

Exploring Generational Differences in Coping with Stress, Personal Growth Initiatives, and Attitudes Towards Mental Health Counseling

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Abstract

This study explores generational differences in coping with stress, personal growth initiatives, and attitudes toward mental health counseling by comparing Generation X and Generation Z. Using a purposive sampling method, data were collected through validated scales, including the Attitudes Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPHS), Personal Growth Initiative Scale-II (PGIS-II), and Coping Scale. Statistical analyses revealed significant generational variations. Generation X demonstrated a greater reliance on problem-solving and pragmatic coping strategies, while Generation Z favored social support, mindfulness, and expressive coping approaches ($U = 2588$, $p < .001$, rank biserial correlation = -0.482). Personal growth initiatives also differed significantly ($U = 2031$, $p < .001$, rank biserial correlation = -0.594), with Generation X prioritizing structured, career-driven growth and Generation Z emphasizing emotional well-being and self-exploration. Additionally, attitudes toward mental health counseling varied notably, with Generation Z displaying greater openness to seeking professional psychological help than Generation X ($t(198) = -5.50$, $p < .001$). These findings highlight the evolving nature of psychological behaviors across generations, emphasizing the importance of tailored interventions.

Keywords: Generational differences, coping strategies, personal growth, mental health counseling,

1. Introduction

In today's fast-paced and interconnected world, individuals face increasing stressors arising from academic, occupational, and social demands. With growing global awareness of mental health, it has become highly important to understand how people manage stress, pursue personal growth, and seek psychological support. These psychological processes, however, are not uniform across age groups; rather, they are shaped by generational values, technological environments, and socio-cultural experiences.

Generational theory suggests that the shared historical, cultural, and technological contexts during formative years influence psychological traits, values, and behaviors across age cohorts (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Generation X (born 1965–1980), raised during a time of economic transition and limited mental health discourse, is often associated with resilience, independence, and structured professional growth (Gursoy et al., 2008; Golberstein et al., 2008). In contrast, Generation Z (born 1996–2012) has matured in a digitally saturated environment characterized by inclusivity, emotional openness, and a growing destigmatization of mental health issues (Twenge et al., 2017; American Psychological Association

[APA], 2020). These differing developmental contexts may significantly shape each generation's approach to stress coping, self-development, and openness to psychological counseling.

The transactional model of stress and coping, developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), provides a foundational framework for understanding how individuals evaluate and respond to stress through problem-focused or emotion-focused strategies. Complementing this, the field of positive psychology emphasizes strengths-based functioning, personal growth, and the pursuit of well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Together, these models offer a robust lens for exploring how individuals across generations differ in their psychological responses and self-improvement efforts.

While prior research has examined generational differences in specific domains such as workplace values or digital behavior, relatively few empirical studies have explored how Generation X and Generation Z differ across multiple psychological constructs—particularly in the areas of stress coping, personal growth, and attitudes toward mental health counseling. Furthermore, there is a noticeable gap in the literature focusing on these dynamics within the Indian socio-cultural context, where generational experiences and mental health discourse are uniquely influenced by cultural norms and rapid modernization. Most existing studies tend to isolate student or employee populations, limiting the ability to understand how generational patterns manifest across life stages.

This study seeks to address these gaps by systematically comparing coping strategies, personal growth initiatives, and attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help between Generation X and Generation Z in India. By identifying cohort-specific psychological patterns, the research aims to inform the development of culturally relevant and generation-sensitive mental health interventions, educational programs, and policy initiatives.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Coping with Stress: Theoretical Foundations and Generational Patterns

The transactional model of stress and coping, developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding how individuals manage stress. This model posits that coping is a dynamic process involving cognitive appraisals and adaptive responses, typically categorized as problem-focused or emotion-focused strategies. Research suggests that coping strategies can differ based on age, life stage, and generational identity (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

Generation X, having matured during times of social and economic changes, tends to favor pragmatic, problem-solving approaches to stress (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). These individuals often display autonomy and emotional restraint, preferring to manage challenges independently. In contrast, Generation Z, raised in a digital era of hyper-connectivity and emotional expressiveness, has shown a greater reliance on emotion-focused strategies, such as mindfulness, expressive writing, and peer support (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge, 2017).

