defined as belonging to Generation X, Y, or Z, appears to be a significant factor in the frequency of organizational behaviors when employees experience intense workplace negative acts. This study provides comparative data for further analysis of relevant organizational behavior factors.

Keywords: organizational behavior, workplace bullying, work, Generation X, Y, or Z

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According to Jean M. Twenge (2024, p. 10), a generation is defined as "people born during the same period who grew up in a similar culture". Each generation experiences different historical events, technological advances, social changes, and cultural shifts. They also grow up in different political and economic contexts. These changes have been reflected in each generation's distinct professional work goals, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors (Qiu et al., 2025; Twenge, 2010; Twenge et al., 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2008). Changes in attitudes toward work are part of broader shifts in personality traits relevant to workplace behavior. These traits include changes in locus of control, self-esteem, narcissism, need for social approval, and individualism (Twenge, 2024). These changes are also accompanied by trends related to the mental health of subsequent generations (Twenge, 2010, 2024). General trends of these changes over several decades, as described in American academic literature, are evident among Polish workers (Czyczerska at al., 2020; Kukla & Nowacka, 2019; Lewicka, 2017; Messyasz, 2021; Nowak et al., 2025). The Polish labor market is made up of baby boomers (born 1946–1964), who are characterized by loyalty to their employers, respect for authority, and adherence to rules; Generation X workers (born 1965–1979), who value job stability and for whom work is one of the central values in life; Generation Y workers (born 1980–1994), who place greater value on free time and work-life balance, as well as independence, and are more focused on competition and individual work than their older colleagues; and Generation Z employees (born in 1995 and later), described as ambitious, preferring flexibility and mobility, multitaskers, and expecting a great deal of freedom in performing their tasks (Czyczerska et al., 2020; Gruszczyńska-Malec & Waligóra, 2019; Kukla & Nowacka, 2019; Nowak et al., 2025). General intergenerational differences in attitudes toward work can be described in terms of several dimensions, including autotelic versus instrumental work values, career stability versus instability, internal versus external locus of control, need for social approval, and materialism (Twenge, 2024). For older generations, work is an end in itself while younger employees view it more pragmatically, as a tool that enables them to develop their own skills; older employees are more attached to their profession and workplace and tend to be loyal to their employer. However, younger people are more career-mobile and reluctant to make long-term professional commitments; younger people are more responsive to external rewards (e.g., salary, promotion), older employees to internal rewards (e.g., affiliation). Older generations are less materialistic than younger ones; older employees' greater need for social approval is accompanied by greater compliance while younger employees' lower need for social approval manifests as greater assertiveness, unconventional behavior, and more frequent job changes (Lewicka, 2017; Twenge, 2024; Twenge & Campbell, 2008). Differences in attitudes, values, and career goals are accompanied by differing organizational behaviors among employees of different age groups (Qiu et al., 2025).

Organizational Behavior

Organizational behavior refers to the behavior of employees within an organization (Baka, 2017; Mikuła, 2015). This includes citizenship behavior, counterproductive behavior, and negative acts, such as workplace bullying. Organizational

citizenship behavior (OCB) was first described by D.W. Organ as behaviors exhibited by employees for the benefit of the organization, undertaken on their own initiative, going beyond the scope of their job duties, not included in the formal compensation system, and beneficial to the organization (Organ, 1988 in: Organ 1997, p. 86). It takes two forms: interpersonal organizational citizenship behavior (e.g., resolving interpersonal conflicts) and organization-directed citizenship behavior (e.g., preventing problems within the organization) (Podsakoff et al., 2000; Sacket et al., 2006). Factors that influence citizenship behavior within an organization include the behavior of supervisors (e.g. leadership style), the characteristics of job tasks (e.g. task complexity), organizational characteristics (e.g. organizational climate), and individual characteristics (e.g. age, gender, job satisfaction, work engagement, sense of organizational justice, personality dispositions: experienced emotions, self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence). Work-related stressors, including social stressors, are also among the determinants of OCB (Glińska-Neweś & Lis, 2016; Podsakoff et al., 2000; Sackett at al., 2006). Counterproductive work behavior (CWB), also referred to as workplace deviance (Pletzer, 2021; Robinson & Bennett, 1995), are voluntary behaviors caused by employees that violate organizational norms and harm the organization and its members (Robinson & Bennett, 1995, p. 556). Contributing factors include those related to the leader, organizational characteristics, job stress, and individual traits (Glińska-Neweś & Lis, 2016). Counterproductive work behaviors include those directed against the organization (e.g., sabotage, theft) and interpersonal counterproductive behaviors (e.g., aggression toward coworkers) (Sackett et al., 2006). The latter group includes workplace bullying, defined as frequent and prolonged negative behavior by coworkers toward another employee, intended to or resulting in a deterioration of that employee's professional situation and/or distress (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010). These two constructs involve similar behaviors but are not identical. Mobbing is a narrower concept encompassing acts directed at an employee that target both their personal sphere (e.g. humiliation and ridicule) and their professional duties (e.g. withholding important information) (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997). The relationship between negative acts and counterproductive behaviors appears to be bidirectional. Experiencing aggressive behavior from coworkers can lead an individual to retaliate with counterproductive behavior (Luong & Ha, 2023; Qiu et al., 2025; Tam et al., 2023). Employees who harm the company and their coworkers may trigger bullying behavior from their peers (Roh et al., 2022). In light of social exchange theory, the interrelationships between CWB, negative acts, and OCB can be considered a kind of spiral of reciprocal exchanges (Cropanzano & Homans, 1961, as cited in Tittenbrun, 1981; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This thesis is supported by research findings indicating negative associations between negative acts or counterproductive behaviors with citizenship behaviors (Chen et al., 2025) and positive associations between counterproductive behaviors and negative acts (Coyne et al., 2012).

