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# WHO AND HOW CAN CONTROL? AUTONOMY OF INTERNET USE AMONG THE MEMBER OF GENERATION Z IN HUNGARY

## **Abstract**

Due to the social and economic changes in the past few decades a new type of inequality, digital inequality has evolved. This study based on the theory of second-level digital inequalities. I examine the autonomy of use dimension. I use a sample of the members of generation Z who live in Debrecen, Hungary. The aim of this study is to reveal who controls the Internet use of generation Z members and how this control is achieved by the means of qualitative and quantitative methods. Based on the focus group interviews, there have been discovered three kinds of control: parental, sibling and internal.

**Key words:** digital inequality, autonomy, Internet, generation Z, youth

## Introduction

Along with the penetration of the Internet and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools the range of potential social inequalities has been expanded by the introduction of new concepts. Digital inequalities constitute one of these issues.

Some researchers (Dyson 1997; Bonfadelli 2002) believed that these inequalities would disappear with the penetration and spread of computers and home Internet access. However, others emphasized that the differences would not disappear, but only be transformed and would continue to exist (Tapscott 1996; Golding 1998; Kubicek-Welling 2000).

DiMaggio and Hargittai (2001) were the first to point out that, following the possible elimination of inequalities in access (the first-level digital divide), the dif-

ferences resulting from the dissimilar modes of use would represent new inequalities. This way they introduced the concept of second-level digital inequalities with five dimensions which can be examined. These dimensions are technical means, autonomy of use, use patterns, social support networks, and skill.

The study of digital inequalities is absolutely essential, since the use of ICT tools has become part of an individual's cultural capital (Angelusz et al. 2004). Traditional sociocultural disadvantages are established in online space, and a previously existing social gap is transformed into a digital divide (Rab – Z. Karvalics 2017).

In this paper, out of the dimensions of secondary digital inequalities, I examine the autonomy of use dimension using qualitative methods. I use a sample of the members of generation Z who live in Debrecen, Hungary. I am interested in the differences among young people who are born into the world of the Internet and are constantly online.

The aim of this study is to reveal who controls the Internet use of generation Z members and how this control is achieved by the means of qualitative and quantitative methods. Firstly the study demonstrates the results of previous research and then presents the results of this investigation.

## Autonomy of use

Inequality of autonomy of use derives from the location where the Internet is used, or from the control of its use.

This paper builds upon the emerging and insightful academic literature on digital inequalities. Based on these investigations, the inequality of autonomous Web use stems from the differences in the locations where the users have the opportunity to access the Internet, how far they have to travel to reach it, whether there is any regulation, control or limitation during use, and how many people they have to share that access with (DiMaggio, Hargittai 2001). According to Hargittai (2008), 24-hour home access provides much greater autonomy than if the individual needs to travel to a community building or library where they have to share use and possibly compete with others for access which is limited in time, is observed by others, and where hardware and software are not always appropriate and are often outdated. We must emphasize that the Internet activity of the individual can also be monitored at his/her workplace.

Autonomy, or freedom, is essential. This includes whether they can use the Internet when they want and for the purpose they want (DiMaggio, Hargittai 2001). Digital inequality research emphasizes that, apart from physical access to the Internet, people's online experiences are different, based on their autonomy of use, the time they spend online, their self-efficacy/self-confidence and their online

skills and knowledge (van Dijk 2005; DiMaggio et al. 2004). Users with greater autonomy, who can use the Internet more freely where they want to undertake more capital-raising activities, have greater digital literacy and use it more often for their studies (Hassani 2006; Hargittai, Hinnant 2008; Hargittai 2010; Livingstone, Helsper 2010; Hargittai, Hsieh 2013; Ting 2015). These users spend more time online (Hargittai, Hinnant 2008) and are more proficient in e-government activities (Velasquez 2016).

Therefore, autonomy is related to the activity of raising capital (Hargittai – Hinnant, 2008) and a growing number of research studies have determined that online skills depend on the socio-economic status of the user (Hargittai 2002, 2011; Page, Uncles 2004; Hassani 2006; Hargittai, Hinnant 2008; Bocsi 2008; Van Deursen 2010; Gui, Argentin 2011).

For these reasons, it is very important to provide young people with autonomous use, as they have the opportunity to develop their skills beyond their cultural capital and thereby reduce their social disadvantages.

