

# Media Figures as Adolescent Role Models: (Dis)similarities Between the Millennials and Generation Z<sup>1</sup>

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In the process of identity formation and individuation from parents, media personalities can serve as role models for adolescents. This may be the case even more so for today's adolescents (i.e., Generation Z), since they have been immersed in the new media from birth. This study examines the ways in which two generations of adolescents differ regarding the media figures they identify as role models, as well as the reasons for their admiration. The data were obtained by surveying the Millennial (n = 1283) and Generation Z (n = 1358) adolescents a decade apart. Public figures served as role models for every other Millennial, compared to three out of four Generation Z adolescents. Crosstabs analysis shows that both generations admire media celebrities most, followed by athletes, with all other types of public figures being far less represented. According to the obtained models of logistic regression, the patterns of admiration reasons are similar in both generations, with celebrities being admired for their cheerfulness, communicativeness, physical appearance, fame, and popularity. The growing influence of the new media is evident from the rising number of media figures that Generation Z identifies as role models compared to the Millennials (431 public figures named as idols by Generation Z,

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and 277 by the Millennials) and the emergence of microcelebrities, e.g., YouTubers and influencers. The Generation Z adolescents who admired microcelebrities were found to have professional aspirations in this domain.

**Keywords:** adolescence; role models; media; Gen Z; Millennials

## Introduction

Recently, distinct life goals and work ethics of Generation Z have often been debated in the media (Francis, 2022; Galarza, 2023). How different are the values of the current generation of youth compared to the one preceding it? Who do they admire, and what do they appreciate about these people? We can learn a lot about youngsters by studying their role models. For this reason, our study explores the similarities and differences between media figures as role models of two successive generations of adolescents, the Millennials and Generation Z.

## The Role of Role Models

The term “role models” refers to persons one wishes to be like, who are emulated by imitation or identification (Hutchings et al., 2008; Zirkel, 2002). One of the main developmental tasks of adolescence is identity formation, as well as attainment of autonomy through independence from parents (Erikson, 1968; Newman & Newman, 2011). Adolescents show tremendous interest in the media (Brooks, 2017), which plays a significant role in shaping their behaviour and social norms. Bandura (1969) refers to the models presented in the media as *symbolic*, contrasting them with the *actual models* from real life. He accurately predicted that the world would become highly complex and that media power would rise, thus contributing to the adolescents’ need to emulate the people outside their immediate environment (Bandura, 1969).

In the new millennium, media are indeed recognized as a powerful source of potential role models that could help adolescents to orient themselves in the world (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007; Gergely, 2016). Research from the past decade (Author, 2017; Gergely, 2014; Gleason et al., 2016) supports this argument, as media personalities make up a large majority of adolescent role models outside the family, with young people frequently turning to celebrities in search for identification figures (Bui, 2017; Click et al., 2013; Dajches, 2021; Galpin, 2016; Rarity et al., 2022).

Furthermore, media figures as adolescent role models can impact some important aspects of psychological functioning, such as mental health (Bond, 2018; Hyman & Sierra, 2010; Imran et al., 2021) or behavioural and health outcomes (Walter et al., 2022; Wicker & Frick, 2016).

### *The New Media and the Tale of Two Generations*

Today's adolescents are digital natives (European Commission, n.d.), innate to and growing up in an information society. They make up the so-called Generation Z (Gen Z), a new generation born between 1997 and 2012, which can be distinguished from the Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996. The Millennials came of age during the rapid Internet boom, but were not immersed in it from birth (Dimock, 2019). This distinction is noteworthy as the role of the media has become increasingly prevalent with the advancement of digital technologies (Wartella et al., 2016), which have become a part of many facets of adolescent lives, including social relations (Boyd, 2014). With the rise of social media, access to information about public figures has become increasingly available. Traditional media representation of celebrities contrasts with contemporary social media presence, making public figures seem more 'authentic' and approachable (Marshall, 2010). Young people are therefore allowed a more direct access to the lives of celebrities than ever before, potentially strengthening their attachment to media figures (Click et al., 2013; Stever & Lawson, 2013). A dramatic increase in celebrity worship has indeed been found in this century (McCutcheon & Aruguete, 2021).

Additionally, a new type of media figure has emerged – microcelebrities, a term referring to the previously unknown individuals who have gained a large following on social media (Driessens, 2016), with some becoming YouTubers or social media influencers (Jerslev, 2016; Martínez & Olsson, 2018; Marwick, 2015). Apart from opening up a space for the emergence of microcelebrities, the digital landscape has reshaped the way in which young people interact with traditional media figures. This shift has likely impacted who they choose to look up to, thus opening up new avenues of research.

### *An Overview of Previous Studies on Media Role Models*

We have been investigating adolescent role models for over a decade, as our first study was conducted in 2007 with the Millennials (Stepanović et al., 2009). Relying on Bandura's notion of symbolic models and the media's considerable influence on adolescents, we focused our interest on the role models with whom they had no direct relationship, along with the reasons for their admiration. The Millennials' role models were classified in accordance with the findings of very few previous studies in this field at the time (Lin & Lin, 2007; Popadić 1990, 2003). We identified the following types of role models: show business celebrities (actors and singers); athletes; scientists and artists; politicians and rulers; entrepreneurs; and fictional heroes. Since they did not appear in previous studies, we added TV presenters/personalities as a new subcategory within the show business role models. The results showed that adolescent Millennials' most favoured role models came from show business and sports, while other types were far less appreciated (Stepanović

et al., 2009). Respondents' reasons for admiration were categorized similarly to the classification by Popadić (1990, 1995, 2003) and the one obtained in the research on Thai adolescents (Lin & Lin, 2007). We established that the Millennial adolescents mainly appreciated the public figures' professional success, fame, wealth, social power, and physical appearance, as well as their strong personality (Stepanović et al., 2009).