Organizational Behavior and Employee Age

Many previous studies indicate a negative association between age and counterproductive behavior (Czarnota-Bojarska, 2015; Litwin & Białas, 2021;

Ng & Feldman, 2008; Pletzer, 2021; Pletzer et al., 2023) and a positive relationship with citizenship behavior (Paliga et al., 2015; Pletzer, 2021; Singh & Singh, 2010). This relationship is not the rule when it comes to citizenship behavior: counterproductive behavior appears to correlate more strongly with employees' age than citizenship behavior does (Pletzer, 2021). Theoretical justifications are sought in the theories of psychosocial development by Erik Erikson (Gruszczyńska-Malec & Waligora, 2019) and career development by Donald Super (Singh & Singh, 2010). These theories contrast a young individual's focus on climbing the career ladder and professional development with an older employee's focus on career stability and prioritizing the quality of social relationships (Paliga et al., 2015). According to L. Carstensen's theory of socio-emotional selectivity (Carstensen, 2021; Singh & Singh, 2010), as people age, their life-span perspective shortens. This means that older employees are more focused on achieving emotional goals than younger ones. This may offer another way to explain the differences in the relationship between age and organizational citizenship behavior and counterproductive work behavior. Another explanation for this relationship involves differences in work engagement, which is higher among older employees (Ikemizu et al., 2024), and changes in personality trait intensity with age. These changes include an increase in conscientiousness and agreeableness and a decrease in neuroticism (Pletzer, 2021; Pletzer et al., 2023), as well as lower intensity of negative emotions and greater emotional regulation among older employees (Gross et al., 1997; Ng & Feldman, 2008). Considering the aforementioned generational differences in work-related values and attitudes, as well as the relationship between age and various organizational behaviors, and assuming that organizational citizenship behavior and counterproductive work behavior can be viewed as reciprocity for negative acts experienced, the following research question was formulated: Does age moderate the relationship between experiencing negative acts at work and employees' engagement in citizenship and counterproductive work behaviors? As there are few published studies that consider the impact of age on the relationship between negative workplace behaviour (mobbing) and organisational behavior, it was decided that a directional hypothesis would not be formulated. Instead, an exploratory approach was adopted.

Method

Study Design

A cross-sectional, anonymous questionnaire-based survey was conducted in the spring of 2025 in northern Poland. The sample was non-representative; the survey was conducted as part of a master's seminar led by the author and formed part of a broader research project. A total of n = 285 employees representing the medical, educational, and commercial sectors participated in the study. The mean age of the study participants was M = 42.92, SD = 9.77, min. = 23 years; max. = 66 years; mean length of employment was M = 20.08, SD = 9.93,