## Sample and method

This research observes the cohorts born after 1995 which are described as digital natives or generation Z in the literature (Prensky 2001a, 2001b; Ságvári 2008, 2011; Tari 2010, 2011, 2012; Jancsák 2013; McRindle, Wolfinger 2014).

This investigation involved 107 young people born after 1995. There were conducted 30 focus groups and one interview. The focus groups included 68 girls and 39 boys, and volunteered in institutions where girls' willingness to respond was generally higher. The selection of institutions was made by a random sampling procedure from among the public education institutions in Debrecen. The eldest participants of the focus groups were born in 1995 (15), the youngest in 2006 (1 person), and the average age was 18 years (born in 1998). Focus groups were recorded in Debrecen, in a religious elementary school, an elite secondary-grammar school, a vocational school, several departments of the University of Debrecen, an After School Program, and among the children from one children home. The latter (children from the After School Program and the children home) are referred to as 'marginalized' in the research, since the members of this group are not related to the same educational institution, and I wanted to illustrate their special situation by this name as well.

The interviews were recorded between September 2015 and November 2016. The NVivo 11 Plus program was used for the analysis. For the analysis of the focus groups, I chose the horizontal analysis method, and therefore I discussed collectively what was said during the focus groups (Vicsek 2006).

Furthermore, I used the results of my own questionnaires, which were referred to as ‘Questionnaire1’ and ‘Questionnaire2’, according to whether they were administered before or after the focus groups, respectively. Due to the sample item number (n=107), these statistical data only represent trends, but they are crucial additions to the results of the focus groups’ soft data. Moreover, as a result of the local nature of our results, it is essential to emphasize that no conclusions can be drawn regarding the whole population of generation Z; we can only characterize the participants of the study.

## Results

An influential element of the autonomy of Internet use is whether the individual can decide how much time they want to spend online. Since the majority of young people in the sample are involved in public education and live with their parents it would be natural to spend a limited time on the Internet. However, despite the fact that almost three-quarters (71.9%) of the young people participating in the focus group studies attend school, get up early in the morning and study every day, only approximately one fifth (20.2%) needs to use the Internet in a controlled context. While 5.8% of them design rules for the Internet use with their siblings, in order to share the use of a common computer, only 14.4% of their parents have a say in how they use the Web. The type of school has a significant impact (Chi-square test,  $p < 0.05$ ) on whether parents supervise their children’s Internet use (see Table 1).

Table 1: The control of internet usage by school type  $p < 0.05$

|                    |                                 | Does anyone decide how much you can use the Internet?    |                                 |           |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|-----------|
|                    |                                 | <i>Yes, we have established rules with my sibling(s)</i> | <i>Yes, my parents limit it</i> | <i>No</i> |
| <b>school type</b> | <i>university</i>               | -  | -                               | 100%      |
|                    | <i>secondary school</i>         | 4.5%   | 22.7%                           | 72.7%     |
|                    | <i>vocational school</i>        | 3.7%   | 18.5%                           | 77.8%     |
|                    | <i>religious primary school</i> | 27.3%  | 9.1%                            | 63.6%     |
|                    | <i>marginalized</i>             | 7.1%   | 28.6%                           | 64.3%     |

Based on the table, we can see that most of the rules are set for students from the religious elementary school and for marginalized students. This is most likely

to be due to their age, given that they all attend primary school. However, it is interesting that while among the religious primary school students the rules – if there are rules – are mostly created and maintained by siblings themselves, among the marginalized students parental control is needed because they experience a greater proportion of different social problems.

After the youngest, secondary grammar students are those who have to deal with strong parental influence. For almost a quarter of these students (22.7%) the time they can spend in front of a computer is determined for them. This ratio is not high, even though they are minors, but this may be due to the fact that – based on the focus group discussions – they focus on building their future in a very conscious way. They attend special lessons and competitions after the day-to-day school sessions. That is why it is certainly important for their parents to supervise their time.

In the case of vocational school students, based on the interviews, the opposite is true. Their parents – in a smaller proportion than secondary school students – use control over Internet usage to force their children to learn or do homework. According to the focus groups, this is an everyday problem for them.

In the lives of university students, control was not present, due to their age. Most of them had moved to a dormitory or were renting a flat, so their parents would not be able to determine how much time they spent online.

Based on the focus group conversations, control can be established by three factors. The first is the parental influence analysed above, the second is the system created by siblings, and the third is the personal decision of the young people themselves, which can be called internal control (see Figure 1). As the age of the students' increases, in most cases, external control decreases, and the role of internal rules is strengthened.