2.2 Personal Growth and Positive Psychology Across Generations

The rise of positive psychology has greatly focused on intentional self-growth, life satisfaction, and strengths-based development (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The Personal Growth Initiative Scale (PGIS) conceptualizes personal growth as an active and intentional process, influenced by both personality traits and socio-cultural environments (Robitschek et al., 2012).

Generation X often associates personal growth with career achievement, self-reliance, and stability, reflecting the values of a generation shaped by economic competitiveness and shifting work structures (Gursoy et al., 2008). Generation Z, meanwhile, emphasizes emotional well-being, work-life balance, and

self-exploration. These differences are partly attributed to the rise of mental health awareness and the normalization of self-care among younger cohorts (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020).

2.3 Attitudes Towards Mental Health Counseling

Attitudes towards seeking professional psychological help have undergone significant shifts over recent decades. The ATSPPHS has been widely used to measure openness, stigma, and help-seeking behavior (Fischer & Turner, 1970).

Older generations, including Generation X, often internalize stigma around mental health services due to cultural narratives that associate counseling with weakness or dysfunction (Golberstein et al., 2008). Conversely, Generation Z has grown up in an era of mental health destigmatization, where therapy and emotional vulnerability are increasingly seen as strengths rather than liabilities (Twenge et al., 2017). Several studies confirm that younger adults are more likely to seek counseling and show favorable attitudes toward psychological services (Rickwood et al., 2007).

2.4 Generational Research in the Indian Context

While a significant body of literature on generational psychology originates from Western contexts, there is a growing interest in examining these dynamics within India. Indian studies have highlighted how generational attitudes are influenced by a unique blend of traditional values, rapid technological advancement, and evolving cultural norms (Arora & Singh, 2019). However, research comparing Generation X and Generation Z on coping, growth, and mental health attitudes in the Indian context remains scarce.

3. Method

3.1 Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference in coping with stress between Generation X and Generation Z.
2. There is no significant difference in personal growth initiatives between Generation X and Generation Z.
3. There is no significant difference in attitudes towards mental health counseling between Generation X and Generation Z.

3.2 Research Design

This study employed a *cross-sectional quantitative survey design* to explore generational differences in stress coping strategies, personal growth initiatives, and attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help.

3.3 Participants

Participants included individuals from Generation X (aged 44–59 years) and Generation Z (aged 12–27 years). *Purposive sampling* was used to ensure participants met inclusion criteria

Inclusion Criteria

- Belonging to Generation X (44–59 years) or Generation Z (12–27 years).
- Currently employed or recently employed (Generation X).
- Currently enrolled in higher education (Generation Z).
- Proficient in English, the language in which the survey was administered.
- Regular access to internet and digital devices.
- Basic understanding of mental health concepts.
- Voluntary agreement to participate.

Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals diagnosed with severe mental health conditions.
- Generational outliers (e.g., 12–15 years and 60–63 years) to ensure developmental congruence.
- Incomplete or invalid survey responses.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by three theoretical models:

- The *Transactional Model of Stress and Coping* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which emphasizes the role of cognitive appraisal and coping strategies.
- *Positive psychology* (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), focusing on strengths, intentional growth, and psychological well-being.
- *Generational theory* (Strauss & Howe, 1991), positing that socio-historical experiences during formative years shape individual attitudes and behaviors.

3.5 Measures

Attitudes Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPHS)

The ATSPPHS (Fischer & Turner, 1970) is a 10-item scale revised from its original 29-item version. Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*disagree*) to 3 (*agree*), with higher scores indicating more favorable attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help. The revised version correlates at .87 with the original version. Internal consistency was reported as $\alpha = .84$, with test–retest reliability $r = .80$.

Personal Growth Initiative Scale–II (PGIS-II)

The PGIS-II (Robitschek et al., 2012) measures intentional personal development across four domains: Readiness for Change, Planfulness, Using Resources, and Intentional Behavior. The 16-item scale uses a 6-point Likert response format ranging from 0 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*), with higher scores reflecting greater personal growth initiative. The scale has shown strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$).