Our next study (Stepanović Ilić et al., 2017) was the first with Generation Z, where we used the same classification of role models and confirmed that media figures from show business and sports were the most appreciated ones. We identified YouTubers and bloggers as a new subcategory within the show business models, demonstrating the growing engagement of young people on the Internet. The classification of admiration reasons was very similar to the study of the Millennials (Stepanović et al., 2009). However, patriotism was absent from students' explanations, and ten categories were identified (physical appearance, social power, professional success, intelligence, strong personality, humanity, cheerfulness and communicativeness, desirable profession, fame, and wealth). This study is particularly noteworthy as it provided an insight into the relationship between various role model types and admiration reasons.

Different motivations (e.g., self-suppression or self-expansion) can underlie young peoples' interest in celebrities (Maltby & Day, 2017). Generally, studies that explore adolescent role models from the media and the reasons for their admiration are rare, although they can help us understand the role of media figures in identity development and adolescent value system (Gleason et al., 2017). To the best of our knowledge, only a few studies discovered broader dimensions related to the appreciation of role models regarding their physical appearance, personality traits, professional success, or talents (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Lin & Lin, 2007; Gleason, 2017).

### *The Current Study*

Gen Z adolescents spend an immense amount of time online (Hipson et al., 2021; Twenge et al., 2019; Weinstein, 2018), which indicates an increasing influence of the new media on their development. Therefore, we find it compelling to explore the way in which the role models of Gen Z and the Millennials, as the two generations growing up in different media landscapes, differ. Since the emergence of the new media brought the lives of celebrities much closer to adolescents (Click et al., 2013; Stever & Lawson, 2013), it generated new types of role models (Jerslev, 2016; Martínez & Olsson, 2018; Marwick, 2015). Furthermore, we want to uncover the role model characteristics in various media figures appreciated by adolescents from these two generations. As mentioned, this aspect of role model admiration has been unjustifiably neglected in this field of research, bearing in mind that it could shed more light on the role of media figures and the values adolescents hold in this challenging developmental phase.

Previous research demonstrated that gender (Bui, 2017; Bricheno & Thornton, 2007; Gleason et al., 2017; Lin & Lin, 2007; Stepanović et al., 2009; Stepanović Ilić et al., 2017), age (Stepanović et al., 2009; Stepanović Ilić et al., 2017), and the type of school adolescents attended (Stepanović et al., 2009) were associated with adolescent role model choices. Thus, in the current study, we are interested in examining how these variables influence the role model choices in two generations of adolescents.

Given the aforementioned, our study aims the following: (1) to compare the types of media figures the Millennials and Gen Z adolescents identify as role models; (2) to explore the patterns of reasons behind the choice of particular role model types in these two generations, and (3) to examine the contribution of gender, age, and school type in the role model choices and admiration reasons in the two generations of adolescents.

## Method

In 2018, we conducted a follow-up study analogous to our study on the Millennials (Stepanović et al., 2009) on a representative sample of secondary school students from the same secondary schools. By doing so, we collected the data that provided a credible comparison of the two generations of adolescents, the Millennials and Gen Z.

## Sample and procedure

Equivalent to the study with the Millennials (Stepanović et al., 2009), we employed quota sampling to represent the population of secondary school students in Serbia. The number of schools corresponded to the population of students in three regions of Serbia. Thus, students from 26 selective and comprehensive schools took part in the research. From each school, we randomly selected two first-grade (aged 15) and third-grade (aged 17) classes. Hence, the sample of Generation Z students included 1,358 students (56% female, 62% from selective schools, 51% in the first year). The follow-up survey was conducted within a broader study about adolescents' everyday life. This was also the case in the previous research of the Millennials' role models (Stepanović et al., 2009), which originally included 2,426 secondary school students from the first, second, third and fourth grade. Bearing in mind that the follow-up survey on Generation Z was realized in the same schools as the one on the Millennials, but only with the students of the first and third grade, we selected 1,283 students attending the first and third grade to represent the sample of the Millennials in the current study (59% female, 59.5% from selective schools, 52% in the first year). A written informed consent was obtained from the school principals and students' parents in both waves of the study. Research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade (Protocol #2018-008).

## Instruments

### *The Role Model Identification*

The same as in the study with the Millennials (Stepanović et al., 2009), we asked the respondents of the follow-up study to name a role model specifically from the public life, with the following instruction: “*The next question is related to your role models. Think about public figures, alive or not, and their important features. Please finish the following sentence: ‘I would like to be like ...’ (Please name the person)*”.

### *Reasons for the Role Model Admiration*

Previous studies (Lin & Lin, 2007; Stepanović et al., 2009; Stepanović Ilić et al., 2017) found the adolescents’ reasons for admiration to be rather stable and classified correspondingly. Therefore, in the follow-up study, we decided to offer admiration reasons to students in a closed form. We included the following categories: Physical appearance and beauty; Power and influence over other people; Professional success, achieved results and ambition; Intelligence and cleverness; Strong personality, persistence, and courage; Humanity, donating money to others and caring for others; Cheerfulness, communicativeness and a sense of humour; He/she is in the line of work I am interested in; Fame and popularity; and Wealth and money. Students evaluated the significance of each admiration reason on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – not at all, 5 – very much). The following instruction was provided: “*I admire this person because of their... (please circle one number from 1 to 5 for each reason)*”.

## Data analysis

We utilized the SPSS v23 software package for all statistical procedures. Crosstabs analysis was used to compare the prevalence of role model types for the two generations. The reasons from the first study were transformed into binary variables (level 1, if participants assigned the reason as an explanation for their admiration, and level 0, if participants did not assign this reason). In the second study, the reasons for admiration were estimated on a Likert scale. To test the relationship between the role model types and reasons, we applied logistic regression on dichotomous variables for each role model category (level 1 – the respondent chose a role model from the category; level 0 – the respondent did not choose a role model from that category). The analysis was conducted separately for each role model type in both studies, with reasons as predictors and the role model category as the criterion variable. Logistic regression can reveal whether the students who admire a particular type of media figure differ from the students whose role model choice is different with respect to the reasons stated.

