

Perceptions of Life Choices In Adulthood

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Abstract:

There has been an increasing gap between the generations prior to the 2000s and the younger generations today, such as generation z. This gap is rather drastic, showing major changes in what many label as the ‘milestones’ that is expected of a person to complete at a certain age. Generation Z has shown to be completing these milestones later in life drawing forth many concerns. Developmentally is generations regressing or rather is there a change in society as a whole which is impacting the societal expectations of what one must achieve in order to be deemed ‘successful’. Due to changes in society, generation z overall possess rather differing views, attitudes, and general expectations of adulthood.

Keywords: Generation Z, generations, Milestones, Economic, emerging adulthood, development.

Introduction:

Traditionally, adulthood has been marked by the achievement of socio-demographic milestones such as completing education, securing full-time employment, getting married, buying a home, and having children (Wright, 2025). These milestones, often referred to as traditional markers of adulthood, were once seen as the standard path to stability and social acceptance. However, the timing and importance of these milestones have shifted significantly over time. For instance, in the 1970s, about eight in ten people were married by age 30, whereas today this milestone is often not reached until age 45 (Vespa, 2017). These changes reflect broader economic and social transformations, including rising educational costs, increased student debt, unstable job markets, as well as a new era of thinking emerging from a new generation. These variables have delayed what is typically recognized as ‘traditional markers of

independence' and have begun to create a new stage of life known as *emerging adulthood*. This stage would be ages 18 to 25 and reflect the stage of self exploration and building of one's identity. The purpose of our study was to examine said delay and the perceptions of milestones in adulthood on college students at *Roger Williams University*.

With the change of society and shift seen in generation z specifically, it is rather critical to examine these differences for the future. Generation Z accounts for about two billion of the world's population and is estimated to represent nearly 27% of the world's workforce by 2025. (Katsaros, 2024) The study explores whether Generation Z showed greater support for males achieving non-traditional milestones compared to females achieving the same non-traditional milestones and traditional milestones overall. By doing so, the study highlights whether generation Z challenges long-standing gender stereotypes and whether gender continues to play an influential role in shaping how young adults view the pathways into adulthood. Today, Gen Z faces criticism for being a "lazy generation" or for "refusing to grow up," yet these assumptions often ignore the social and economic barriers they experience. With higher living costs and lower job security, Gen Z may not be rejecting adulthood but rather redefining it to fit their realities. "Recent polling has found that young people think that much in their lives is outside of their control, that they are pessimistic about their own futures and the fate of the country, and they are feeling that the American dream is out of reach for most young people. (Heys, 2024). This understanding is often presented throughout the literature and guides the studies regarding this subject matter.

Literature Review:

Researchers have begun exploring the topic area of delayed adulthood in terms of a large variety of variables. Significant changes in society within political, economic, demographic, and

sociocultural factors are ever present today. Studies have examined these changes in connection to generation z's attitudes toward adulthood in general, the attitudes of social roles, conceptualization of adulthood, how gen z defines being an adult, maturity fears, and lastly, changes in adulthood over the past forty years. Due to the reality that what many define as an 'adult' is a rather broad concept, a wide array of variables need to be taken into account. This extensive variety of components reflects our rather comprehensive research areas.

Attitudes Toward Adulthood:

One of the many complaints about generation z from prior generations is that this era of emerging adults 'does not want to be an adult' or that the attitudes the generation fosters towards adulthood is flawed. The counter argument is that with a changing society there are changing attitudes of adulthood that may be either positive or negative. These changing perceptions can largely account for the change in the societal dynamics we see today. "Perceptions of adulthood and whether people feel like adults, how they feel towards adulthood, and how they define adulthood have changed substantially over the past 30 years. Traditionally adult status was defined by reaching the age of majority or legal age of adulthood which is 18 years old in most jurisdictions, or by the attainment of socio-demographic milestones such as career, getting married, and becoming a parent." (Wright, et al 2025). This however, is often not the case today. Due to the untenability of many of these milestones for generation z the attitudes towards adulthood have changed. A descriptive study that looked into a total of 98 different generation z students found that, "Few Gen-Zers believe in the 'American Dream; and they are the least patriotic of any generation. Despite their cynicism, they are passionate about social change and crave a sense of purpose." (Grow et, al. 2018). Due to the overall lack of belief in this so-called,

‘American Dream’ due to the sense of it being generally unreachable accounts for the change in attitudes toward adulthood. On the same note, there is a change in how the generation not only views adulthood but how it is conceptualized.