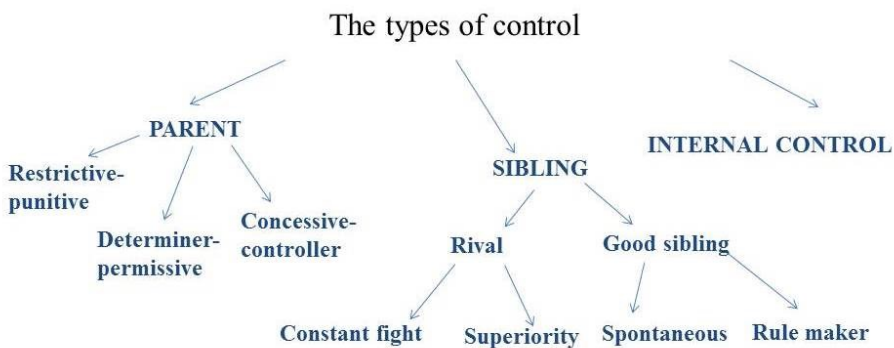


Figure 1: The types of control, based on the research

With the spread of smartphones, people can access the Internet when and wherever they want; use is no longer linked to a particular place or time. Therefore, in

the following, I will only examine the characteristics of web-based use of the computer, through a detailed exploration of the three control factors listed above (parents, siblings, self-control), grouping their behavioural patterns, and the responses of the young people participating in the focus groups.

Apart from a few cases, parents tried to restrict their children's Web and PC use after they first accessed the Internet or computer at home, or before they reached a certain age<sup>1</sup>. There are only a few cases when parents did not restrict it. That happened mostly among girls, who were uninvolved with the Internet.

If we analyse how young people talk about the 'controller', we can derive very interesting conclusions. Most people simply use the third person plural, not mentioning the parent specifically<sup>2</sup>: *'They made rules'*, *'They said it was enough for the evening'*, and *'They had a say in the matter'*. If the parents are named, then mostly often (15) they use the term 'mother'. This shows that mothers appear to be the main decision-makers as regards the time spent by young people in front of the computer and the Internet. The youngsters mention their mother nineteen times when they talk about control: *'Mum enters the code'* (interviewee 100), *'My mother always scolded me'* (interviewee 99), *'Mother said that I have two hours of PC use'* (interviewee 38), *'Mother told me it was enough'* (interviewee 94). However, fathers were only mentioned twice as a parent who has influence over young people's free time: *'Mother's or father's strictness has solved the situation'* (interviewee 24), *'Dad said that PC use depends on my grades'* (interviewee 21). This is most likely due to the fact that mothers are more involved in the upbringing of children, spending more time with them from their childhood onwards, so they are the decision makers as regards the rules.

By analysing the responses of the young people in the sample, we can distinguish three types of parental control, based on the responses of young people born in Debrecen after 1995: restrictive-punitive, determiner-permissive, and concessive-controller. In the following, I characterize these types of parents, using the answers given by the young people.

**Restrictive-punitive:** This type of parent appears 39 times in the sample. These parents define strict rules for PC or Internet use, and there is no way to deviate from them. If for some reason their child violates these rules, they can count on punishment and reproach. *'We could use the PC from eight to ten for two hours in the evening, and then Mum always told me that the time was up, then we left it because there was hoopla, if we had surfed longer or watched more South Parks (...) the maximum I could spend was two and a half hours, but then... And the PC was*

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<sup>1</sup> This age varies from one family to another; usually after enrollment at secondary school, parents' controlling role is reduced, or even ceases.

<sup>2</sup> In spoken or written Hungarian language we do not differentiate between the sexes like in English (he, she).

*encoded, so really... So it was restricted for us, we couldn't always use it' (interviewee 99). 'On weekdays we could use the computer until half past nine, then it was off, my mum nagged me and bugged me and said 'let's turn it off...' She set my nerves on edge, so I turned it off whatever I was in' (interviewee 48). Restrictive- punitive parents do not only explicitly state how long their child can use the Internet or a computer, but also often set requirements for access, such as good marks or finished homework. 'I could have been on third or fourth grade, and there was a rule that I could play an hour every day, but if we got fours or worse marks, then nothing for a week' (interviewee 101). 'I only could use it after I did my homework and chores' (interviewee 76).*

