

4. ZETGENERATION – SMILE, EMPATHY, THERAPY. THE OPPORTUNITIES OF ART AND EDUCATION REGARDING DEPRESSION AMONG GENERATION Z PREADOLESCENTS

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Abstract: *Concurrent global events such as political changes, natural disasters, climatic changes, protests, wars, and pandemics are factors that help with defining a generation. What are the characteristics of Generation Z and what are the problems its members face? Preadolescence is a period during which individuals strongly feel the need to reflect deeply on what is happening to them. Several questions arise: “Who am I? Am I a normal person? Am I a competent person? Am I worthy of being loved?”¹⁹¹; “How do I manage my emotions (e.g. fear, anger, and sadness)?”. Anxiety and depression disorders are two of the most common issues that arise during adolescence. The project ZETgeneration - Smile, Empathy, Therapy aims to facilitate access to culture for generation Z preadolescents affected by depression disorders, with the help of art and therapy. This is achieved through four contemporary art productions based on interviews and questionnaires conducted with 300 children from Iași. This article, an interdisciplinary perspective between art, education and mental health, explores how cinema, theater, and art therapy can prevent depression and encourage conversations between adults and children on topics related to mental health.*

Key words: *depression, preadolescence, generation Z, performance, Iași*

1. Introduction

One of the oldest forms of criticism of youth behaviour is attributed to the ancient philosopher Socrates, who argued that: “The children nowadays love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt the authority; show disrespect for the elders and love chatter in place of exercise”¹⁹². Conflicts between adults and children are, metaphorically speaking, older than the oceans. Poet Khalil Gibran wrote: “Your children are not your children / They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself / They come through you, but not from you, and even if they are with you, they don’t belong to you”¹⁹³. The emotional growth of a child is not something you can observe, unlike their physical growth.

Children need Socratic conversations. They need to be allowed to make their own choices, and they desire for more profound challenges in their lives and education, other than: “What was your grade in maths today? Look at me when I’m talking to you; Do you even bother listening to me? You are addicted to technology; What do you know about being stressed out? You have no reason to feel depressed; Do as I told you to! You’ve never walked in my shoes! God knows where you’ve been fooling around! That’s the reason you get bad grades; You are acting like you are staying at a hotel, not your house.”

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¹⁹² Dean Burnett, *Creierul mic despre creierul mare*, Translated by Loredana Bucuroaia, Publishing House BAROQUE BOOKS & ARTS, Bucharest, 2020, p. 10

¹⁹³ Khalil Gibran, *Profetul*, Translated by Radu Carneci, Publishing House, MIX, Bucharest, 2000, p. 21

This article promotes arts as an instrument of meditation and community action, an interdisciplinary approach, which links theatre, visual arts, cinema, psychology and sociology in order to help preadolescents from the city of Iași develop their self-knowledge capacity and build a healthy relationships with self and others, through the project *ZETgeneration - Smile, Empathy, Therapy*¹⁹⁴. This project also concerns parents and teachers, local community members and the general public, via a set of integrated actions designed to be implemented simultaneously in Romania (Iași city) and Norway (Oslo area).

To that end, four contemporary artworks have been produced: a medium-length film, called *My Couch/My coach*, a performance called *Generația Zet. Story al unui Suferman cu Glugă*, an art installation created in Romania, named *Recul*, with another similar artwork to be produced in Norway in 2024, as part of a mirrored experiment, and, finally, a series of art therapy workshops¹⁹⁵. In this article, I will describe the impact of this manifesto, in which “art aims to make a difference” at a community level, and I will also draw conclusions from this small case study, which could help open up a new line of research.

2. Preadolescents in the city of depression

Life, for some people, for certain reasons, can be described as an emotional roller coaster. However, emotions, as they are defined today, began to be analysed after 1830¹⁹⁶. There are as many different definitions as there are researchers, and even more because people often change their minds. In short, emotion is defined as “the term we use to encompass everything we understand as feelings, moods, pleasures, pains, passions, sensations, and desires”¹⁹⁷.

Adolescents often struggle to manage their emotions, especially anger, fear, and sadness, which makes the transition to anxiety and depression a fairly small step. Approximately 280 million people worldwide suffer from depression. 700,000 young people aged 15 to 29 commit suicide every year, due to depression¹⁹⁸. This many people could fill a city, a city of depression. Early-onset depression can have significant effects.

The numbers do not reflect reality because this mental illness is often reported late, parents being convinced that the emotional state that the adolescent is experiencing are specific to the age and temporary. In Romania, some parents are unable to recognise depressive symptoms, while others do not take them seriously. There are also parents who consider that having their children see a psychologist is something to be ashamed of.

As far as schools are concerned, little is done to support children’s mental health (prevention and intervention), because of the lack of basic teacher’s training in this regard and because of the shortage in qualified school psychologists. In the

¹⁹⁴ The *ZETgeneration – Zâmbet, Empatie, Terapie*, project cit.