Conceptualization of Adulthood:

Often what we consider to be the ‘norm’ reflects a social conditioning for what others would consider to be a stereotype. This is shown through the definition of what many consider as ‘an adult’. However, generation z tends to stray from this stereotype due to a changing of society and economy. “The way in which adolescents often structure the concept of what an adult looks like is culturally relative and has societal implications.” (Jackson et al, 1998). With this in mind, the stereotype of generation z being ‘lazy’ in terms of adulthood is rather a sweeping generalization. *Jackson, D.W., & Tein, J. (1998)*, conducted a cross sectional survey design study to examine the building of the stereotypes of ‘an adult’, while also exploring the roles and influences other factors have on the construction of said conceptualization of gender, maternal employment, and employment goals in adolescence. The sample of 237 adolescents ranging from ages 12-14 years old and 15-18 were surveyed. Out of this sample 150 had employed mothers, 85 unemployed, 48% planned to go to college, and the other half planned to be employed, enlist, and/or get married. The survey reflected a questionnaire listing several social issues that were put into statements based on what many consider traditional gender roles of adulthood. The study concluded, there is a significant interaction of age, gender, career aspiration, and maternal employment status. In conclusion, it is rather apparent that adolescent's conceptualization of what adulthood looks like is heavily influenced on gender, familial worker roles, and public roles within the home. With this in mind the study needed to take into account potential demographic

information. While our study does not ask participants about parental employment, other factors such as age, gender, race, and grade of college education were featured in the survey. These questions were not to serve as identifying factors but to assess the general population taking the survey.

How Gen Z defines Adulthood:

Generation Z as discussed, tends to have quite a different outview on what an adult is compared to other generations. With this being said generation z had exhibited rather different definitions of what makes an adult, an adult. A study conducted by *Wright, M., & von Stumm, S. (2025)* looks into the generational definitions of adulthood. The study assessed a sample of 722 adults ranging from ages 18 to 77 years old. Asking questions such as subjective adult status and the extent to which people feel like an adult, attitudes of adulthood, if participants think adulthood is a positive or negative experience, as well as the characteristics that people use to define adulthood. The study concluded that overall, participants felt positive about adulthood and the definition of adulthood was significant in relation to the age of which the respondents were. Participants predominantly defined adulthood throughout psychological characteristics, “endorsed by 80% of the sample, rather than by socio-demographic milestones which were endorsed by only 22–40% of participants. Both subjective adult status and attitudes towards adulthood were significantly associated with older age and the attainment of the socio-demographic milestones of marriage and parenthood. Regression analyses revealed that having a positive attitude towards adulthood was the strongest psychological predictor of subjective adult status, accounting for 10% of the variance. This suggests that fostering positive attitudes towards adulthood may help improve the well-being of contemporary adults.” Due to

the ever changing times and pressures of life in all areas, generation z's definition of adulthood is negatively impacted due to the attitude towards adulthood. The subjective adult status through generation z's viewpoints is rather influential to the delay that generation z exhibits in reaching the traditional milestones of what others label as 'adulthood'.

Maturity Fears:

Maturity fears among generation z is something that is increasing specifically with undergraduate students in the US today. Not only is generation z facing the unattainability of what other generations expect of them, but many experience fears of growing up due to the challenges and complexities of the world today. Substantial research has been conducted by researchers to learn about these increased maturity fears of generation z, one of which was conducted by *Smith et, al 2017*. The study examines maturity fears among 3,291 undergraduate students across the years of 1982, 1992, 2002, and 2012 using a time lag technique to assess the generational changes to maturing fears. The results revealed that both men and women across generations had some level of maturity fears with the fear increasing over time. The study was conducted again on a total of 673 undergraduate students in 2001, 2003, 2009, and 2012. The second study replicated prior findings indicating that those that are younger report higher maturity fears than prior generations. The data shows maturity fears increased in 2001 to 2012 and is rising again with further generations. Some of the contributing factors of this fear are challenging economic times, social pressures to remain youthful, and/or internal fears of assuming increased responsibility. "Indeed, a failure to achieve and accept appropriate maturity status may lead to the inability to successfully transition to adulthood. Specifically it may adversely affect the development of one's own identity, capacity for intimate relationships,

and/or behavioral and financial independence. Thus, increased maturity fears could have a broad maladaptive effect on society as a whole if they interfere with successful transition across developmental stages.” (*Smith et al 2017*). Making it rather critical that these fears in relation to changes in society today are addressed. Maturity fears are only an aspect of the delay seen in adulthood today, with societal demands contributing to said dilemma.