**Determiner-permissive:** 11 students mentioned this type of control. These parents also set regulations on the use of the computer, but these rules are less rigid, they can be changed with some degree of flexibility, and the children have the opportunity to extend the time they spend at the machine. These parental roles are not punitive, but permissive. *'I have a brother and we had a little debate sometimes, but the replacement time was customized. Let's say, it was not strict, for example two hours' (interviewee 100). 'Well, uh, for us, it wasn't that... Okay, obviously, when I had to go to sleep, it was, but if my mother told me it was enough, I stood up' (interviewee 50). 'Yes, yes, it was 2 o'clock and then I had to finish at 3:00. Well, I tried to make it a little bit longer, but then I was told "Come on...", and then...' (interviewee 43). 'My mum told me that I can use it for an hour and then she looked at the clock when it ended. Sometimes it was "Oh, Mom, please just half an hour more", or "Oh, I am still in the game right now", so it was... but then she went away from time to time' (interviewee 55).*

**Concessive-controller:** In 21 cases this type emerged. These parents do not initially develop principles of use, but, depending on the situation, meddle in the online activities of their child. One context in which this form of control may appear is with late PC use. *'When I got my first computer I had a period when I used it almost continuously, so they came in in the evening and said that I could turn it off now' (interviewee 105). In this case, the concessive-controller parents do not have a specific period of time to be followed by the child, but indicate if they feel it is time to stop and, for example, get some rest. 'Well, in the evening, when my brother is going to sleep, I would have to "Put my phone down", but I use Facebook a little, under the blanket. The most important thing for my mother is learning, and, really, if I have to, I can use my phone, though my mom doesn't like it' (interviewee 75). These parents do not stipulate that children can only have access to the Internet after they have studied, so this issue is treated more flexibly. 'Not only, um, the point is also that if I start to learn, I don't use it very much, because then it's a problem that I'm paying attention elsewhere' (interviewee 9). The second type of the concessive-controller parents is when control is the result of an action (in most cases a bad mark). They were concessive before the bad mark, and then they became a controller. 'It is not*

*typical for me to be under control, but if I study badly, it is obvious that I can't use it (...)*' (interviewee 35).

The most common type of parent is the restrictive-punitive (39), followed by the determiner-permissive (21) then the concessive-controller (11). The majority of the parents (50) link the use of the Internet with pre-established rules. They consider it to be harmful in several respects, e.g. in studies, ruining eyesight, etc. A smaller proportion of them are less strict in complying with these rules. It is also common that parents move from restrictive-punitive to determiner-permissive over the years, or they hand over all regulation to their child. *'They let me have an hour, and then one and a half hours, later two, and over the years this regulation changed'* (interviewee 4). The reason for this is that, with age, rules are loosening in all different ways for young people. In addition, the use of the computer over the years is no longer limited to gaming, but it is also more strongly associated with studies, thereby legitimizing longer-term use. *'In a primary school I could obviously use it only after studying, and it was decided that I could not sit there at 8 o'clock and 9 o'clock in the evening and then have a bath etc.; then in secondary school this evening time was extended to 10 o'clock, 11 o'clock'* (interviewee 44).

Before going on to observe sibling control, we will discuss what means of control and sanctions are used by parents to limit their children's internet activities. The following factors were mentioned in the focus groups by the participants:

- Encoding: In five cases (two of them in the child care home), the PC was coded, so the child can use it if the parent or caregiver in the child care home enters the code. With this method – obviously providing the child does not try to break the code – they can completely customize when youngsters can use the computer and the Internet. *'When we got home, there was no computer, and when they came home, we talked about everything, and if we wanted to use the PC, we had to ask, and they entered the code'* (interviewee 46).

- Taking away a cable or device needed to operate the computer: in this case, the parent takes away or pulls out a device (mouse, internet cable, etc.) necessary for the functioning of the PC, or turns off the wi-fi router at some point to control the time the child spends online. *'Once, she put away the internet cable. I was looking for it, but then I realized that it had been taken away. It had been taken somewhere'* (interviewee 43). As with the coding described above, this can be avoided in some cases (especially for members of generation Z this is not a problem). *'Once, my mum took the mouse. But with the number lock and other keys, I was able to use everything'* (interviewee 48). *'She pulled out the cable, and until she came home, I obviously put it back'* (interviewee 45).

- Time limit: this is the most commonly used method; a parent sets a specific time limit for using the computer (e.g. a daily limit, a final finishing time, etc.): *'When we were younger, Mom said that then everyone could play on the PC for*



*twenty minutes or half an hour, and that was all'* (interviewee 34). In other cases, the hour limit is tied to something (after studying, after dinner, etc.). *'If we got home, then we had to study, and if we were ready, we could use the Internet, but just for 1 or 2 hours'* (interviewee 20).

