

A Backlash, Rebellion or Revolution? A Survey Study on the Gender Perceptions of Generation Z Females at the Methodist Ladies' College in Australia

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Abstract

With the rapid development of society and the acceleration of the globalization process, the post-2000 generation of women, namely Generation Z women, are experiencing unprecedented social changes. The gender concepts of this generation are undergoing profound transformations. This study selects an all-girls high school in Australia as a typical field site and investigates on the marriage views, family concepts, future career choices, and attitudes towards current feminism of Generation Z women. This research aims to explore how Generation Z women shape and express their gender concepts when confronted with the conflict between traditional gender roles and modern feminist ideas. Through in-depth research on this specific group, this study will reveal the diversity and complexity of gender concepts in contemporary society and provide new perspectives and data support for future gender research.

Keywords

Generation Z, feminism, gender perception, Australia.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the topic of gender equality has attracted significant attention. Over the centuries, countless women have laid a solid foundation for the social status women enjoy today, despite facing challenging circumstances. With the advancement of technology, globalization, and the advent of the internet era, Generation Z has gained greater access to multicultural and global issues. They quickly acquire information, actively participate in discussions, and develop a deeper understanding of social issues such as gender equality, recognizing its importance. However, this has also brought about a series of radical statements and actions, as well as deep-seated skepticism and opposition from patriarchal societies. As a result, in many cases—particularly during online discussions involving gender-related controversies—feminism has gradually become a sensitive and even pejorative term, leading to misunderstanding and resentment. This perception has, to some extent, distorted the original intentions and impact of feminists.

Generation Z refers to the generation born roughly between 1995 and 2010. Growing up in a world of pervasive digital technology, they are often referred to as "digital natives". It is a generation that has been exposed to the Internet, smartphones, and social media from birth (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). This upbringing has enabled them to demonstrate exceptional efficiency and diversity in acquiring and transmitting information. At the same time, this generation embraces more diverse cultures and is more sensitive and engaged in global issues. Moreover, Gen Z groups value pursuing personal interests and individual identity over simply following conventional norms, which is why they are sometimes called "identity nomads" (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). (Fig.1)

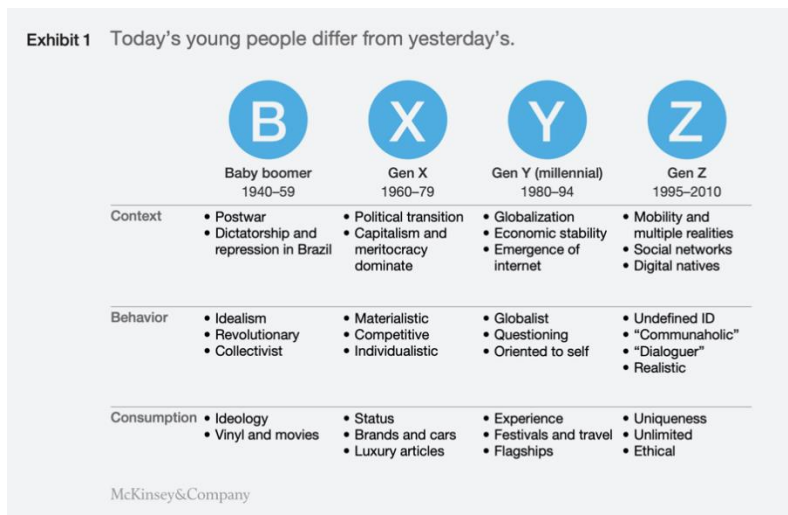


Figure 1. (Francis & Hoefel, 2018)

Currently, young women in Gen Z are at a critical stage in forming their understanding of gender roles and identity. Their perspectives not only reflect the psychological characteristics of their personal growth stage, but also reveal their generation's expectations regarding social gender. At the same time, they are deeply influenced by contemporary social trends, such as gender equality, feminism and diverse values, etc., which makes their gender concepts more representative of the times.