Changes In Adulthood:

Over the years there has been a change in adulthood overall through the generations. The experiences of young adults today greatly differ to that of 40 years ago, the 1970's. Due to changes of times there has been an introduction of new ages for milestone achievements such as marriage, education, living independently, etc. Getting married young, owning a home, and having children has been significantly delayed for generation z not only due to the economy but due to pursuing higher education first. Instead of ‘settling down’ like prior generations did, generation z is often encouraged to pursue a college degree first and foremost. This within itself has delayed the ages in which generation z achieves these milestones in comparison to other generations, with studies noting “Generation the cohort of young people born between 1995 to 2012 is navigating the transition to adulthood in an era marked by significant economic challenges.” (Rubin et al. 2024).

A study using descriptive statistical analysis from the U.S. Census data compared patterns across decades (primarily 1975, 2005, 2015, and 2016) Participants were those within the U.S. population across all 50 states, ages ranging from 18 to 34, with a specific focus on the 25–34 age group. The study concluded that not only are times different due to the changing society we live in today but it is delaying milestones overall. Findings included living

independently has been on the decline. In 2015, more young adults lived with their parents than in any other arrangement. “One in three young people, or about 24 million 18-34-year-olds lived in their parents home in 2015.” (Vespa, 2017). Economic challenges have overall intensified, especially for young men, with increasing numbers earning under \$30,000 annually. (Vespa, 2017) Women have moved away from homemaking, with rates dropping from 43% in 1975 to 14% in 2016 (Vespa, 2017) With delays in marriage now becoming more common as well, “8 in 10 people married by the time they turned 30. Today, not until the age of 45 have 8 in 10 married.” (Vespa, 2017) With another study concluding that overall marriage has become less attainable. “Although marriage is optional and often foregone, it has by no means faded among the poor and near poor. Instead, it is a much sought after but elusive goal. They state that they wish to marry, but will do so only when they are sure they can do it successfully.” (Cherlin, 2004). Due to the economic change present, to be able to marry successfully is now increasingly delayed in general for both generation z as well as other generations. Overall, the emerging adults now have education and economic self-sufficiency as the primary markers of adulthood, while marriage and parenthood rank low in importance due to the inaccessibility of said goals.

Among a total of 12,951 Finnish families the earnings of those who pursued family life first compared to those that chose to delay this path and get an education were studied. Examining the average earnings of both men and women between the ages of 18 to 39 in relation to their lifepaths. Taking into account both “wage gaps, economic outcomes by marriage, parenthood, or divorce, documenting marriage and fatherhood premiums for men and motherhood and other penalties.” (Jalovaara, 2019). The study noticed that there was an overall significant difference among those that took what is considered the ‘traditional’ path of ‘settling’ down and starting a family were associated with lowest later life earnings. “Most ‘traditional’

family life courses are associated with lowest later life earnings, followed by women who delayed motherhood, unpartnered mothers, and partnered childless women. Single childless women, who deviated most from the ‘traditional’ family life course of stable marriage and parenthood, were found to have the highest earnings.” (Jalovaara, 2019). Further supporting generation z’s delay in adulthood due to the goal of obtaining financial stability and self sufficiency prior to the roles of what many consider to be an adult, marriage and children. Despite this however, “marriage has remained the most institutionally and culturally supported family form” (Jalovaara, 2019). Demonstrating the clear gap between what is many aspirations versus what is achievable in recognition to society both in the United States as well as other countries.

Another study looking at the transition of adulthood in the years of 2010 to 2011 was conducted. Looking at the connection of subjective adulthood in terms of feeling an adult and what many believe constitutes an adult and identity characteristics of what adulthood is. The study found that overall adulthood is being delayed in the younger generations due to the changes within our society both politically, demographically, economically, and socio-culturally. The study noted that in other countries as well as Poland there has been a noticeable tendency to decline a ‘complete’ entrance into adulthood. “Young people later and later decide to establish a relatively stable relationship, to start a family, to give birth to the first and the subsequent children, to leave the family home, start independent living and to keep their own household, and to get a steady job.” (Brzezińska et, al. 2012). The study notes that this delayed transition is commonly connected to obtaining higher education where these years need to be spent developing a career with a degree that allows for better stability in the world. “This period is now often called, emerging adulthood” (Brzezińska et, al. 2012). A period that is increasing in

awareness both in developmental psychology as well as studies examining the gap between generations.