min. = 1; max. = 47. The study included n = 193 (67.7%) women. Each study participant was assigned to a generational group based on the following criterion (Twenge, 2024): Generation Z, n = 29 (individuals up to age 30); Generation Y, n = 147 (individuals aged 31 to 45); Generation X, n = 109 (aged 46 and older); since only n = 7 participants represented the oldest generation, the baby boomers (born before 1965), it was decided to include them in the Generation X group. The power analyses, calculated post hoc using G*Power (version 3.1.9.7) for n = 285, three predictors, at α = .05 and an effect size of f = 0.15, was 1-ß = 0.99. The power analysis was also checked for groups selected based on age at α = .05, an effect size of f = 0.15, and one predictor. For both the Generation X and Generation Y groups, the test power was 1-ß > 0.99. The Group Z sample was smaller and the test power analysis output for this group was weaker at 1-ß = 0.52. While a small sample size only allows strong statistical effects to be detected (Green, 1991), the analysis was nevertheless conducted for this group, in line with Stevens's (2009) recommendations that the minimum sample size for regression analysis with a single predictor should be at least n = 15.

Research Tools

The *Organizational Citizenship Behavior Questionnaire* and the *Counterproductive Work Behavior Questionnaire* (Czarnota-Bojarska, 2011, 2015) were used to measure organizational behaviors. The reliability of both measures in this study was good, with McDonald's omega = .97 for the *Organizational Citizenship Behavior Questionnaire* and McDonald's omega = .93 for *the Counterproductive Work Behavior Questionnaire*. To measure the intensity of negative acts experienced by study participants, the *Negative Acts Questionnaire* (NAQ) (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Warszewska-Makuch, 2007) was used. The NAQ enables the intensity of both work-related and person-related negative acts to be determined (McDonald's omega = .90 and .94, respectively).

Statistical Analysis Method

The analysis of the collected data was preceded by an examination of the descriptive statistics and the distribution properties of the studied variables. The skewness of the distributions fell within the acceptable range of ±2.0 (George & Mallery, 2021), with only the distributions of the variables „sabotage" and „negative acts" exceeding this range. Given the satisfactory sample size (n = 285), Pearson's r coefficient was used to test the correlations among the variables under study; for samples with n > 100, this coefficient is fairly robust to violations of the assumption of a normal distribution (Bishara & Hittner, 2012; Havlicek & Peterson, 1977). Descriptive statistics and correlations for the variables under study are presented in Table 1 (p. 127). To examine the moderating role of age in the relationship between negative acts and organizational behaviors, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted after first checking for outliers. Scatter

plots did not indicate the presence of outliers and influential observations; the shape of the regression lines for the tested models did not suggest nonlinearity in the relationships under study. The first set of analyses focused on the dependent variable of organizational citizenship behavior, while the second focused on the dependent variable of counterproductive work behavior. In the first step of the regression analysis, age and negative acts were introduced as predictors; in the second step, an interaction term based on standardised predictors was added. Significant interaction effects were verified separately for employee groups X, Y and Z. For each model tested in the regression analysis, multicollinearity among the predictors was checked. The values of the multicollinearity statistics in each model fell within the range VIF < 2.0 and tolerance coefficient > 0.1, indicating low correlation among the predictors. The results of the regression analyses are presented in Tables 2 (p. 129) and 3 (p. 130). Significant interaction effects for the three generational groups are illustrated in Figures 1a and 1b (p. 128). The calculations were performed using PS IMAGO SPSS 29.

Results

A positive, significant association was observed between the intensity of negative acts and engagement in counterproductive work behaviors, and a negative association with engagement in citizenship behaviors. In the case of citizenship behaviors, this relationship was significant but weak; in the case of counterproductive behaviors, it was moderate. As in the studies cited earlier, the frequency of citizenship behaviors correlated weakly but significantly negatively with the frequency of employees' engagement in counterproductive behaviors. A positive relationship was also found between age and citizenship behavior, and a negative relationship with counterproductive behavior. Contrary to the results obtained in other studies (Einarsen & Skogstadt, 1996), the relationship between age and the experienced intensity of negative acts was negative.

The significant association between negative acts and organizational behavior provided the basis for investigating the moderating role of age. In the case of organizational citizenship behavior, age did not act as a moderator. Although the models with an interaction term fit the data well [person-related negative acts $F(3, 281) = 6.60$, $p < .001$; work-related negative acts $F(3, 281) = 6.68$, $p < .001$], the interaction term was not statistically significant for either type of negative behavior (person-related $\beta = .008$, $p = .892$; work-related $\beta = .058$, $p = .357$). For counterproductive work behaviors (overall score), a statistically significant moderation effect of age emerged (person-related negative acts: $F(3, 281) = 35.03$, $p < .001$, $\beta = -.150$, $p = .007$; work-related negative acts $F(3, 281) = 42.78$, $p < .001$, $\beta = -.161$, $p = .003$), models with an interaction term explained 26% (person-related) and 31% (work-related) of the variance in counterproductive behavior, respectively. Significant interaction effects were verified separately in each generational group, yielding a good fit to the data for all tested models (person-related negative acts: Generation X ($\beta = .350$, $p < .001$), Generation Y ($\beta = .344$, $p < .001$);