As the Internet and the computer, and later the smartphone, began to play an increasingly vital role in the lives of young people, parents realized this by using ICT tools and the Internet as a punishment tool. How can this be achieved? Based on the responses of students who participated in the study, the most important sanctions introduced by parents can be grouped as follows:

- Threatening: it is typical that many parents only threaten punishment, for some children the punishment will not be implemented, or if it is applied, the previously imposed punishment will eventually be reduced. *'It used to be said that in the case of a bad mark or such like, I could not play for a week, but that wasn't a week generally, it ended sooner'* (interviewee 62). *'Mom sometimes tells me that there is no PC tomorrow, or I can only use it until 10 PM, but never keeps her word'* (interviewee 37).

- Withdrawing rights: the most commonly used sanction is the withdrawal of the Internet or the computer. This can take two forms; there may be a permanent withdrawal for a certain period of time; alternatively, it can be a reduction in the daily limit for a given period.

- Permanent: in this case, access to the computer or the internet is completely eliminated for a certain period of time. This period can be predetermined: *'Once I broke a bench because I jumped on it in the school. After that I couldn't use it [the computer] for a month'* (interviewee 94). *'Well, if I had gotten a bad mark, I wouldn't have sat in front of the PC'* (interviewee 63). Sometimes a certain condition must be met in order to finish the punishment. *'I couldn't sit there until I fixed it,* (interviewee 59).

- Daily Reduction: In the case of a daily reduction, the young person may use the Internet or computer only for a shorter period than usual. *'Last time it was in September that I did something, and all the power cords disappeared from my PC so I could not turn it on. In the last three weeks, they turned off the Wi-Fi for some reason at 10 PM'* (interviewee 32).

- The device (smartphone) is taken away: this is the other most commonly used punishment, which has become widespread nowadays, with the spread of smartphones. These parents do not forbid the use of the computer; they only take their children's smartphones away. In this way, the children have access to the Internet, but this access is no longer unlimited and non-stop, but is limited to the period when the student is at home in front of the computer. *'Well, after some bad marks, they usually take it away for 1-2 weeks (...) I get used to it...'* (interviewee 36).

- Internet disconnection: in the fourth typical sanctioning method the parents do not ban students from the computer, just from the Internet. In this case, they have access to the PC, but they cannot connect to the Web. *'Well, yes, they turned off the net, or something like that'* (interviewee 49).

Since most families had only one computer when the Internet was introduced, after parental control sibling rules became the second characteristic type of control. This was designed to achieve a fair or less fair sharing of the computer. Two main types of agreement between siblings (rival, good brother) appeared in focus groups, which can be divided into two further subcategories. These are shown below.

**Rival:** this is the most common form of behaviour. In this case, brothers and sisters consider access to the Internet or to the computer to be a fight. These situations can often come to the point of physical confrontation: *'Physical contact... pull each other from the PC... so there is no way to stop him'* (interviewee 2). *'We despised each other from the chair and then said "Now it's my turn", so we had so many conflicts'* (interviewee 48). The category of rival has two subcategories.

- In the first subcategory, the siblings are in a constant fight to control the computer, and this competition is equal: *'We have a laptop in our mother's room, and I have a sister who is a year younger than me, so we always have severe fights'* (interviewee 78). *'When we had only one PC and it was in my room, we also argued a lot about using it. We were younger and wanted to play continuously, and then we tried to make a schedule for every hour. Well, it worked for a while, but somehow it was always a great quarrel in the end'* (interviewee 42). *'There were debates, but we always solved it. Sometimes with a fight, sometimes we got it right, but mostly with a fight'* (interviewee 36). Most of these 'debates' disappear as children get older, or due to the spread of computers and smartphones. On the one hand, in many families, it has become natural that all family members have their own PC or laptop. On the other hand, smartphones have become cheaper, so children from families with lower financial status have one as well. *'With my brother, we've been able to fight about everything since we were younger, so we naturally argued about it, but now we can agree'* (interviewee 66).