Emerging Adulthood:

Many studies support the idea of emerging adulthood to contribute to the gap of development we see today. Many label it as ‘the transition to adulthood’ being between the ages of 14 to 24 years old. (Rubin et al. 2024). “Offering opportunities for growth and exploration. Developmentally, adolescents and young adults envision aspects of their future related to milestones such as educational goals, career aspirations, and life benchmarks.” (Rubin et al. 2024). As a society, as soon as you reach the age of 18 or 21 it is almost expected that you act as a functional adult but much research in development psychology notes that the prefrontal cortex is not even fully developed by that age. “Brain development continues into and throughout the young adult years, including myelination of areas in the prefrontal cortex. Paralleling these developmental changes are increased skills in the area of executive functioning. In one framework, executive functioning itself can be divided into cognitive flexibility, inhibitory control, and working memory” (Burt, 2012). Further supporting this new area of development to be recognized. A brain that is not fully developed can not function that of an adult, making this age rather not adulthood but emerging adulthood.

This stage has been widely discussed amongst psychoanalysts, developmental psychologists, as well as cognitive psychologists, many of which have noticed this delay in reaching adulthood. All of which have noted the change in understanding of the developing brain and societal changes seen today. “The changes observed occur in concert with remarkable social changes in postindustrial societies, producing similar transformations in young adult

populations...the theory in this twenty-first-century cultural upheaval: the breakdown of defined pathways or “route-maps” to the predictable status of adulthood, corresponding changes in gender roles, sexuality, and approach to work” (Gilmore, 2019). Further accounting for the changes experienced today in relation to the work around us further delayed the predicted paths that many take into the status of what is considered ‘adulthood’.

In relation to an emergence of a new development stage there has been an increase in research that have noted a change of age in the typical ‘risky’ behaviors young adults and adolescents often participate in. A study looked into the arrest rates from the years of 1975 to 2013 and noted that arrest rates in the 2000s were often from 18 to 20 years olds and then declined after compared to the 80s and 90s mean ages of being 15 to 17 years old. The study examined trends in both police engagement, binge drinking, marijuana use, suicide and deaths by homicide and motor vehicle accident deaths. All of which showed a significant delay in recent times. Concluding that, “desistance from problem behaviors typical in adolescence was delayed in recent decades as the passage to adulthood has also delayed.” (Hays, 2021). Additionally supporting prior literature. Due to a delay in the passage to what is considered ‘traditional’ adulthood younger generations are delayed in developing to what we consider, adulthood.

Traditional/Non Traditional Milestones:

In relation to this delay and differences amongst generations there is a difference with what people consider traditional or non traditional milestones. *Wright et al. 2025* found less of an emphasis on these ‘traditional milestones’ of what many discuss to be defining someone as an adult. However, within feeling like an adult themselves, it is still strongly associated with the connection to traditional milestones such as marriage, house, children, etc. Concluding that,

“Marriage rates have fallen by 50% from 1991 to 2019” (*Wright et al. 2025*) In addition to marriage rates falling, the connection to parenthood has also been delayed. “For parenthood the average age of first time mothers has also increased from 26 to 31 between 1970 and 2019, and the number of children per woman has decreased from 2.9 to 1.6 between 1964 and 2020.” (*Wright et al. 2025*). Not only are these milestones being reached in a later stage of life but they are also less supported by generation z with the study stating, “In a recent survey, 55% of US respondents ages 18-25 endorsed being settled into a long term career as defining adult status, 26% endorsed marriage, and 33% parenthood.” (*Wright et al. 2025*) Concluding overall that although these are real goals that generations accept an adult to achieve, they are overall less attainable and therefore less accepted by the generations as something that needs to be achieved in order to feel like an adult.

Study Overview:

Need for study:

This study may benefit society by contributing to the scientific research of whether the younger generations are generally more accepting of these non-traditional life milestones due to this change in society we see today. While also examining if there is a gender role in this acceptance. Is Generation Z more likely to support a male’s non-traditional path than to support a woman following the same path? Knowing this information will allow us to assess the generational changes we see today in literature and research. Our study can help expand if this gap seen in literature is real in today’s generation z or not through either the negative or positive attitudes presented towards the different lifepaths presented.

Study Method:

This study was conducted online via survey. Participants were Roger Williams University undergraduate students. Participants electronically read and signed an informed consent form, then completed the study measures. Qualtrics randomly assigned participants to one of four conditions, manipulating both the gender and the milestone present. Participants were first asked to examine a story, then asked to answer questions evaluating the milestones present. Next, the participants will be given a set of traits and rate the character within the story based on how much they believe the trait fits the character. Questions were also provided regarding the story to do manipulation checks. Lastly, participants were asked demographic questions not for identification purposes but for the purpose of statistical data. Participants were told the purpose of the study was to examine college students' perceptions regarding milestones.

Data Collection. Responses were collected from a 5-point Likert scale to assess participants' perceptions of the milestones as well as to rate the character on a set of characteristics.