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Between the Studied Variables (Pearson's r); All Correlation Coefficients Are Statistically Significant at the p < .05 Level

	M	***SD***	***Sk***	***Kurt***	***K–S***	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**
OCB (1)	3.40	0.67	–0.87	1.81	.07									
CWB (2)	1.60	0.51	1.54	3.31	.12	–.23								
Aggression (3)	1.53	0.54	1.80	4.12	.17	–.20	.92							
Theft (4)	1.66	0.69	1.30	2.18	.17	–.18	.82	.69						
Unproductiveness (5)	1.64	0.58	1.30	2.05	.14	–.23	.92	.79	.69					
Sabotage (6)	1.17	0.45	3.53	14.50	.46	–.26	.70	.70	.56	.59				
Withdrawal (7)	1.91	0.74	0.77	–0.18	.13	–.18	.78	.56	.65	.67	.37			
Negat_work (8)	1.41	0.61	2.29	6.53	.25	–.20	.50	.56	.37	.48	.42	.32		
Negat_pers (9)	1.32	0.58	2.74	8.23	.29	–.22	.45	.47	.32	.42	.42	.23	.83	
Age (10)	42.92	9.77	0.17	–0.81	.08	.17	–.30	–.24	–.27	–.28	–.28	–.28	–.23	–. 17

Note. OCB – citizenship work behavior; CWB – counterproductive work behavior; Negat_work – work-related negative acts; Negat_pers – person-related negative acts; Sk – skewness; Kurt – kurtosis; K–S – Kolmogorov–Smirnov normality test result – all K–S test values are significant at the p < .01 level.

Generation Z (β = .721, $p < .001$); work-related negative acts: Generation X (β = .392, $p < .001$), Generation Y (β = .371, $p < .001$), Generation Z (β = .815, $p < .001$). The interactions are illustrated in Figures 1a and 1b.

Figure 1a

The Interaction Between Age and Person-Related Negative Acts

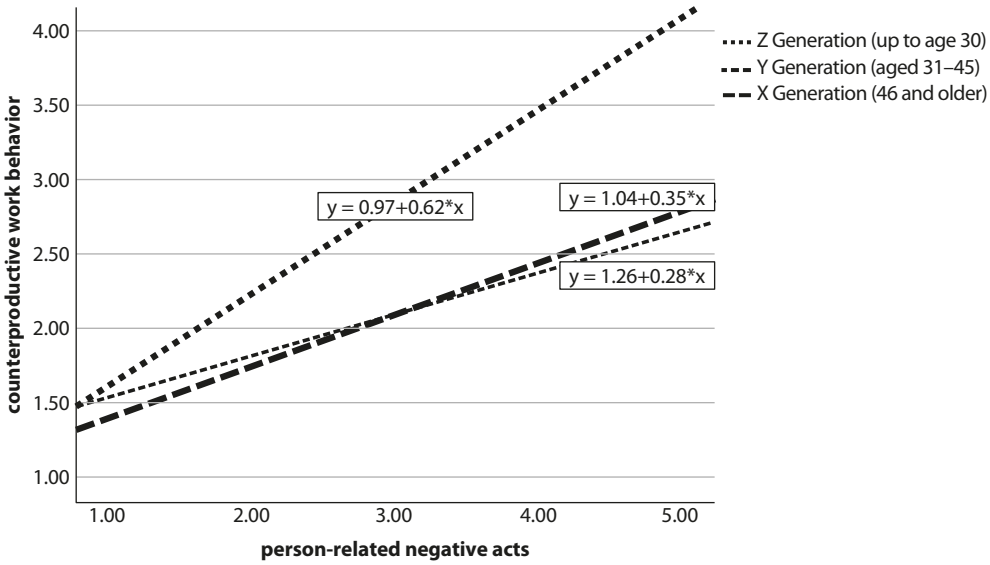
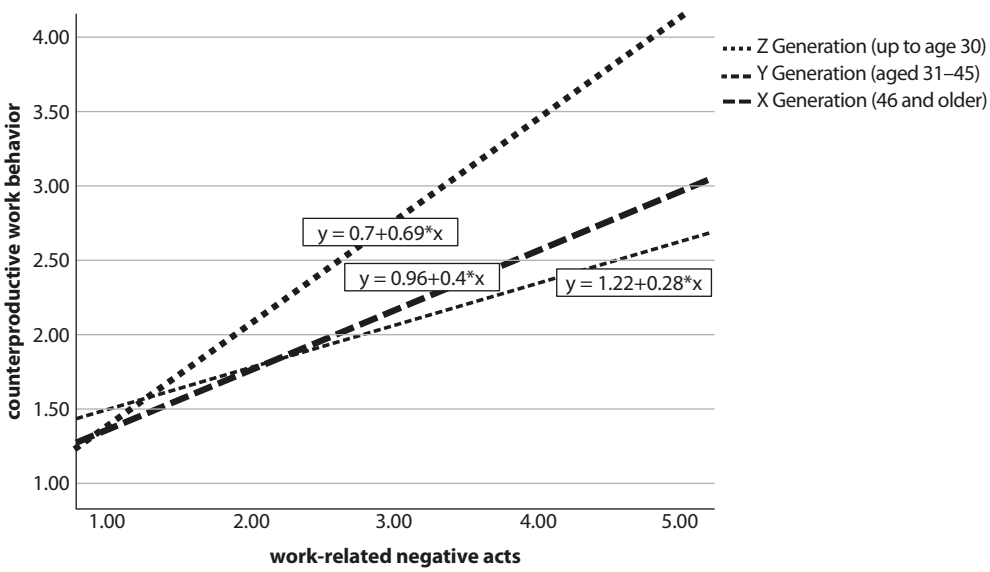