## Results

### *Adolescents' Choices of the Role Model Types in Two Generations*

In the study on the Millennials, media figures were perceived as role models by 48.2% of adolescents. For Gen Z, that number rose to 75%. Furthermore, the Millennials named 277 media figures as role models, while Gen Z listed 431. Male role models were selected slightly more frequently (54.8%) than the female ones (45.2%) by the Millennials. A decade later, a significant increase in the male role models (63.4%) is noticeable ( $\chi^2=11.064$ ,  $df=1$ , Cramer's  $V=0.088$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

Table 1 shows the frequencies of the role model types nominated by the Millennial and Gen Z adolescents. An overview of the most frequently mentioned media figures within each category in both generations can be found in the Appendix. Show business celebrities and athletes were the most appreciated ones in both generations. However, there is a noticeable decrease in the admiration of athletes, actors, and TV presenters in Gen Z, while the popularity of reality stars had grown. In the follow-up study, we identified microcelebrities as a new subcategory of show business role models.

Table 1

*The proportion of role model types and their comparison between two generations*

Category	2007		2018		$\chi^2(1)$	p
	n	% <sup>a</sup>	n	%		
SHOW BUSINESS	332	52.4	425	50.5	0.84	>.05
Musicians	167	26.8	261	31	3.44	>.05
Actors	115	18.4	118	14	15.5	<.05
TV Presenters	33	5.3	19	2.3	15.08	<.05
Reality TV Stars	5	0.8	17	2	3.66	>.05
Models	12	1.9	10	1.2	2.67	>.05
MICROCELEBRITIES	-	-	59	7	-	-
YouTubers	-	-	37	4.4	-	-
Social Media Influencers	-	-	22	2.6	-	-
SPORTS	220	35.3	237	28.2	28.99	<.05
POLITICIANS & RULERS	32	5.1	35	4.2	1.03	>.05
SCIENCE & ART	17	2.7	29	3.4	0.64	>.05
Scientists	7	1.1	11	1.3	0.01	>.05
Artists	10	1.6	18	2.1	0.05	>.05
ENTREPRENEURS	7	1.1	16	1.9	0.53	>.05
FICTIONAL CHARACTERS	4	0.6	17	2.0	3.18	>.05
OTHER <sup>b</sup>	16	2.5	23	2.7	0.05	>.05

<sup>a</sup> Percentage is calculated as the ratio of students who listed particular role models.

<sup>b</sup> The category 'Other' includes unknown people, well-known criminals and a famous lawyer.

### *A Comparison of the Reasons for Admiration in Two Generations*

To explore the connection between particular role model types and the associated reasons, we performed logistic regressions with reasons as predictors and the role model type as the dependent variable. As stated before, we wanted to test the predictability of gender, age, and school type for each role model type, since previous research found these demographic characteristics to be related to adolescents' choices of role models. Therefore, we performed a two-step logistic regression, with demographic variables included as categorical predictors in the first step and admiration reasons added in the second. Considering that the assumptions regarding linearity, multicollinearity, and sample size were not met for every logistic regression, we performed the bootstrap method to ensure robust results. We conducted seven logistic regressions for the following role model types: show business (for both generations), athletes (for both generations), politicians and rulers (for both generations), microcelebrities (for Gen Z), and artists and scientists (for Gen Z). Due to a small number of entrepreneurs and heroes nominated in both generations and few art and science role models nominated by the Millennials, we could not conduct logistic regressions for these categories.

Our data show that all eight regression models improved significantly in terms of the data fit by adding demographic variables compared to the baseline models. Furthermore, admiration reasons on top of demographic variables significantly contributed to predicting each role model type. Thus, we performed logistic regressions on a model that incorporated reasons and demographic variables as predictors since it had the best fit to the data. Regression models were statistically significant for all role model types (Table 2).

Table 2  
*Model summaries for the logistic regression*

Role model types	Chi-square	df	p	Negelkerke R <sup>2</sup>
SHOW BUSINESS				
Millennials	197.391	14	<.05	.439
Gen Z	194.899	13	<.05	.294
MICROCELEBRITIES				
Gen Z	42.329	13	<.05	.133
SPORTS				
Millennials	178.542	14	<.05	.412
Gen Z	149.429	13	<.05	.250
POLITICIANS & RULERS				
Millennials	70.132	14	<.05	.492
Gen Z	63.268	13	<.05	.263
SCIENCE & ART				
Gen Z	103.202	13	<.05	.488



The Millennials who appreciated the role models from show business were more likely to mention their cheerfulness, communicativeness, physical appearance, and fame and popularity as reasons for admiration (see Table 2.1). Additionally, girls had role models from show business more frequently. Professional success and patriotism were unlikely reasons for admiring the show business celebrities.

Table 2.1

*Significant regression coefficients of demographic variables and the reasons for choosing people from show business as role models by the Millennials*

Predictors for choosing people from show business	Bootstrap <sup>a</sup>							
	Model 1				Model 2			
	B (SE)	B (exp)	Upper bound	Lower bound	B (SE)	B (exp)	Upper bound	Lower bound
Gender <sup>b</sup>	-1.93 (.21)	6.92**	1.55	2.35	1.67 (.27)	5.34**	1.21	2.26
Cheerfulness, humour, communicativeness					1.88 (4.86)	6.53**	0.61	21.13
Fame & popularity					0.97 (.31)	2.63**	0.40	1.61
Physical appearance & beauty					1.13 (.36)	3.09**	0.53	1.97
Professional success					-1.10 (.29)	0.33**	-1.71	-0.58
Patriotism					-2.00 (3.95)	0.14*	-4.89	-0.58
Constant	-.90 (.19)	.41	-1.31	-.55	-0.47 (.33)	0.62	-1.15	0.18

Note. N= 495. In Model 1, we entered the demographic variables of gender, grade, and school type to predict a preference for people from show business. In Model 2, we added the reasons for appreciating people from show business.