Data Analysis. A 2 X 2 between-subjects factorial ANOVA was conducted to examine the favorability of life milestones (Milestones: Traditional vs. Non-Traditional Milestone) x 2 (Gender: Female vs. Male). Our independent variables being life milestones and gender. The dependent variable is our participant pool, generation z.

Hypothesis/Rationale:

Based on prior research, the study predicted that college-age participants would be more supportive of non-traditional milestone stories compared to traditional milestones. While also expecting to find evidence of gender bias within the positivity or negativity given toward the different stories. Specifically, predicting that Gen Z participants would show greater support for

males achieving non-traditional milestones than for females following the same non-traditional milestones. Our study was chosen due to both our research pool being limited to college students as this is for an experimental class as well as the undergraduates today being predominantly generation z. It is rather more relevant to survey generation z on their own generational phenomenon than other generations.

Our predictions are associated with our very own experience of the gap of generational values when it comes to what used to be considered traditional. Often throughout social media headlines state that generation z is 'lazy' or 'refusing to grow up' or that we do not know how to be adults. Many of which stating that 25 is the new 18 in that generation z are overall reaching these milestones that are considered adulthood later than prior generations. Due to the changes challenging society generation z has to our understanding, become more accepting of those that chose to follow different paths. We believe that our generation is aware of the change in society and the different challenges we face compared to other generations and due to this generation z is rather more understanding and welcoming of choosing to follow a different path than what is considered of an adult. This research is relevant to psychology today as it can ultimately allow for psychologists to understand if the *emerging adulthood* developmental stage is needed today with the generational gap that is ever present in both literature as well as the media.

Method:

Participants:

A sample of 99 undergraduate students (21 men; 76 women; 2 non-binary/third) from Roger Williams University participated in our study in exchange for SONA credit. The mean age was 19.8 (SD = 1.34; range=10.0). Most participants were in their third year of college being a

college Junior, (37.7%). The majority of participants were white (91.58%; 6.32% Black/African American; 1.05% Native American/American Indian/Alaskan Native; and 1.05% Asian).

Procedure and Materials

Participants electronically read and signed an informed consent form, then completed the study measures. Participants were randomly assigned to 1 of 4 conditions in a 2 (gender character: male vs. female) x 2 (milestone type: traditional vs. non-traditional) between-subjects factorial design through Qualtrics.

Participants were told they would be reading a brief story about a young adult describing their experiences after graduation. They were shown one of four vignettes that differed only in the character's gender and the type of milestones the character achieved followed, all characters being 27 years of age. For gender, there were the options of either a female, Emma, or a male, Brian. The traditional milestone story included aspects such as going to college, getting a full-time job, marrying, and buying a house. The non-traditional milestones included earning a GED, freelancing, running a small business, traveling, and not pursuing marriage or children. After reading the story, participants were asked to rate their impression of the character. First, they responded to questions containing six factors that assessed how they viewed the character's life choices, using a 1-5 agreement scale (1 = Highly Disagree, 5 = Highly Agree). Then, they answered questions with seven personality traits, rating the character on each trait using a 1-5 scale (1 = Not at all, 5 = Extremely). These ratings captured participants' overall impression of the character's personality and lifestyle. Then, participants completed three manipulation check questions to confirm they noticed key details about the character's gender and milestone type.

After the manipulation question, participants completed a set of questions regarding their demographics.

This study took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and skip any questions they chose not to answer. After completing the study, participants were provided with resources for questions and the researchers' contact information and thanked for their participation.

Measures:

Perception of Character

Participants rated the character on six questions related to their life outcomes. These items asked whether the character seemed successful, financially stable, satisfied with their life, satisfied with their personal relationships, living a life the participant would personally be happy with, and whether the character had an ideal lifestyle. They rated these items on a 5 point scale (1 Highly Disagree, 5 Highly Agree). We combined the scores of the questions “I would be happy living this person's life” and “The person has an ideal lifestyle” to create a personal opinion score. We conducted a Cronbach's Alpha test in which the score was a 0.818 (*see appendix page 23*) These ratings were used to measure how positively or negatively participants viewed the character's life based on the version of the story given.

Personality Trait Ratings

Participants rated seven personality traits, including warmth, responsibility, maturity, drive, ambition, nurturance, and hard work. They rated these traits on a 5 point scale (1 not at all, 5 Extremely). We combined all seven traits rated into a mean Positive Rating Score. We conducted

Cronbach's Alpha test in which the score was 0.879. (*see appendix page 22*) These ratings measured how positively or negatively participants viewed the character overall and whether milestone achievement impacted the view of said characters.