Figure 1b

The Interaction Between Age and Work-Related Negative Acts



As the intensity of negative acts increased, so did the frequency of counterproductive behavior among all study participants. However, this trend was most pronounced among Generation Z employees. An analysis of the moderating role of age was conducted for all types of counterproductive behavior and yielded significant interaction effects for four types (see Table 2). It is also worth noting that age more often moderated work-related negative acts than person-related ones. Table 3 (p. 130) presents an in-depth analysis for each generation separately.

The interaction observed for both types of negative acts and counterproductive work behaviors was analogous to the effects illustrated in Figures 1a and 1b (p. 128). When negative acts were very intense, Generation Z employees were significantly more likely to engage in counterproductive behaviors than employees from Generations X and Y. It is also worth noting that there was a slightly stronger association between both types of negative acts and counterproductive behaviors among Generation X employees than among Generation Y employees. When negative acts were of low intensity, employees from all three generations analyzed exhibited counterproductive behavior with similar frequency.

Table 2

The Moderating Role of Age in the Relationship Between Negative Acts and Counterproductive Behaviors Across the Entire Study Group (n = 285)

Negat_pers * age	**Aggression**	**Theft**	**Unproductiveness**	**Sabotage**	**Withdrawal**
F	34.38***	18.43***	27.71***	37.56***	12.33***
ß	–.148	–.148	–.092	–.301	–.083
p	< .001	.012	.106	< .001	.174
R^2	.26	.16		.28	
ΔR^2	.018	.018		.064	
Negat_work * age	**Aggression**	**Theft**	**Unproductiveness**	**Sabotage**	**Withdrawal**
F	34.35***	21.82***	34.65***	37.11**	16.13***
ß	–.163	–.143	–.116	–.301	–.071
p	.003	.015	.038	< .001	.239
R^2	.28	.17	.26	.28	
ΔR^2	.022	.017	.011	.076	

Note. Negat_pers – person-related negative acts; Negat_work – work-related negative acts; R^2 – adjusted; ß – standardized regression coefficient.

Discussion

The question posed in the title of this study can be answered in the affirmative, though with great caution: experiencing negative acts at work is associated

Table 3

Negative Acts and Counterproductive Behaviors Among Employees from Generations X, Y, and Z

		Generation X (n = 109)			Generation Y (n = 147)			Generation Z (n = 29)		
		F	β	R^2	F	β	R^2	F	β	R^2
Negat_pers	Aggression	18.30***	.382***	.15	22.56***	.367***	.14	35.84***	.755***	.57
	Theft	7.69**	.259**	.07	3.88	.161		28.32***	.716***	.51
	Sabotage	16.27***	.363***	.13	9.57***	.294***	.06	37.85***	.764***	.57
Negat_work	Aggression	22.51***	.417***	.17	23.25***	.372***	.14	49.70***	.805***	.65
	Theft	10.20***	.295**	.09	6.93**	.212**	.05	38.50***	.767***	.59
	Sabotage	9.10**	.280**	.08	7.32**	.219**	.05	43.24***	.785***	.62
	Unproductiveness	17.12***	.371***	.14	21.34***	.385***	.13	45.33***	.792***	.63