Bootstrap results are based on 1,000 bootstrap samples.

Male=1, female=2. <sup>c</sup> First grade=1, Third grade=2. <sup>d</sup> Selective school=1, Comprehensive school=2

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01

Similar patterns were founded for Gen Z. Girls and those adolescents who mentioned cheerfulness, communicativeness, and physical appearance were more likely to admire show business media figures. Furthermore, Gen Z adolescents were less likely to admire celebrities for their strong personality and humanity or because they wanted to become show business stars. These findings are summarised in Table 2.2. It should be noted that the values of beta coefficients in regressions from the two studies cannot be strictly compared, as reasons provided by the Millennials were answers to an

open-ended question. In contrast, the reasons in the follow-up study were measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

Table 2.2

*Significant regression coefficients of demographic variables and the reasons for choosing people from show business as role models by Gen Z*

Predictors for choosing people from show business	Bootstrap <sup>a</sup>							
	Model 1				Model 2			
	B (SE)	B (exp)	Upper bound	Lower bound	B (SE)	B (exp)	Upper bound	Lower bound
Gender <sup>b</sup>	1.42 (.16)	4.12**	1.13	1.73	1.06 (.18)	2.88**	.76	1.44
Strong personality, persistence & courage					-0.34 (.11)	0.71**	-.58	-.13
Humanity, giving money to others & care for others					-0.21 (.10)	0.81*	-.40	-.02
Cheerfulness, humour, communicativeness					0.38 (.10)	1.46**	.20	.58
Physical appearance & beauty					0.37 (.07)	1.44**	.25	.52
Wants to become a celebrity					-0.23 (.06)	0.79**	-.36	-.13
Constant	-0.73 (.15)	.48	-1.04	-0.44	.06 (.64)	1.06	-1.10	1.39

Note. N= 784. In Model 1, we entered the demographic variables of gender, grade, and school type to predict a preference for people from show business. In Model 2, we added the reasons for appreciating people from show business.

Bootstrap results are based on 1,000 bootstrap samples.

Male=1, female=2. <sup>c</sup> First grade=1, Third grade=2. <sup>d</sup> Selective school=1, Comprehensive school=2

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01

As Gen Z identified microcelebrities as a new category of role models, we wanted to investigate the reasons for their admiration. Logistic regression indicates that students from comprehensive schools more often looked up to microcelebrities. Gen Z appreciated micro-celebrities for their power, influence, cheerfulness, and sense of humour, but less often for their wealth and professional success. Students who admired microcelebrities had professional aspirations in this domain (see Table 2.3).

Table 2.3

*Significant regression coefficients of demographic variables and the reasons for choosing microcelebrities as role models by Gen Z*

Predictors for choosing microcelebrities	Bootstrap <sup>a</sup>							
	Model 1				Model 2			
	B (SE)	B (exp)	Upper bound	Lower bound	B (SE)	B (exp)	Upper bound	Lower bound
School type <sup>d</sup>	.44 (.31)	1.55	-.16	1.05	.71 (.35)	2.03*	.05	1.47
Cheerfulness, humour, communicativeness					.46 (.22)	1.59*	.11	.97
Professional success					-.43 (.24)	0.65*	-.86	.06
Power & influence					.49 (.17)	1.62**	.18	.89
Wealth					-.24 (.12)	0.78*	-.49	.01
Wants to become microcelebrity					.35 (.12)	1.42**	.17	.63
Constant	-2.60 (.25)	0.07	-3.15	-2.16	-4.46 (1.36)	0.01	-8.04	-2.60

Note. N= 784. In Model 1, we entered the demographic variables of gender, grade, and school type to predict a preference for micro-celebrities. In Model 2, we added the reasons for appreciating micro-celebrities.

Bootstrap results are based on 1,000 bootstrap samples.

Male=1, female=2. <sup>c</sup> First grade=1, Third grade=2. <sup>d</sup> Selective school=1, Comprehensive school=2

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01

The Millennials appreciated athletes’ professional success, strong personalities, persistence, and courage (see Table 2.4). However, adolescents were less likely to mention physical appearance as a reason for admiring athletes. Students appreciating athletes were more likely to be boys, younger, and from selective schools.

Table 2.4  
*Significant regression coefficients of demographic variables and the reasons for choosing sports figures as role models by the Millennials*

Predictors for choosing people from sport	Bootstrap <sup>a</sup>							
	Model 1				Model 2			
	B (SE)	B (exp)	Upper bound	Lower bound	B (SE)	B (exp)	Upper bound	Lower bound
Gender <sup>b</sup>	-1.81 (.22)	.16**	-2.28	-1.42	-1.71 (.28)	0.18**	-2.35	-1.24
Grade <sup>c</sup>	-.61 (.22)	.54**	-1.10	-0.21	-0.48 (.26)	0.62*	-1.07	0.00
School type <sup>d</sup>	-.02 (.22)	.98	-0.45	0.40	-0.50 (.27)	0.61*	-1.08	-0.03
Strong personality, persistence & courage					0.70 (.39)	2.02*	-0.01	1.60
Physical appearance & beauty					-0.70 (.39)	0.50*	-1.57	-0.06
Professional success					1.86 (.31)	6.40**	1.33	2.55
Constant	.65 (.19)	1.92	0.28	1.07	-0.32 (.35)	0.73	-1.02	0.38

Note. N= 495. In Model 1, we entered the demographic variables of gender, grade, and school type to predict a preference for sports figures. In Model 2, we added the reasons for appreciating sports figures.

Bootstrap results are based on 1,000 bootstrap samples.

Male=1, female=2. <sup>c</sup> First grade=1, Third grade=2. <sup>d</sup> Selective school=1, Comprehensive school=2

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01

However, in Gen Z, gender was the only significant demographic variable related to athletes as role models. Strong personality, persistence, and courage remained significant predictors. In addition, humanity, giving money, and caring for others became relevant for this role model choice. We identified intelligence, cheerfulness, and social power as unexpected reasons for admiring athletes in this wave (see Table 2.5).