- In the other case, one of the siblings (usually the older one, or the boy) is more violent and does not let the other sibling use it: *'I was older, I used it'* (interviewee 10). *'I was the dominant one, and told him to get out after 8 PM, and the PC was mine from 8, and then I was on MSN and I was there... I was the older sister here. And no matter what he did, what he wanted, at 8 o'clock I packed him off. (...) He was frustrated, but I was the older one'* (interviewee 54). *'I have an older brother; I am younger, so I was a bit oppressed. I could use it, but obviously less than him'* (interviewee 44). *'I have an older and a younger brother and we have a computer and a laptop at home, and we always had fights about time and who gets on first. Everyone struggled for their position... My older brother was the winner'* (interviewee 28).

**Good sibling:** two kinds of good sibling can be distinguished in the focus group conversations

○ In the first type, the siblings do not develop a system of rules but always decide spontaneously who can use the computer and for how long. These compromises are accepted and there is no debate between them on this issue. *'No, I always let her use it, we never fight'* (interviewee 85). *'Actually, as I remember, we never had a quarrel, if I asked my brother to let me use, he would let me, and I played a bit and then he continued what he wanted'* (interviewee 47). *'We never bothered each other. After a while, we said that it was my turn in half an hour'* (interviewee 40).

○ The second type of good sibling is characterized by rigid rules, which are always observed, so there is never, or only rarely, any argument between them. *'Well, when we had only one PC we agreed that my brother would use it in the morning and the afternoon, and then it would be me in the evening'* (interviewee 41). *'When we use the Internet we change every 30 minutes. If one of us plays more, then the other can spend exactly the same time there'* (interviewee 58). *'Once we made a big chart and we drew a line under every hour. It worked'* (interviewee 78).

After parental and sibling control, the third major type of control is **internal control**, which gradually gains a greater role as children become older. Some of them had the chance to decide the amount of time they spend online from an early age. *'No, my parents never had a say in the matter, it was my own little world'* (interviewee 106). *'In my case, they never get involved'* (interviewee 2). *'I don't have so much control because I'm 17 years old now, so I taught myself that if I am tired I leave it and don't stay in front of the computer'* (interviewee 4). *'We do not have such a rule, but I control myself by knowing that, for example, I have to study, so I put my phone in the farthest place in the house'* (interviewee 26).

Thus, based on the interviews presented above, I can state that most of the young people in the sample did not use the computer alone at one stage of their life, and some external control (parental, sibling control) appeared.

## Summary

In this study, my aim was to examine the autonomy dimension in a second-level digital inequality context. I primarily focused on the autonomous Web use of the members of generation Z, using qualitative and quantitative methods. My goal was to discover who controlled young people's Internet use, and how they did so.

The study of digital literacy is extremely important as it has become part of cultural capital. Autonomous use, based on research, also leads to an increase in cultural capital. Molnár (2017) highlights the proportion of digital illiterates in

Hungary as being extremely high, approximately 40% of the population over 15 years old. According to this result, there are 3.4 million people in Hungary who do not use ICT tools and various online services due to their lack of digital expertise. 84% of non-users are over 45 years of age, 65% of them are inactive, three-quarters have a low level of education, and a third lives in villages. More than a quarter of the digitally illiterate ones live in the north-eastern part of Hungary.

Molnár (2017) emphasizes that the labour market is undergoing more rapid and more drastic changes than before. That is why it is extremely significant to develop digital skills and teach children autonomous, safe, and conscious use of digital tools. However, it is difficult for parents because, as members of generation X, they have low digital literacy, are not aware of the risks (e.g. cyber-bullying, internet addiction [Galán 2014; Galán, Rákó, Szabó 2018]) and are unable to use computers or the Internet. Therefore, it is difficult for them to protect their children from the dangers of the Web, and to control or empower them.

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## **Kto i jak może kontrolować? Autonomia korzystania z Internetu wśród członków pokolenia Z na Węgrzech**

### **Streszczenie**

Zmiany społeczne i gospodarcze w ciągu ostatnich kilku dekad wygenerowały nowy rodzaj nierówności – nierówność cyfrową. Zaprezentowane badanie opiera się na teorii nierówności cyfrowych drugiego poziomu. Próba została dobrana spośród członków pokolenia Z, którzy mieszkają w Debreczynie na Węgrzech. Celem tego badania jest ujawnienie, kto kontroluje korzystanie z Internetu przez członków pokolenia Z i jak ta kontrola jest uzyskiwana za pomocą metod jakościowych i ilościowych. Na podstawie wywiadów grup fokusowych odkryto trzy rodzaje kontroli: rodzicielską, rodzeństwa i wewnętrzną.

**Słowa kluczowe:** nierówność cyfrowa, autonomia, Internet, pokolenie Z, młodzież