Nowadays, there is growing interest regarding Generation Z's attitudes toward gender equality and gender role formation in western academic circles. Studies have found that Gen Z college students are generally more enthusiastic about gender equality than previous generations, and they are more active in advocating for gender equality in the workplace, education, and politics (Lin et al., 2021). However, issues surrounding gender equality still affect Gen Z. For example, the idea that "men should be breadwinners" and "women should take care of others" continue to shape Gen Z college students' perceptions of gender roles (Fang et al., 2023). Meanwhile, other studies highlight more progressive gender role models, such as the notion that men and women should share family responsibilities equally (Bucchetti & Casnati, 2022). Nevertheless, as criticized by the third wave of feminism, much of this research focuses primarily on Western societies, lacking cross-cultural attention and comparative analysis of Asian and other ethnic groups.

On the contrary, the research on female gender concept in Chinese academic circles mainly focuses on adult female college students, without recognizing underage girls as valuable research subjects. For instance, Wang Qin and Liang Li's study, *Transformation of Female College Students' Values Since the Reform and Opening-Up*, divided the evolution of female college students' values into two stages, and revealed the track of their value changes from five aspects— gender perceptions, female subjectivity, views on marriage and relationships, employment view and life value. Similarly, Qian Xiaoyun's master's thesis, *The Development of Gender Perceptions Among Contemporary Female College Students*, employs a combination of questionnaire surveys and interviews to investigate the gender perceptions of 1,250 students from five universities in Fuzhou. However, most of these studies were conducted before 2010, lacking follow-up and feedback on the significant social changes in recent years.

Therefore, this study will take the gender perceptions of "Generation Z women" as the starting point to explore how social characteristics shape individual beliefs and to provide new perspectives and practical significance for contemporary gender studies. I will pay particular attention to introducing a comparative perspective, focusing on immigrant countries to investigate how the intersection of diverse cultures in contact zones influences and shapes the gender perceptions of Generation Z women.

The focus of the study turns to Australia. In line with global trends, Australia has made important progress on gender equality, with women's status advancing across many fields. As an immigrant nation, women living in Australia come from all over the world, bringing with them a rich cultural diversity. This diversity offers new perspectives and opportunities for women's empowerment, but it also means that women face different challenges depending on their cultural backgrounds. During the Covid-19, Asian women suffered severe inequality in Australia under the dual pressures of racial discrimination and gender inequality. Studies have shown that Asian women are more likely than Asian men to experience the brunt of racial discrimination during the pandemic (Ang et al., 2023). It can be seen that the problem of gender inequality still exists, and issues such as gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and misogyny cannot be overlooked. In Australia, the education model of some single-sex schools has promoted the cultivation of gender advantages to a certain extent, but it has also potentially led to antagonistic attitudes or stereotypes between the genders, resulting in a lack of comprehensive understanding of gender equality.

This study ultimately selects a local girls' high school in Melbourne as the field site. Girls' high school has an exclusive and homogenous environment, which provides a relatively pure observation object and research conditions for the study, and facilitates a deeper understanding of students' gender perceptions in the single-sex education environment. On the other hand, this school is situated within Australia's education system and multicultural societal context, effectively reflecting how local education and culture shape gender perceptions. Therefore, the college holds high representativeness and can provide valuable references for the study. Although existing research has explored topics such as gender perspectives, educational environments, and multicultural backgrounds, systematic analyses on their consequences and reflections remain insufficient, thus leading to the motivation of this study. By exploring GenZ's gender perceptions, social responses and influencing factors, this study aims to deepen the understanding of the spread and evolution of feminism across generations. Furthermore, by focusing on the girls' school environment in Australia's multicultural context, the study can discover the interaction of education, culture and gender perspectives.

This study will focus on the following questions:

Do Gen Z women's views on marriage and family responsibilities conflict with traditional gender role expectations?

How do they perceive gender equality in future career choices or workplace sexism?

What is their level of acceptance, questioning point or identification method of contemporary feminism (especially fourth wave feminism and online feminism)?

What influence do educational environment and multicultural society have on their gender perceptions?

2. Method

2.1. Fieldwork

Fieldwork refers to a social science research method in which researchers collect first-hand information through direct observation, interview, participation and recording (Guo, 2023). This method emphasizes the close interaction between the researcher's spirit of seeking the truth and the research object (Li, 2015). In this study, fieldwork was conducted in Methodist Ladies' College, a girls' school in Melbourne.