Table 2.5

*Significant regression coefficients of demographic variables and the reasons for choosing sports figures as role models by Gen Z*

Predictors for choosing people from sport	Bootstrap <sup>a</sup>							
	Model 1				Model 2			
	B (SE)	B (exp)	Upper bound	Lower bound	B (SE)	B (exp)	Upper bound	Lower bound
Gender <sup>b</sup>	-1.41 (.17)	0.24**	-1.75	-1.05	-1.32 (.20)	0.27**	-1.75	-0.95
Intelligence & cleverness					-0.30 (.10)	0.74**	-0.53	-0.12
Strong personality, persistence & courage					0.48 (.14)	1.61**	0.24	0.79
Humanity, giving money to others & care for others					0.43 (.10)	1.54**	0.25	0.66
Power & influence					-0.30 (.09)	0.74**	-0.49	-0.14
Constant	-0.14 (.15)	0.87	-0.43	0.15	-2.78 (1.05)	0.06	-5.36	-1.24

Note. N= 784. In Model 1, we entered the demographic variables of gender, grade, and school type to predict a preference for sports figures. In Model 2, we added the reasons for appreciating sports figures.

Bootstrap results are based on 1,000 bootstrap samples.

Male=1, female=2. <sup>c</sup> First grade=1, Third grade=2. <sup>d</sup> Selective school=1, Comprehensive school=2

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01

The Millennials associate politicians and rulers with social power and patriotism, but less so with professional success. Comprehensive school students admired them more than the students attending selective schools (see Table 2.6).

Table 2.6  
*Regression Coefficients of demographic variables and the reasons for choosing politicians and rulers as role models by the Millennials*

Predictors for choosing politicians and rulers	Bootstrap <sup>a</sup>							
	Model 1				Model 2			
	B (SE)	B (exp)	Upper bound	Lower bound	B (SE)	B (exp)	Upper bound	Lower bound
School type <sup>d</sup>	1.35 (.96)	3.85**	0.36	2.61	2.10 (7.70)	8.16**	0.80	18.73
Physical appearance & beauty					-2.11 (9.29)	0.12*	-29.45	-0.14
Professional success					-2.36 (6.74)	0.09**	-25.57	-1.07
Power & influence					4.60 (16.63)	99.10**	2.52	54.62
Patriotism					2.65 (8.09)	14.14**	0.91	16.13
Constant	-3.83 (1.37)	0.02	-5.45	-2.93	-3.95 (16.34)	0.02	-29.76	-2.55

Note. N= 495. In Model 1, we entered the demographic variables of gender, grade, and school type to predict a preference for politicians and rulers. In Model 2, we added the reasons for appreciating politicians and rulers.

Bootstrap results are based on 1,000 bootstrap samples.

Male=1, female=2. <sup>c</sup> First grade=1, Third grade=2. <sup>d</sup> Selective school=1, Comprehensive school=2

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01

In Gen Z, social power remained the strongest predictor of all. Additionally, politicians and rulers were appreciated for their intelligence and cleverness (see Table 2.7). School type did not remain a significant predictor. However, boys preferred this role model type more than girls. Communicativeness, a sense of humour, and physical appearance were unlikely to be associated with politicians and rulers.

**Table 2.7**  
*Significant regression coefficients of demographic variables and the reasons for choosing politicians and rulers as role models by Gen Z*

Predictors for choosing politicians and rulers	Bootstrap <sup>a</sup>							
	Model 1				Model 2			
	B (SE)	B (exp)	Upper bound	Lower bound	B (SE)	B (exp)	Upper bound	Lower bound
Gender <sup>b</sup>	-1.49 (.46)	0.22**	-2.64	-0.82	-1.31 (.65)	0.27**	-2.89	-0.40
Intelligence & cleverness					0.58 (.96)	1.78**	0.24	1.95
Cheerfulness, humour, communicativeness					-0.41 (.18)	0.66**	-0.79	-0.10
Physical appearance & beauty					-0.44 (.15)	0.64**	-0.78	-0.18
Power & influence					0.61 (.29)	1.84**	0.23	1.38
Constant	-2.59 (.32)	0.07	-3.32	-2.05	-4.27 (11.30)	0.01	-17.56	-1.14

Note. N= 784. In Model 1, we entered the demographic variables of gender, grade, and school type to predict a preference for politicians and rulers. In Model 2, we added the reasons for appreciating politicians and rulers.

Bootstrap results are based on 1,000 bootstrap samples.

Male=1, female=2. <sup>c</sup> First grade=1, Third grade=2. <sup>d</sup> Selective school=1, Comprehensive school=2

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01

Lastly, artists and scientists were the role models nominated more often by girls and comprehensive school students (Table 2.8) among the Gen Z adolescents. They were appreciated for their intelligence and cleverness, professional success, as well as the adolescents' ambition to follow the same career path. Further, physical appearance was identified as an unexpected admiration reason for this role model type. Regression coefficients of all predictors of various role model types, regardless of their statistical significance, can be found in supplemental online material.

Table 2.8

*Significant regression coefficients of demographic variables and the reasons for choosing scientists or artists as role models by Gen Z*

Predictors for choosing scientists or artists	Bootstrap <sup>a</sup>							
	Model 1				Model 2			
	B (SE)	B (exp)	Upper bound	Lower bound	B (SE)	B (exp)	Upper bound	Lower bound
Gender <sup>b</sup>	1.10 (.75)	3.01*	.24	2.39	2.34 (1.42)	10.41**	0.99	5.38
School type <sup>d</sup>	1.40 (.49)	4.04**	.60	2.52	1.12 (.78)	3.08*	0.11	2.90
Intelligence & cleverness					2.35 (3.29)	10.50**	1.53	17.05
Humanity, giving money to others & care for others					-0.39 (.26)	0.68*	-0.97	0.05
Physical appearance & beauty					-0.80 (.27)	0.45**	-1.53	-0.45
Professional success					0.67 (.93)	1.96*	-0.08	1.76
Wants to become scientist or artist					0.59 (.22)	1.81**	0.34	1.18
Constant	-5.08 (1.02)	0.01	-7.45	-3.90	-15.11 (18.09)	0.00	-91.40	-9.56

*Note.* N= 784. In Model 1, we entered the demographic variables of gender, grade, and school type to predict a preference for scientists or artists. In Model 2, we added the reasons for appreciating scientists and artists.