¹⁹⁵ The official website of the project where all activities are described in detail is: <https://zetgeneration.ro/>. Link accessed on 4 Oct. 2023

¹⁹⁶ Jane O’Grady, Review of *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category; The Navigation of Feeling: A framework for the History of Emotions*, by T. Dixon & W. M. Reddy, *Philosophy*, vol. 80, no. 311, 2005, pp. 156–59. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4619635>. Accessed on 4 Oct. 2023

¹⁹⁷ *Ibidem*

¹⁹⁸ Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation. Global Health Data Exchange, specifically: <https://vizhub.healthdata.org/gbd-results/>. Accessed on 4 Oct. 2023

municipality of Iași, for example, in the year 2019, a total of 45,256 children were enrolled in Pre-University Education, of which 11,774 were enrolled in Middle/Lower-Secondary Education (Gymnazium)¹⁹⁹.

Regarding the current extent of counselling provision in schools, currently there are only 55 school counsellors available to offer counselling services to pupils²⁰⁰, meaning that there is one counsellor for over 800 children. Moreover, depression and anxiety have been heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic²⁰¹. In this regard, experts recommend a proper evaluation of adolescents, as it is known that they can easily dissimulate their symptoms.

3. Generation Z, Generation iGen or Generation DITTO²⁰²

The concept of generation is a sociological one. “A generation includes individuals who live in the same time span and have roughly the same age, acquire common characteristics generated by living similar experiences, have a common history and economy, and are shaped by similar technological and social conditions”²⁰³. Its representatives are born around the same time and have similar behaviours, they share some common memories from the context in which they live, and they have a common culture.

Generation Z has over twenty-five names²⁰⁴ and is known to have been born between 1995 and 2010. In Romania, Generation Z is considered part of the post-communist generation (1990-2015). iGeneration, Centennials, or “digital natives” represent approximately 2.47 billion of the global population and 25% of the US population²⁰⁵. Representatives of this generation have a special dialogue with brands, are very interested in understanding the world around them, and are tech-savvy. They had an online childhood, devices are omnipresent, and they are a high-tech generation, which is why this generation is also called the iGen. This has given rise to two new concepts, namely FOMO (fear of missing out) and JOMO (joy of missing out), born from the desire to always stay connected to what others are doing.

The most prominent influencer representing Generation Z is Kylie Jenner (333 million followers on Instagram). Living offline creates a state of anxiety; they have few face-to-face interactions, which also results in a low level of empathy. They communicate more in writing, using a language based on images and signs. They have developed what psychologist Howard Gardner calls “visual-spatial intelligence”²⁰⁶ and possess visual thinking, combining lateral thinking and vertical thinking. Young people of Generation Z suffer from accelerated thinking syndrome,

¹⁹⁹ Information available at: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/>. Accessed on 4 Oct. 2023

²⁰⁰ Information available at: <http://www.cjrae-iasi.ro/info/cjap/echipa>. Accessed on 4 Oct. 2023

²⁰¹ Information available at: <https://www.unicef.org/romania/ro>. Accessed on 4 Oct. 2023

²⁰² Generation DITTO (Diversity, Individualism, Teamwork, Technology, Organizational Support), expression used by Elena Bonchiș, in „Generația Z. Educație și vulnerabilități”, in *Parenting de la A la Z. 83 de teme provocatoare pentru părinții de azi*, Georgeta Pânișoară (coord.), Publishing House Polirom, Iași, 2022, p. 116

²⁰³ Çalıș, kan, C. (2021), “Sustainable tourism: gen Z?”, *Journal of Multidisciplinary Academic Tourism*, Vol. 6 No. 2, pp. 107-115, doi: 10.31822/jomat.2021-6-2-107

²⁰⁴ Idem, p. 116.

²⁰⁵ Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Population Prospects 2022. Summary of Results*, UN DESA/POP/2021/TR/NO. 3, United Nations New York, 2022, specifically: https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/wpp2022_summary_of_results.pdf. Accessed on 4 Oct. 2023

²⁰⁶ Çalıș, kan, C., op. cit., p. 118

exhibit multitasking behavior, which causes some to suffer from attention deficit. They are concerned about the environment and are focused on academic performance. 50% of them want to build their own start-up, to travel, to have financial independence and be in control of managing their time.

4. *Blue Monday* vs. “Tomorrow is Monday. It makes me feel depressed”

The project *ZETgeneration - Smile, Empathy, Therapy* started with the development of a methodology for selecting pilot schools, where interviews and questionnaires were to be conducted with approximately 300 preadolescents. University professor and psychologist dr. Ovidiu Gavrilovici, and sociologist Virgil Leițoiu, both specialists involved in the project, selected ten pilot groups from the educational units in Iași, in collaboration with the School County Inspectorate, respectively nine groups from the state schools in Iași (normal) and a special school, where children with disabilities are enrolled.

The interviews were conducted in schools with the consent of directors, teachers and parents. Initially it was important for us to evaluate the adolescent’s perspective on depression, as in their responses they use expressions such as “the math teacher makes me feel depressed”, “tomorrow is Monday, it makes me feel depressed”. Here are some of their responses. When I think of depression, I think of: “a snow-filled glass globe that has been shaken, like a Christmas one, with a person inside”; “a withered flower”; “a cube, not material, physical, but like a hologram in space”; “rain”; “stacks of white papers with folded corners”; “an abandoned cat”; “an eclipse”; “autumn”; “a broken hourglass from which the sand has poured out”; “a mental illness”.