Note. Negat_pers – person-related negative acts; Negat_work – work-related negative acts; R^2 – adjusted; ß – standardized regression coefficient.

with counterproductive work behavior among all employees, but most strongly among members of Generation Z. The relationship linking negative experiences to counterproductive behaviors was weakest (and occurred least frequently) among Generation Y employees. Generation Z employees are generally characterized by poorer emotional regulation, a greater tendency toward negative affect, a lower need for social approval, and lower organizational commitment (Liang et al., 2022; Twenge, 2024; Twenge & Campbell, 2008), which could partially explain the observed difference. In contrast, Generation Y employees are in the middle stage of their career development and stabilization (Singh & Singh, 2010) and place greater emphasis on developing and strengthening their professional standing. Age did not moderate the relationship between negative acts and organizational citizenship behaviors. Instead, age correlated significantly with OCB and weakly with the experience of negative acts. The latter relationship, however, has not been consistently confirmed by other researchers (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Jaakson & Dedova, 2023). Based on the results of this study, it is possible that age explains the relationship between negative acts and organizational citizenship behaviors rather than defining the conditions under which it occurs. In other words, age may act as a mediator rather than a moderator, and this role may be more complex (e.g. it occurs through the regulation of emotions and work engagement; cf. Szwiec, 2022). Since this study was exploratory rather than explanatory, the above suggestions serve as a starting point for further inquiry. In summary, understanding the role of age in the relationship between negative acts and organizational behavior may be useful in psychological practice. It provides a relatively simple explanation of this relationship, though it may be overly simplified. The moderating role of age revealed in the

study group may reflect the influence of age-related factors that were not controlled for in this study, such as emotions experienced at work, the ability to regulate those emotions, self-esteem, and work engagement. Age-related factors and their interactions may explain the observed relationship differently across age groups. To broaden our understanding of the factors influencing the organizational behavior of Generations X, Y, and Z employees, it would be worthwhile to consider age-related factors specific to each group.

A weakness of the presented study, aside from its correlational nature, is the small sample size of the Generation Z group, which made it impossible to apply more advanced statistical analysis methods, such as SEM. Using a single factor of citizenship behavior rather than indicators of different types of citizenship behaviors limited the detail of the collected data. However, Sackett et al. (2006) allow for the use of a single, general indicator of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and counterproductive work behavior (CWB). This study's strengths include providing comparative data for further analysis and proposing hypothetical pathways linking the experience of negative workplace acts to counterproductive and citizenship behaviors among Generation X, Y, and Z employees.

The results may be valuable for school career counseling. They indicate the need to strengthen students' emotional and social competencies for those who will be future employees. The results will also be useful for career counselors working with unemployed adults and job seekers at labor market institutions. They foster a better understanding of the professional adaptation challenges of clients of various ages. The results may also help employers manage human resources amid ongoing demographic changes, such as generational diversity within a company. Understanding the differences in organizational behavior between Generations X, Y, and Z and the underlying factors is one of the challenges in psychological practice. The presented findings may help understand these differences, at least in part.

Declarations

Declaration of conflict of interest
The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship or publication of this article. The author has no financial or non-financial interests that require disclosure, nor any competing interests related to the content of the article. The author confirms that she is not affiliated with, nor involved in the activities of any organisation or entity that might have a financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Entities that contributed to the publication and their contribution
Not applicable

Ethical approval
This study received a favorable opinion from the Research Ethics Committee of the Ateneum Academy in Gdańsk, No. 2/2025.

Data availability statement
The data may be made available to other researchers upon a justified request addressed directly to the author.

Financing statement
Not applicable

Statements and declarations regarding the use of AI
In preparing this article, the author used AI-based tools solely to translate the manuscript from Polish into English, a hybrid translation involving an initial translation by AI (DeepL), followed by linguistic verification by a human English language specialist. The author takes full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

Declaration of authors' contributions to the manuscript
Anna Skuzińska (sole author): Conceptualization, Data Management, Formal Analysis, Research, Methodology, Project Management, Resources, Oversight, Validation, Visualization, Writing – First Draft, Writing – Review and Editing.

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