Coping Scale

The Coping Scale (Hamby, Grych, & Banyard, 2013) assesses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral coping strategies. It includes items adapted from Holahan and Moos (1987) and Spitzberg and Cupach (2008), modified for general use. The 13-item scale showed high reliability ($\alpha = .91$) and strong validity. Responses are rated on a 4-point scale; higher scores indicate greater coping. Z-scores were used in analysis.

3.6 Procedure

Data collection was conducted online. Participants were recruited via email, social media, and institutional networks. Prior to participation, they received an information sheet outlining the study's purpose, confidentiality, voluntary nature, and contact information for further inquiries. Informed consent was obtained digitally. No personally identifiable information was collected. After completing the anonymous survey, participants were debriefed and provided with mental health resource contacts. Data were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher.

3.7 Statistical Analysis

All data analyses were conducted using *Jamovi*. In **descriptive statistics**, means, standard deviations, medians, and range values were computed for each variable. Normality was assessed using the *Shapiro–Wilk test*, which indicated that coping and personal growth scores were not normally distributed. **Inferential Statistics** used, *Mann–Whitney U tests* were used to compare coping and personal growth

scores between generations due to non-normal distributions. An *independent samples t-test* was used to assess differences in attitudes toward psychological help, as the data met normality assumptions (Levene's test: $p = .704$). *Effect sizes* were calculated: Rank Biserial Correlation (for non-parametric comparisons) and *Cohen's d* (for t-tests).

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines outlined by the *American Psychological Association (APA, 2017)*:

- *Informed consent* was obtained from all participants.
- *Confidentiality* was maintained through anonymization and secure data handling.
- The principle of *non-maleficence* was upheld by minimizing participant burden and risk.
- Participants were informed of their right to withdraw without penalty and were provided with debriefing materials.
- A balanced and respectful representation of both generations was maintained.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis focused on three key variables: coping with stress, personal growth initiatives, and attitudes toward psychological help. Descriptive statistics summarize the overall trends, while inferential statistics test the hypotheses. Tables and figures are included for clarity.

Table 1 *Descriptive statistics of Coping with stress, Personal initiatives and Attitude towards psychological help*

	Generation	N	Mean	Median	SD
Coping with stress	X	100	40.6	38.0	7.36
	Z	100	34.0	35.0	6.55
Personal Initiatives	X	100	67.0	70.0	12.98
	Z	100	54.0	55.0	12.73
Attitude towards psychological help	X	100	12.7	13.0	5.66
	Z	100	17.1	16.0	5.67

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for coping with stress, personal growth initiatives, and attitudes toward seeking psychological help across Generation X and Generation Z. The findings indicate that Generation X scored higher in coping with stress ($M = 40.6$, $SD = 5.9$) compared to Generation Z ($M = 34.0$, $SD = 6.3$). Similarly, personal growth initiatives were more prevalent among Generation X ($M = 67.0$, $SD = 10.1$) than Generation Z ($M = 54.0$, $SD = 12.2$). However, Generation Z exhibited a more favorable attitude toward psychological help ($M = 17.1$, $SD = 4.1$) than Generation X ($M = 12.7$, $SD = 3.2$). These trends suggest that while Generation X may demonstrate stronger coping mechanisms and a greater engagement in personal development, Generation Z appears more open to seeking professional psychological support.

Table 2

Mann–Whitney U Test for Coping and Personal Growth

			Statistic	p			Effect Size
Coping with stress		Mann-Whitney U	2588	< .001	Rank correlation	biserial	-0.482
Personal Initiatives		Mann-Whitney U	2031	< .001	Rank correlation	biserial	-0.594

Note. $H_0: \mu_X = \mu_Z$

Normality testing for Coping with stress, Personal initiatives and Attitude towards psychological help
Table 2 reports the results of the Shapiro–Wilk test used to assess the normality of data distribution across the two generational groups. For Generation X, all three variables (coping with stress, personal growth initiatives, and attitudes toward psychological help) yielded statistically significant values ($p < .05$), indicating deviations from normality. In contrast, for Generation Z, coping with stress ($p = .113$) and attitudes toward help ($p = .281$) did not significantly deviate from normality, while personal growth initiatives did ($p = .015$). These findings justify the use of non-parametric tests—specifically the Mann–Whitney U test—for analyzing coping and personal growth data due to the non-normal distribution in Generation X.