Methodist Ladies' College (MLC), located in Melbourne, was Australia's first girls' school to be founded by the Wesleyan Methodists. MLC opened on 14 February 1882 after the founding Principal, Rev. Dr. William Henry Fitchett, and a committee convinced the Australian Methodist

Church that having established schools for boys, it should also open a school for girls. MLC is one of the few schools in Victoria offering a choice between Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme, and Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathways, ensuring that students can tailor their education to suit their aspirations (MLC, 2019).(Fig 2-Fig 3)

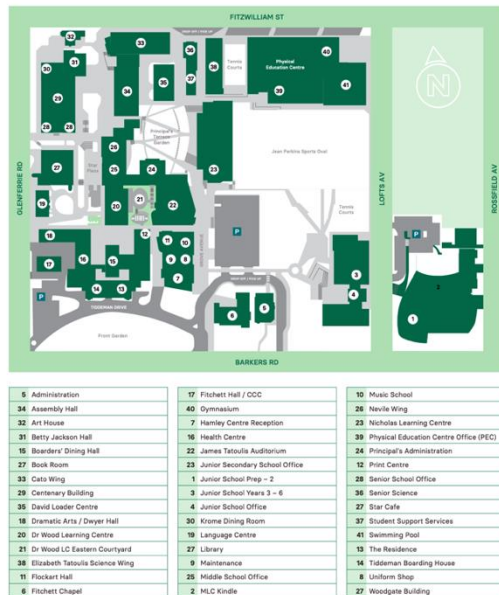


Figure 2. Map of MLC campus



Figure 3. Life in MLC

2.2. In-depth interview

In-depth interview is a qualitative research method in which researchers engage in one-on-one, in-depth conversations with participants to explore their true feelings, attitudes, behaviours, motivations and experiences on a specific topic. This method emphasizes openness and flexibility, allowing interviewees to express opinions and emotions in their own words. At the same time, interviews are purpose-driven with most of the information provided by the interviewees is within the defined scope of the interview's objectives (Yang, 2001).

In this study, seven students will be randomly selected (information recorded in table 1 below) from the high school cohort for one-to-one interviews. The information obtained will be directly used as primary data for this research. The interviews will take place in November-December 2024, and the average length of an interview will be 1 hour. The purpose of the interviews is to understand the views and thoughts of Gen Z women on marriage, family responsibilities, career planning, and contemporary feminism. The interviews will be conducted online.

Table 1 – Interviewees information

Interviewee	age
I1	18
I2	17
I3	18
I4	17
I5	16
I6	17
I7	17

3. Results

3.1. Redefinition of gender roles

The results of this study show that Gen Z women have developed a new understanding and attitude towards the meaning of marriage and family. They tend to examine the value of marriage and family with equality, freedom and mutual respect as core principles. Getting married or having children is no longer seen as a "necessary path" in a woman's life but rather as a personal choice. Compared with the traditional concept of marriage and family as "mandatory options" in life, Gen Z women pay more attention to personal growth and self-fulfilment. In relationships, they exhibit a rational and independent approach, which is significantly different from the intense emotions depicted in melodrama or fairy tale romance people loved in the past. They prefer to stay sober in their feelings and pursue mutual growth with their partners, rather than blindly sacrificing themselves.

According to the survey data collected from the interviews, the ideal marriage age for Gen Z women averages around 30 years old. Most interviewees believe that by this age, both they and their partners would be more mature in their careers, lives and emotions, enabling them to approach marriage and relationships with a more rational and thoughtful attitude. This shift reflects the new generation of women's pursuit of equality, independence and high-quality emotional connections. Specifically, some interviewees shared their views:

Interviewee 3 believe that between the ages of 30 and 35 is the stage when women gradually mature and are between equipped to handle relationships: "We become more mature between the ages of 30 and 35 and are more capable of undertaking relationships...when we encounter conflicts, we will not choose a cold war but solve problems in a more effective way." This view reflects an emphasis on emotional maturity and the expectation of constructive communication in marriage.

Interviewee 4 emphasised the importance of personal growth and financial stability in marriage: "I want to get married after 30 because I want to have enough space to find my own pursuits first...When I start a family, I want to be able to focus more on my family, so that it is responsible. So I choose to work hard to earn money first, build a solid financial base, and make sure that I can pay more attention to my family."