Bootstrap results are based on 1,000 bootstrap samples.

Male=1, female=2. <sup>c</sup> First grade=1, Third grade=2. <sup>d</sup> Selective school=1, Comprehensive school=2

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01

## Discussion

Our main goals in this study were to examine adolescents' role models from the public life and to identify the types of role models they admired, as well as the patterns of reasons behind these specific choices in two generations of adolescents, the Millennials and Gen Z. At the beginning of the millennium, the authors claimed that the media strongly affected whom adolescents chose to look up to (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002; Biskup & Pfister, 1999). However, significant changes in technology in the last decade produced new forms of media and made them even more powerful and attractive to adolescents (Twenge et al., 2019; Wartella et al., 2016; Weinstein, 2018). Hence, we tried to address these changes by comparing the choices of role



models and the reasons for their admiration among two generations of adolescents, attending the same schools and living in the same areas.

The increasing effect of media, especially related to their attractiveness for adolescents and the emergence of new types of celebrities, is visible in the rising popularity of media figures in Gen Z compared to the Millennials. Our results show that every other Millennial found a role model among famous people, while in Gen Z this applies to three in four adolescents. This trend is also apparent in the surge of different public figures named as role models by the adolescents from Gen Z.

The specific influence of media on adolescents from these two generations is also evident in the finding that the presenters of various TV shows appeared as a new type of role model within the category of show business in the Millennials, which had been previously found by other researchers as well (Gergely, 2014). However, our findings show that the number of adolescents appreciating TV presenters decreased in the follow-up study investigating the Gen Z adolescents and that the new types of celebrities occurred as their role models (Table 1). The age of the new media brought micro-celebrities (e.g., influencers and YouTubers), previously unknown individuals, as the new role models (Driessens, 2016), which aligns with the findings of our previous study on Gen Z (Stepanović Ilić et al., 2017). These findings demonstrate the significant impact of YouTubers and influencers on the adolescents from Gen Z.

Adolescent role models are more often male than female, as in previous studies (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007; Gleason et al., 2017; Lin & Lin, 2007; Stepanović Ilić et al., 2017), and this tendency has become even more evident in Gen Z. In the present study, we identified a pattern established in earlier research showing that the gender of the role model mainly aligned with the adolescent's gender in both generations. Furthermore, we found that girls were more likely to have male role models than boys were likely to have the female ones. Some researchers explain this by the fact that male public figures are more salient in media than females in domains such as sports (Gleason et al., 2017) and politics (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). Engle and Kasser (2005) explain girls' tendency to idolize male celebrities by their preoccupation with boys and romantic relationships during adolescence, specific attachment styles, and consumerist behaviour inspired by the celebrities engaging in media advertisements targeting young women.

The significance of popular media for adolescent preferences of particular role model types was evident in the Millennials, and even more so in Gen Z. Show business and sports celebrities are the role model types the Millennials and Gen Z adolescents prefer most. Show business stars are admired most in both generations, as found in previous studies (Lin & Lin, 2007; Gleason et al., 2017; Stepanović Ilić et al., 2017). The dominance of these types of role models is most likely connected to the fact that entertainment personalities are highly present in the media. The most admired type of role models from

show business in both generations of adolescents are musicians, in line with our previous findings (Stepanović Ilić et al., 2017), as well as scholars, highlighting the importance of music in adolescence (Lonsdale, 2020; Miranda, 2013; North et al., 2000).

Complementary to earlier studies (Gergely, 2014; Gleason et al., 2017; Stepanović Ilić et al., 2017), athletes are the next favourite role model type for both generations. Hyman and Sierra (2010) claim this is not surprising, since athletes are present in the media not only when playing but “off the field” as well, which is very important for the powerful sports industry. The inclination to emulate favourite athletes could be important later in terms of physical health, as Giuliano and associates (2007) found that young people admiring athletes tended to engage in sports in adulthood. Our results indicate that Gen Z values athletes, as well as actors, slightly less than the Millennials do; a tendency worth following up on in future research. However, one should not jump to conclusions since the role model number one for Gen Z is the famous Serbian tennis player Novak Đoković (6.9% of adolescents who have role models admire him). We assume his popularity is the result of his achievements and frequent appearance in various media.

The ratings of other types of role models (politicians and rulers; scientists and artists; entrepreneurs; and fictional heroes) have not significantly changed in these two generations. As in earlier studies (Lin & Lin, 2007; Gergely, 2016), they were far less admired than show business celebrities and athletes (see Table 1). Few nominations of politicians as role models are certainly not the result of their absence from the media, something that could perhaps justify an unlikely identification of adolescents with scientists or artists. It might rather be related to young people’s low interest in politics (Farthing, 2010), or to Manning and associates’ (2016) findings about distrust in politicians’ intentions, and expectations of the youth for politicians to be more authentic, but also responsible when it comes to their appearance on social networks, which is a hard-to-reach standard.