Additional Measures

Manipulation check questions consisted of two multiple-choice items, with all having a yes, no, or I don't answer. Participants were asked to select the character's gender (male, female, or not sure) and if the character attended college, bought a house, and got married. Demographic items assessed gender, race/ethnicity, age, and academic status. In addition, the group assessed if gender had a significant impact on the character ratings.

Results:

Manipulation Checks:

In order to determine the effectiveness of the studies manipulations a total of three manipulation check questions were administered. These questions were used to ensure the validity and effectiveness of participants accurately identifying key characteristics about their condition regarding the characters gender and milestone relating to the vignette given. Of 99 participants, 85 participations (86%) accurately answered the manipulation question regarding milestone type correctly. 3 participants (3%) incorrectly identified the milestone and 11 (11%) were unable to answer. However, 99 participants (100%) accurately identified the character's gender.

Primary Analysis:

In order to test the effect of gender and milestone on personal opinion scores, we conducted a 2x2 (Timeline vs. Non-Traditional) x (Gender: Female vs. Male) between subjects factorial ANOVA. As hypothesized, a significant main effect for the timeline was found $F(1, 95) = 18.98, p = <.001$, partial $\eta^2 = .167$. Traditional milestones led to higher personal opinions ratings ($M = 4.00, SD = .13$) than did nontraditional milestones ($M = 3.15, SD = .15$) Contrary to expectations, the main effect for gender was not statistically significant, $F(1, 95) = 0.002, p = .962$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$. There was no main difference in personal opinions rating scores between those in the female condition ($M = 3.58, SD = .13$) and the male conditions ($M = 3.57, SD = .14$)

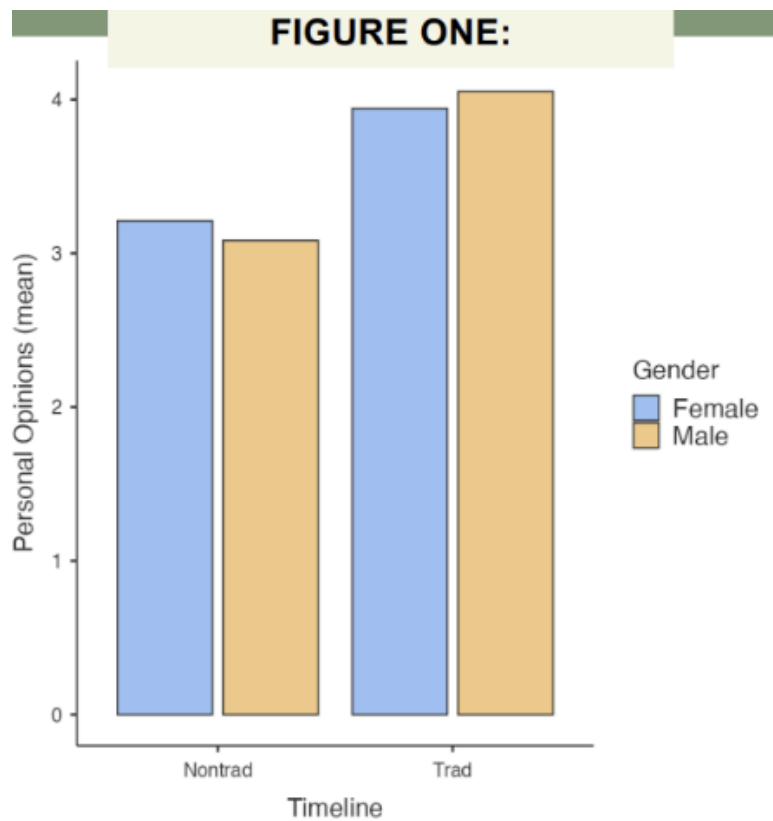
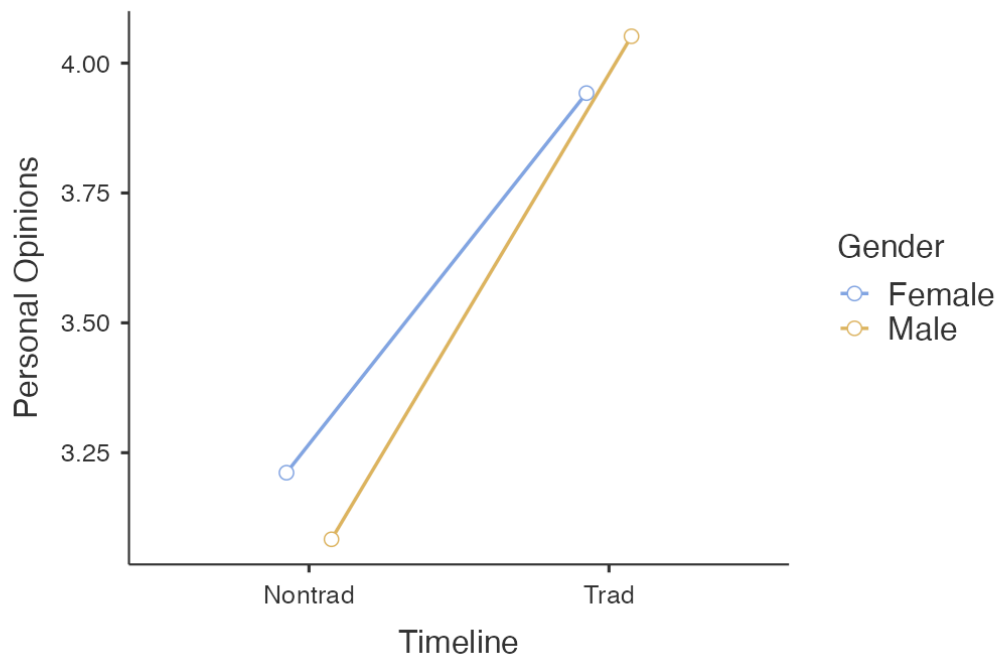
Contrary to our hypothesis, no significant interaction of Gender X Timeline was found, $F(1, 95) = .37, p = .54$, partial $\eta^2 = .004$. Personal opinion means and standard deviations for the four conditions are presented in Table 1. Examination of the pattern of means (in Figure 1) suggested there is no interaction between gender and timeline.