These views represent a significant change in Gen Z women's views on marriage. This new concept of marriage not only reflects their self-identification of modern independent women but also highlights their pursuit of a higher standard of living and emotional dynamics.

3.2. Criticism and reflection on prevailing feminist trends

Interviews reveal that most Generation Z women, whether self-identified feminists or non-feminists, expressed concern that some forms of feminism today appear too extreme in some cases and fail to have a positive social impact. They pointed out that extreme statements and behaviours not only deviate from the original intention of promoting gender equality but may also lead people to mistake feminism for opposing and fighting against men, ignoring its essence of fostering gender equality and harmonious coexistence in the whole society. At the same time, they also mentioned that in some cases, some people seem to use the concept of feminism as a rationalization to satisfy personal needs and interests, rather than truly promoting social change or improving gender relations. For instance, on social media, some people may selectively amplify certain events, simplifying them into gender conflicts to stimulate emotional discussions and antagonisms, which in turn obscure the real issues that the feminist movement is concerned with.

In addition, such behaviour may lead to the public misunderstanding of feminism, reducing it to opposition, blame, and even conflict, while overlooking its original intention of advocating fairness, respect and cooperation. Some interviewees believe that although extreme actions attract widespread attention, they may not truly advance the practice of gender equality. Instead, they may alienate some people who originally supported gender equality and even become sceptical of the movement. Therefore, they call on modern feminism to focus more on rational, inclusive and constructive expression, eliminating prejudice and misunderstanding through practical actions and communication, rather than resorting emotions or antagonistic ways to pursue short-term public results.

Interviewee 5 said that contemporary feminist expressions and social perceptions have become disconnected from the original intention of traditional feminism: "I think I am a feminist, but I don't support modern feminism, especially those who are active on the Internet...And I don't support female sex work... They're just defending all the bad things people do. I'm more on the side of traditional feminists who fight for the rights of women in third world countries who can't go to school... Not the ones advocating that we don't need men, promoting cheating and sex work."

Interviewee 6 said that people's ideas do not align with the current social situation, and their actions are not appropriate: "A lot of people say that women are better than men because they think that men and women are equal, but the truth is that people are still more tolerant of men," she called this "Edinburgh thinking." (comes from the Chinese pronunciation) She added: "The original goal of feminism should be equality between men and women, not women over men... I wouldn't consider myself a feminist because I haven't taken any actions for feminism yet... I am still at the level of thought"

The interviewees all expressed reflections on certain developments in contemporary feminism, as well as rethinking its original intentions. They called on feminism to return to reason and focus on promoting real equality and progress, while warning against the negative impact of the radicalization of expression and lack of actionable efforts.

3.3. Diverse views on Women's Education

Students have very different views about the feminist education they receive at all-girls schools. Some believe that certain feminist actions in single-sex schools may unintentionally reinforce gender antagonism, leading some students to develop a sense of wariness or even hostility toward men. These individuals argue that placing too much emphasis on the differences between women and men, or oversimplifying gender issues into adversarial terms, not only fails to solve the underlying problem, but may make it harder for women to integrate into a gender-diverse society after leaving campus. They advocate for feminist education to focus more on cooperation and mutual understanding, fostering true gender equality.

Nevertheless, some students said that the environment of a single-sex school creates a relatively safe space for women, allowing them to avoid the interference of gender bias. In this environment, they are able to focus more on self-growth and empowerment without the fear of unequal treatment or gender discrimination from the outside world. This supportive atmosphere boosts their confidence, encourages them to pursue their dreams, and deepens their understanding of gender equality. Additionally, they pointed out that education in girls' schools is not intended to incite gender antagonism, but to help women recognize the rights and opportunities they deserve. It aims to equip them with the confidence to firmly defend their rights when entering the workforce or broader society.

Interviewee 1 mentioned that when she first came to a girls' school, she was shocked by the feminist atmosphere there: "Gender equality is not yet perfect, but feminism is so intense that it may indirectly cause men to resist gender equality. My English teacher would casually say in class that 'Of course women are more valuable than men', although it was in a joking tone... I don't think I would have known that feminism was so exaggerated if I hadn't been at a girls' school."

Interviewee 7 stated she felt protected at an all-girls school: "If I had not been at an all-girls school, I might have experienced gender discrimination... but at least at MLC, there is no such situation, and everyone is more united."