Bearing in mind previous research, we included gender, age, and school type as predictors within the regression models relating to the role model types and reasons for admiration. Girls admired celebrities more than boys in both generations, which had been also found previously (Gergely, 2014; Gleason et al., 2017; Stepanović Ilić et al., 2017). Athletes more often figured as idols of boys than of girls in both generations, as established before (Gergely, 2014; Gleason et al., 2017; Stepanović Ilić et al., 2017). Gender differences regarding the preferences of show business and sports celebrities might be related to Closson’s (2009) findings about boys’ and girls’ constructions of popularity. Namely, boys primarily associate social status with athletic capability and girls with attractiveness, the features often attributed to show business celebrities. Although the intensity of role model admiration was not measured in our study, which may be listed as one of its limitations, the aforementioned

reasons in girls may be considered worrying, having in mind their sensitivity regarding the beauty standards promoted in the media (Rodgers & Melioli, 2016; Mahon & Hevey, 2021), as well as the fact that celebrity worship can negatively impact their self-image (Click et al., 2013; McCutcheon & Aruguete, 2021). Higher idolization of athletes by boys could be related to gender inequality in opportunities for a career in sports, existing even in the countries where equality has been reached in terms of participation (Eriksen, 2021). Furthermore, media coverage is dominantly oriented towards male athletes (Hartmann-Tews, 2019). Consequently, the authors in this field suggest that it would be important for the media to promote female figures in sports more often (Gleason, et al., 2017). Interestingly, gender differences were not found in the preferences for microcelebrities. However, it was established they were more popular among comprehensive school students than those attending selective schools, a finding worth exploring further.

Our findings also indicate that the Millennials from comprehensive schools chose politicians as role models more frequently than the students attending selective schools. This tendency did not uphold in the Gen Z adolescents in the current study, nor in our previous research with Gen Z (Stepanović Ilić et al., 2017). These results from the two studies on Gen Z adolescents indicate that the type of school is not a relevant predictor of politicians' idolization in this generation.

We also found that Gen Z boys were more likely to idolize politicians than girls were, which was not shown in our previous studies with this particular generation (Stepanović Ilić et al., 2017) or the Millennials (Author, 2009). Recent studies suggest that politics has been dominated by men worldwide until now since male politicians outnumber the female ones (Ladam et al., 2018) and are still more visible in the media than their female counterparts (Hayek & Russmann, 2022; Van der Pas, 2021). This was even more salient before, so it is quite puzzling that these gender differences had not been found previously. Subsequent studies are necessary to corroborate this finding in Gen Z and provide possible justifications.

Attendance of comprehensive schools appears to be a significant predictor of the tendency to admire scientists and artists for Gen Z. This could be related to the fact that the professional interests of scientists and artists correspond more with the content of the comprehensive school curricula than those of selective schools. When it comes to the Millennials, it was not possible to test the role of this predictor by regression, due to the insufficient number of participants that chose scientists or artists as role models. However, in the study previously conducted with the Millennials (Stepanović et al., 2009), we obtained the same result by crosstabs analysis. It was also established that Gen Z girls more often found role models among scientists and artists than boys, which could not have been tested by regression for the Millennials, but

was not found in our previous crosstabs analysis (Stepanović et al., 2009). The absence of this tendency in the Millennials could be explained by a stable finding on gender differences in the preference of school subjects, showing that science is more popular among boys, and the arts among girls (Francis, 2000). However, growing achievements and interest in science among girls have been registered in the last two decades (Gomoll et al., 2016), in a developmental period crucial for science career choices (Maltese & Tai, 2009). This could be associated with the Gen Z girls admiring scientists and artists more than their male peers.

Our findings reveal different reasons for appreciation of various types of role models, as well as similarities in the patterns of reasons associated with particular types of role models in two generations. The Millennials valued show business celebrities for their cheerfulness and communicativeness, physical appearance, and fame. They tended to respect these role models because of their professional success, similar to the findings of previous research (Stepanović Ilić et al., 2017), and patriotism. Similarly, Gen Z appreciated the attributes of show business stars highly valued in the world of media, such as cheerfulness or beauty. On the other hand, show business role models were not admired because of their strong personality or humanity or the respondents' desire to be in a similar profession. Gen Z appreciated microcelebrities as new role models within the show business category mostly because they were amusing. Namely, they perceived microcelebrities as communicative and cheerful people and admired them for the influence they had on others. Our data indicate that Gen Z adolescents would like to follow their path in terms of professional engagement, but they did not associate wealth and professional success with microcelebrities.

Both the Millennials and Gen Z admired athletes for their strong personalities, persistence, and courage. The Millennials idolized athletes for their professional success, but not for physical appearance, as found in our previous study (Stepanović Ilić et al., 2017). Gen Z appreciated their humanity, which was also found to be the case for adolescents of that generation (Stepanović Ilić et al., 2017), but did not respect them because of their intelligence, social power, cheerfulness, and communicativeness. These results show that athletic models are appreciated for their inner characteristics related to high achievement, as opposed to show business celebrities, who are mostly associated with outer features and traits closely related to entertainment. The Gen Z's perception of athletes as willing to help the others could be the result of media coverage of their humanitarian work.

Politicians and rulers are valued for their social power by both generations. Although the Millennials admired politicians and rulers for their patriotism, they did not see them as professionally successful. Gen Z considered politicians intelligent and clever, while communicativeness, cheerfulness,

and physical appearance were unlikely to be important for choosing this role model type.

We explored the admiration reasons for scientists and artists of Gen Z adolescents only, due to an insufficient number of the Millennials who chose them as role models, as was the case in both generations for the categories of entrepreneurs and heroes. Intelligence proved to be the most important predictor of the choice of scientists and artists as role models by Gen Z, the finding we had obtained earlier (Stepanović Ilić et al., 2017). This reason seems understandable having in mind extraordinary attainments of scientists and artists.

## Conclusion

The comparison of two generations of adolescents has revealed that the role model choices have stood the test of time, with the emergence of new media being reflected in the increasing preference for microcelebrities and a growing number of today's adolescents idolizing the media figures. The patterns of admiration reasons are rather congruent, while the distinctions between the two generations could be attributed, at least partly, to the difference in the measurement of reasons in the two waves, which is a limitation of our current research.