We also ran an additional test to test the effects of Gender and Timeline on mean positive scores. We conducted a 2x2 (Timeline: Traditional vs. Nontraditional) x (Gender: Female vs. Male) between subjects factorial ANOVA on mean positive scores. Contrary to our expectations, no significant main effect for the timeline was found, $F(1, 94) = .40, p = .528$, partial $\eta^2 = .004$. The main effect for gender was also not statistically significant, $F(1, 94) = 0.063, p = .640$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$. Lastly, there was no significant interaction of Gender x Timeline found, $F(1, 94) = .33, p = .565$, partial $\eta^2 = .004$. (See figure two). Measures used to calculate scores can be viewed in the appendix (pages 20-23).

Appendix:

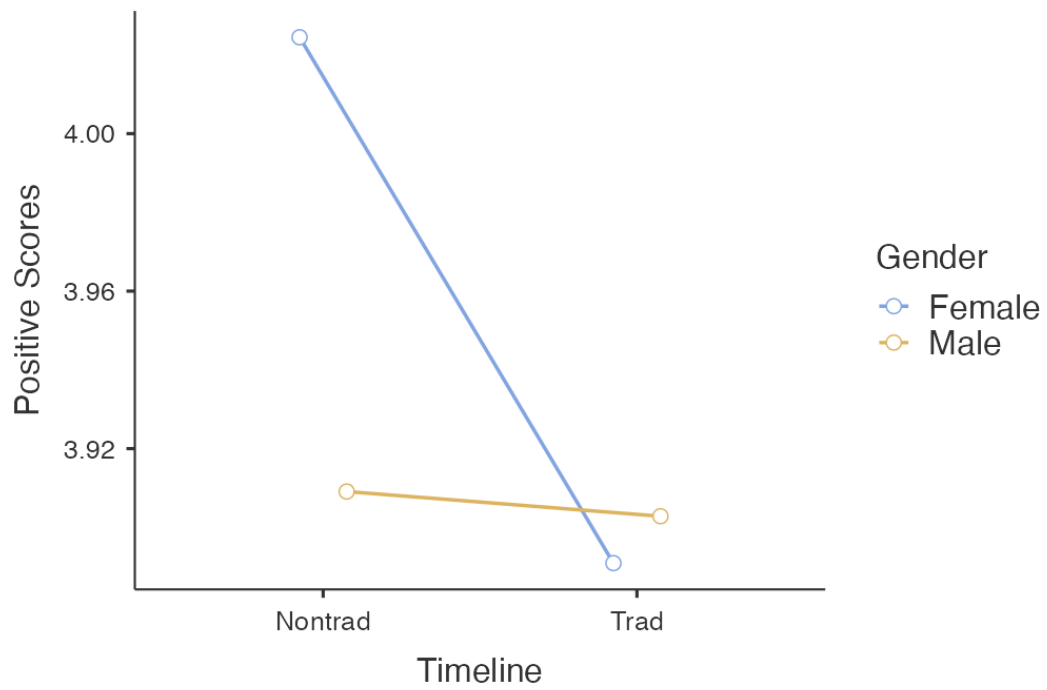
Timeline * Gender

FIGURE ONE



Timeline * Gender

FIGURE TWO



Positive Rating Scores

Scale Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's α	
scale	0.879

[5]