This diversity of views also indicates that the approach and content of gender education still need to find a balance among different backgrounds and objectives to better promote the realization of gender equality.

4. Discussion

4.1. Conclusion

Research reveals that Gen Z women have redefined the meaning of marriage and family. Compared with traditional concepts, they pay more attention to self-growth, and no longer regard marriage as a necessary path of life, nor willing to blindly sacrifice themselves for emotional commitments. At the same time, Gen Z women are sceptical of certain radical demands of contemporary feminism. They believe that these demands may fail to fully take into account the diverse perceptions of gender equality in the current society, and even deviate from the original intention of the feminist movement to some extent, bringing new constraints to the movement that was originally designed to promote equality.

Moreover, high school students from girls' schools expressed mixed views on education aimed at promoting gender equality. Some respondents noted that too much emphasis on the difference between women and men, or the oversimplification of gender issues into antagonistic relationships, not only fails to address the root causes of underlying inequality, but may also make women face greater challenges when they leave campus and enter a broader and gender diverse society.

4.2. Innovation and value

This study is an in-depth discussion on the changes of Generation Z women's ideas about marriage, family and contemporary feminism, as well as the multiple attitudes of girls' high school students towards gender education, which has the following innovative and valuable values:

Firstly, this study combines data from diverse social, cultural and educational backgrounds of Generation Z women to show a multidimensional view of the evolution of gender perceptions, which helps to address the limitations of previous research that often relied on single perspectives or fixed scenarios.

Secondly, this study expands the boundaries of feminist discourse by questioning and reflecting on contemporary feminism. Through the lens of Generation Z women, it introduces a new research dimension that helps the academic community reexamine the relationship between radical feminism and gender equality. This provides fresh insights for the further enrichment and refinement of feminist theory.

Finally, this study highlights the correlation between education and social adaptation, paying special attention to the conflicts and challenges faced by high school students in girls' schools when they enter a broader society after receiving gender equality education, which can provide reference for future studies on social integration and self-identity and provide empirical evidence for relevant education reform.

Based on the research results of this topic, the following suggestions are proposed:

In the field of education, audiences should be subdivided, and teaching approaches need to be stratified. Gender education content should be tailored to students' age, psychological maturity, and cultural and social environments, reducing "one-way indoctrination" or overly confrontational methods, so that students can gradually form diversified and inclusive perspectives in the learning process. At the same time, it is crucial to enhance teachers' gender awareness by implementing targeted training programs for educators. These programs should help teachers understand the mindset and values of Generation Z, equipping them to effectively guide discussions in the classroom. This ensures that gender-related topics are explored in greater depth and with more inclusivity within the school environment. In addition, it is necessary to foster students' critical thinking and reflective abilities. Encouraging students to question and reflect on concepts such as gender, marriage, and family helps them critically assess diverse perspectives. This approach enables students to navigate complex gender dynamics in society with greater resilience and independent thought.

In terms of policymaking, it is essential to improve youth rights and social security system. Considering the needs and concerns of Generation Z women regarding employment, marriage, childbirth, and independent living, governments and social organizations can formulate or enhance relevant protection policies. This includes offering flexible public services as well as more comprehensive social support in areas such as childbirth, childcare, and healthcare, ensuring that young women have greater autonomy when making decisions about marriage and family. Furthermore, we can establish a platform for multi-gender dialogue, actively promote cooperation from all sectors of society—government departments, enterprises, universities and social organizations—building a more inclusive public discussion, so that people of different positions and different age groups can communicate on an equal basis, reduce excessive confrontation or labelling, and create conditions for reaching a broader social consensus.

4.3. Limitations

At present, Global gender inequality remains an ongoing issue. This study focuses on the gender perceptions of Generation Z women and the potential overreactions of some feminist behaviours. However, there are still some limitations in this research. Firstly, the sample size and field sites are limited. The primary data obtained in this study were all from students at Methodist Ladies' College senior school, so the sample size is not large enough. Secondly, because the interviewees are aged between 16 and 18, some of the interview content is too distant from their actual life experiences, so they cannot answer from a practical perspective. If there is a further investigation on gender cognition of Gen Z women in the future, the sample size can be expanded, and cross-cultural comparative analysis can be considered.

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