Depression has been associated with colours such as dark blue, black, pink, aurora borealis, dark green, orange, and navy blue. A symptom of depression is sadness. When I am sad: “I go into my room and isolate myself from everyone”, “I put on my headphones and listen to music”, “I want to be alone”, “I withdraw from others and try to forget”, “I need a hug to feel safe”, “I cry”, “I have thoughts impossible to imagine”, “I smoke and listen to music”, “I think about running away from home. About suicide”, “I think about what I did to make myself feel sad”, “I escape into my thoughts”.

5. Depression among young people from Iași expressed through art, film and devised theatre

Regarding the level of cultural consumption of Romanian people, relevant for the project is the study *Cultural Barometer 2019*: The consumption of culture in Romania is five times lower than the European average. Romanians spend an average of €27 per person per year for culture, while the European average is five times higher²⁰⁷. The proposed project aims to increase the degree of access to culture for consumers from Romania and Norway, who will be able to participate in some of the cultural activities we have proposed. The interviews and questionnaire responses of the preadolescents from Iasi were a source of inspiration for creating four artistic productions, which have in common the theme of depressive disorders

²⁰⁷ Information available at: <https://www.culturadata.ro/barometrul-deconsum-cultural-2019-experienta-si-practicile-culturale-de-timp-liber>. Accessed on 4 Oct. 2023

among Generation Z.

The medium-length film *My Couch / My Coach*²⁰⁸ presents the perspective of twelve preadolescents on depression, is filmed in unconventional spaces in Iasi and has as a yellow couch as a binder (as most of them stated that this is the colour of happiness). The film is available online and runs as part of the installation artwork made within the same project that is exhibited in the foyer of Iași National Athenaeum. The soundtrack was created by the partner from Norway - DAC Music Performance, an association coordinated by Dragoș Andrei-Cantea. One of the questions in the questionnaires addressed to preadolescents was: “What object do you associate depression with?”, so a long list of objects and natural phenomena inspired the installation art called *Recul* made by plastic artist Alexandru Grigoraș.

The following objects were selected from the pupils' list: ax, bed, light bulb, scissors, key, padlock, cube, knife. They are placed in a circular box made of glass and mirror, which through a series of LEDs creates an effect of infinity, multiplying the thoughts in our mind. The round shape that forms the basis of the installation takes the shape of an eye. We are challenged to look deeply through the retina which, due to the materials used, projects a collective and unique unconscious, from where the mirror pushes these objects out.

The image of an (androgynous) child stands above this circular box, a black sculpture, a man emptied of colour, with colour being a metaphor for positive emotions. Caught in a rope, as a symbol of strangulation, the man stretches out a hand to the sky, thus asking for help. This image is enclosed in a circular Plexiglas that has portions of wire in the upper part meant to give the outline of a brain on which the led strips resemble a neural network. Depression is a *Recul*²⁰⁹.

The performance called *Generația Zet. Story al unui Suferman cu Glugă* was created on the principle of devised theater by four actors, namely Andrei Sava, Bianca Ioan, Sorin Cimbru and Cezara Fantu. Following the case study, based on the answers received, the four performers created a supporting text. The main situations were selected according to the place where pre-adolescents spend most of their time, respectively: “At Home”, “At School”, “Between School and Home”. Additionally, “A Solution” was inserted, a scene featuring a therapist's office.

The performance has become a lesson, as in this interactive show revolving around emotions and how to manage them the audience can vote, using two cards, one red and one green, the emotion with which they want to continue the scene. The voting moment is based on the message “You choose!” as a reminder that you can choose the emotion you use in a situation in your life.

The performance has two directions, one of an informative-educational nature in terms of the psychological perspective on emotions, and the other one proposing a strictly interpretative-dramatic text. These cultural products are available to the public free of charge. At the end of each performance, attendees can sign up for a series of art therapy workshops at no cost.

²⁰⁸ The film can be viewed by accessing: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWswQ_B8B70. Link accessed on Oct. 4, 2023

²⁰⁹ Kickback

2. Conclusions

Non-formal and informal education helps to clarify the values that young people have or wish to acquire at this stage, which is a tumultuous one from an affective and behavioural point of view. It is important to support them to “become healthy adults” in order to prevent certain mental illnesses. There is an emerging interdisciplinary field of arts and health aimed at integrating the arts on individual and community level as “participation in artistic and cultural activities is significantly associated with good health and high life satisfaction”²¹⁰.

The arts contribute to a range of profound cognitive, emotional and behavioural changes. “What is emotion?” is as complex a question as “What is blue?”²¹¹, “Who am I?” is humanity’s greatest challenge, a question we answer throughout our lives because we keep “becoming”. We are always rediscovering ourselves and trying to understand ourselves as well as the others. Social complexity has helped us to evolve as we have lived in groups to survive. Young people need to learn that. Man is a social being or whatever that means.

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