Item Reliability Statistics

	If item dropped
	Cronbach's α
Successful	0.864
Financially_Stable	0.870
Satisfaction	0.866
Personal_Relationship	0.870
Warmth	0.878
Responsible	0.860
Mature	0.862
Driven	0.865
Ambitious	0.869
Nurturing	0.888
Hard_Worker	0.861

Personal Opinion Score

Scale Reliability Statistics

	Cronbach's α
scale	0.818

[5]

Item Reliability Statistics

	If item dropped
	Cronbach's α
Happiness	0.766
Lifestyle	0.630

Discussion:

Overall our hypothesis was unfortunately not supported. Participants show a significant preference towards traditional milestones rather than the nontraditional. The data analysis found that participants rated characters with the traditional timeline more favorably than those with a non traditional timeline, contrary to our expectations. Showing a lack of support to our belief that generation z prefers a non-traditional lifepath due to the societal demands we see today, leading us to believe that although this traditional path is rather unattainable for generation z it is still the preferred path of the generation. The path of securing a full time job, buying a home, graduating on time, and starting a family is rather difficult to achieve for generation z, it is however still the valued milestones of the generation.

Contrary to our hypothesis, gender did not show a significant effect on participants' ratings of the characters in their designated vignettes either. Suggesting that there is rather no gender bias associated with what is valued by generation z in terms of milestone completion. This leads us to believe that expectations surrounding adulthood are shared regardless of gender of those completing them. There was no significant reaction between gender and timeline contrary to what we had hypothesized. Gender difference rather does not play a role into the negative or positive attitudes towards a person in either lifepath. Overall the results highlight the tension between idealized adulthood milestones and the rather complicated reality generation z faces today due to changes in political, economical, and societal times.

The results of the study draw forth unresolved questions. If the traditional lifepath is rather unattainable why is it still favoured by generation z? Does the emerging adult need to be introduced as a new developmental stage to better support new generations in their path to adulthood to better reflect the societal changes present as suggested by prior studies. Prior studies suggest that the ages of the emerging adult are between the ages of 14-24 years old with the brain not being fully developed until mid twenties (Rubin et al. 2024). Drawing to question if brain development is not completed, has societal expectations of adulthood negatively impacted society and generations as a whole? Does parental employment have a connection in relation to how positive the characters were related? In the future, research studies should examine why these traditional milestones still hold strong significance and meaning for generation z despite the lack of ability to achieve said goals. Examine how economic pressures, family expectations, and social norms shape generation z's path into adulthood. Research should also examine if parental employment plays a role into the favorability one has towards traditional or nontraditional milestones. If participants have parents who followed the nontraditional lifepath

are they more likely to be accepting of this lifepath or rather be less accepting and want to pursue that of a traditional path? With so many unresolved questions leading to even further uncertainty it is critical that research continues on this generational gap especially in developmental psychology research.

Our strongest part of the study was our reliability scores (Cronbach's Alpha) for both personal opinion and positive rating being high. This led us to conclude that our questions were both reliable and valid. Due to this, we were expecting to see results that supported our hypotheses. However, due to the fact that our study was done under a short period of time for a class and surveyed college students we did experience some limitations. Our biggest limitation is our study was small with only 99 undergraduate participants and was predominantly female. (75% female, 24.5% male, .5% third gender/transgender). With surveying undergraduate students the survey was only studying those that are already following what we consider to be the traditional lifepath which could contribute significantly to our results. Another factor that could influence our unsupported hypothesis was the rather simplicity of our survey design. If participants read more differing vignettes and answered questions regarding their values in lifepaths the results may have been rather different. Our study was overall limited due to the time strain and lack of complexity needed for the course as well as lack of variability of lifepath, age, and gender which could have influenced our results.

In the future if I were to conduct another study with the information gathered from this present study I would suggest doing a longitudinal study in which people from all different life paths talk about their journey in an interview in front of participants. I would increase participant size, have individuals from different economic statuses, different educational backgrounds, occupations, gender, and races participate. Participants can ask the person being interviewed

open-ended questions about their experiences and get a better overview and understanding of their life. I would then have participants rate each person on how much they value their lifestyle and if they would ever see themselves in that lifestyle. As well as examine whether parental employment was significant in relation to the lifestyle in which they chose. I believe that this would not only be more representative of the generational population but also yield more conclusive and valid results in terms of understanding generational differences in lifepaths.

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