Table 3

	Generation	N	Shapiro-Wilk	
			W	P
Coping with stress	X	100	0.881	< .001
	Z	100	0.985	0.323
Personal Initiatives	X	100	0.822	< .001
	Z	100	0.968	0.015
Attitude towards psychological help	X	100	0.963	0.007
	Z	100	0.982	0.178

Table 3 outlines the Mann–Whitney U test results comparing Generation X and Generation Z on coping with stress and personal growth initiatives. The findings reveal statistically significant differences between the two generations on both variables. For coping with stress, Generation X scored significantly higher than Generation Z ($U = 2588.00$, $p < .001$), with a medium effect size ($r = -0.482$). This supports the view

that older adults may possess more established and effective coping mechanisms, possibly due to accumulated life experience and maturity (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Generation Z's lower scores may reflect developmental challenges or the unique stressors they face, such as academic pressure and digital overstimulation. Similarly, personal growth initiatives were significantly greater among Generation X ($U = 2031.00, p < .001$), accompanied by a large effect size ($r = -0.594$). This aligns with the tenets of Positive Psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), suggesting that life stage and responsibilities may increase intrinsic motivation for growth. Generation Z, being in a transitional phase of identity development, may not yet prioritize long-term personal growth initiatives. These results underscore generational differences in stress management and self-development, potentially reflecting the influence of age, maturity, and accumulated life experiences in Generation X.

Table 4

Independent Samples t-Test for Attitude Towards Psychological Help

		Statistic	df	p
Attitude towards psychological help	Student's t	-5.50	198	< .001

Note. $H_0: \mu_X = \mu_Z$

Table 4 presents the independent samples t-test comparing attitudes toward psychological help between Generation X and Generation Z. The analysis shows a statistically significant difference in scores, $t(198) = -5.50, p < .001$, with Generation Z displaying a more positive attitude toward seeking professional psychological support. The negative t-value indicates that the mean score of Generation Z was significantly higher than that of Generation X. This finding aligns with contemporary literature suggesting that younger generations are more receptive to mental health discourse and are less influenced by stigma surrounding psychological services.

Table 5

Levene's Test for Homogeneity of Variance in Attitude Towards Psychological Help

	F	df	df2	p
Attitude towards psychological help	0.144	1	198	0.704

Note. A low p-value suggests a violation of the assumption of equal variances

Table 5 reports the results of Levene's test, which was conducted to assess the homogeneity of variances between the two generational groups concerning their attitudes toward psychological help. The result, $F(1,198) = .144, p = .704$, indicates no significant difference in variances between the groups. Since the p-value exceeds .05, the assumption of equal variances is met, validating the use of the standard independent samples t-test in this context. This supports the reliability of the earlier finding that Generation Z holds significantly more positive attitudes toward seeking psychological help.

Therefore, the findings reveal a generational difference in psychological orientations. Generation X exhibits greater capacity for stress management and self-directed growth, possibly shaped by life stability and socio-cultural expectations of resilience. Conversely, Generation Z, while more vulnerable to stress, demonstrates openness to psychological help—a progressive shift that could enhance long-term mental health outcomes. These differences reflect broader generational dynamics as conceptualized in Generational Theory and emphasize the need for age-specific psychological interventions. Empowering Gen Z with stress-reduction strategies and encouraging Gen X to adopt professional support can lead to holistic mental health development across age cohorts.

5. Conclusion and Limitations

The present study provides valuable insights into generational differences in coping with stress, personal growth initiatives, and attitudes toward psychological help among individuals from Generation X and Generation Z in Bangalore, India. The findings indicate that Generation X demonstrates significantly higher coping skills and personal growth initiative, while Generation Z shows more favorable attitudes toward seeking psychological help. These results reflect the complex interplay of developmental, cultural, and technological factors shaping generational behavior. Despite its contributions, the study has some limitations. The use of purposive sampling and a specific urban population may limit generalizability to rural or non-digital populations. Additionally, self-report measures may be influenced by social desirability bias. Future research could expand to more diverse samples and include qualitative methods to deepen understanding of the psychosocial mechanisms underlying these generational differences.

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