The popularity of show business celebrities in both generations indicates a strong orientation of young people towards entertainment, which has also been detected in the studies of adolescents' leisure time (Pavlović & Stepanović Ilić, 2022; Piko & Vazsonyi, 2004). Athletes, also frequently present in the media, are among the most idolized public figures. The reasons for their admiration are primarily related to their internal characteristics that contribute to high results, in the case of the Millennials, or even humanity (in Gen Z), which might positively influence the development of adolescents, bearing in mind Bandura's (2005) considerations about abstract modelling, which imply that one does not imitate a model's behaviour, but deduces the principles underlying the positive outcomes of that behaviour.

Our study showed that there were more parallels than discrepancies between the Millennials and Gen Z and additionally demonstrated that socio-demographic characteristics of adolescents in both generations were relevant predictors of their choices, which suggests that it is not all about differences between the generations and values.

We propose that future research should focus on measuring the intensity of role model admiration and connecting it, together with reasons for their appreciation, to various developmental outcomes and measures of adolescent value systems. Finally, it would be intriguing to conduct prospective research with the adolescents born after 2012, i.e., the Alpha generation, in order to explore (dis)similarities of a future generation to the ones that preceded it.

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## **Medijske ličnosti kao uzori adolescenata: sličnosti i razlike između milenijalaca i generacije Z**

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U procesu formiranja identiteta i tokom odvajanja od roditelja, adolescenti se mogu ugledati na osobe koje se često pojavljuju u medijima. To, čini se, ponajviše važi za današnje adolescente (tj. generaciju Z), koji su od rođenja okruženi novim elektronskim medijima. Ovo istraživanje ispituje koliko se dve generacije adolescenata, milenijalci i generacija Z, razlikuju kako u pogledu izbora idola iz sveta medija, tako i u pogledu razloga zbog kojih im se dive. Podaci su dobijeni ispitivanjem adolescenata milenijalaca ( $n = 1283$ ) i adolescenata generacije Z ( $n = 1358$ ) u razmaku od jedne decenije. Javne ličnosti su idoli polovini uzorka milenijalaca, dok je to češće kod adolescenata generacije Z, gde njih 75% ima idola među ličnostima iz medija. Rezultati pokazuju da se obe generacije adolescenata najviše dive osobama iz sfere zabave (glumci i muzičari), zatim sportistima, dok su sve ostale vrste javnih ličnosti daleko manje zastupljene. Na osnovu modela logističke regresije može se reći da su razlozi divljenja slični u obema generacijama. Ličnostima iz sveta zabave, na primer, adolescenti se dive zbog vedrine, komunikativnosti, fizičkog izgleda, slave i popularnosti. Rastući uticaj novih medija vidljiv je na osnovu sve većeg broja javnih ličnosti koje generacija Z navodi kao svoje idole u poređenju sa milenijalcima (adolescenti generacije Z naveli su 431 javnu ličnost, a milenijalci 277). Pored toga, kao idoli generacije Z pojavljuju se „obični” ljudi (engl. microcelebrities) koji su svoju popularnost stekli u medijima na internetu: jutjuberi i influenseri. Utvrđeno je da adolescenti generacije Z koji se dive tim osobama imaju profesionalne aspiracije upravo u području oglašavanja na internetu.

**Ključne reči:** adolescencija, uzori, medij, generacija Z, milenijalci

## Appendix

*Names of the most mentioned role models within each category in two waves*

Category	2007	2018
	Top 3 role models	Top 3 role models
<b>SHOW BUSINESS</b>		
Musicians	Ceca (Serbian singer) Rihanna Beyonce	Jelena Karleuša (Serbian singer) Selena Gomez Beyonce
Actors	Angelina Jolie Jessica Alba Brad Pitt	Nina Dobrev Angelina Jolie Johnny Depp
TV Presenters	Isidora Bjelica (Serbian writer/TV presenter) Sanja Marinković (Serbian TV presenter) Milan Kalinić (Serbian TV presenter)	Hugh Hefner Gordon Ramsay Jamie Oliver
Reality TV Stars	Paris Hilton	Kylie Jenner Anđela Veštica (Serbian reality star) Kim Kardashian
Models	Naomi Campbell Sanja Papić (Serbian model) Katarina Rebrača (Serbian model)	Adriana Lima Virgil Abloh Irina Shayk
<b>MICROCELEBRITIES</b>		
YouTubers	/	Baka Prase (Serbian YouTuber) Zorana Jovanović (Serbian YouTuber) PewDiePie
Social Media Influencers	/	Diana Morić (Serbian influencer) Jordan Peterson Jelena Đoković (Serbian influencer – Novak Đoković's spouse)
SPORTS	Ana Ivanović (Serbian tennis player) Novak Đoković (Serbian tennis player) Gaucho Ronaldinho	Novak Đoković (Serbian tennis player) LeBron James Cristiano Ronaldo
POLITICIANS & RULERS	Vojislav Šešelj (Serbian radical politician) Zoran Đinđić (Serbian democratic politician) Boris Tadić (Serbian democratic politician)	Vladimir Putin Aleksandar Vučić (Serbian president) Vojislav Šešelj (Serbian radical politician)

Category	2007	2018
	Top 3 role models	Top 3 role models
<b>SCIENCE AND ART</b>		
Scientists	Nikola Tesla Antoni Gaudi Charles Darwin	Nikola Tesla Albert Einstein Vuk Aleksić (medical doctor)
Artists	Paulo Coelho Momo Kapor (Serbian writer) Mika Antić (Serbian poet)	J.K. Rowling Ivo Andrić (Serbian writer – Nobel prize winner) Mika Antić (Serbian poet)
ENTREPRENEURS	Bill Gates Roman Abramovich Donald Trump	Bill Gates Steve Jobs Robert Kiyosaki
FICTIONAL CHARACTERS	Superman Sherlock Holmes Rocky	Hurem Wrex James Bond