



UNIVERSITÀ DELLA
VALLE D'AOSTA
UNIVERSITÉ DE LA
VALLÉE D'AOSTE

DIPARTIMENTO DI SCIENZE UMANE E SOCIALI
CORSO DI LAUREA SCIENZE E TECNICHE PSICOLOGICHE

ANNO ACCADEMICO 2025/2026

TESI DI LAUREA TRIENNALE

**Is a new trend emerging in the attitude towards gender equality in
Generation Z members?**

RELATORE

Martin Dodman

LAUREANDA

Caterina Mainardi

Matricola 23 D03 546

Contents

Introduction	3
1. Generation Z: psychological and social analysis.....	6
1.1 Identity development in digital environments.....	7
1.2 Values, beliefs and psychosocial characteristics	11
1.3 Internal contradictions	14
1.4 Shifts in attitudes across generations: a historical excursus from the 1990s to Generation Z	17
2. Gender equality attitudes in Generation Z: evidence and reversal trends	20
2.1 Study outcomes.....	21
2.1.1 The paradox of proclaimed equality and practised resistance	21
2.1.2 The intra-generational gender gap: from divergence to division	24
2.1.3 Gender stereotypes in practice: evidence from entrepreneurial contexts	27
2.2 Contemporary evidence on gender attitudes	29
2.2.1 Backlash and the reversal of the long-term liberalization trend	30
2.2.2 Intra-generational polarization as a qualitatively new phenomenon	31
3. Psychological analysis of social media as a context of identity formation	35
3.1 Psychological mechanisms of social media influence	37
3.2 Online masculinity narratives, misogyny and the Manosphere	40
3.3 Social media manipulation and gendered experiences	44
Conclusions	50
References	53

Introduction

Generation Z is widely described as the first generation to have grown up within a fully digital and hyperconnected social environment. Continuous internet access and social media have become embedded in everyday communication, self-presentation and social relationships, making digital environments an important context for identity development and socialisation. At the same time, Generation Z is also frequently described as the most progressive generation in history, as it is associated with progressive values and greater openness to diversity, inclusion, mental health awareness and equality. These descriptions, however, coexist with increasingly visible internal contradictions, particularly in relation to gender attitudes. Recent research suggests that young adults within Generation Z are diverging in their political and social orientations, raising questions about whether the long-term movement toward increasingly egalitarian gender attitudes is continuing in the same direction.

The present thesis focuses on this apparent tension by examining whether a new trend is emerging in gender equality attitudes among Generation Z, with particular attention to the differences between young men and young women, and what explains them. For my literature search, I identified keywords and synonyms—along with other related terms, phrases, and concepts—and then consulted Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science for multidisciplinary research, as well as PubMed and PsycINFO for psychology-related searches, gradually narrowing the scope until I identified the literature most relevant to my objective.

The topic is situated within a broader historical trajectory in which successive generations, from Baby Boomers through Generation X and Millennials, have generally displayed increasingly egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles and women's position in society. The emergence of more conservative or resistant attitudes among part of Gen Z, especially among young men, therefore represents an important development to investigate. Rather than considering Generation Z simply as either progressive or conservative, this thesis adopts a multidimensional perspective, examining how attitudes vary across different domains of gender equality and how the contemporary gender gap is expressed within the generation.

To address this question, which is both empirical and theoretical, the thesis is organized into three chapters. Chapter 1 first considers the psychological and social characteristics of Generation Z, examining identity development, values, attitudinal profile and psychosocial characteristics, as well as the internal contradictions that characterise this cohort. It also places contemporary gender attitudes within a historical excursus, tracing the evolution of gender-related attitudes across generations and establishing the long-term liberalisation trend against which the current developments can be evaluated; this historical perspective is essential for distinguishing between changes that represent continuity with previous generations and those that may constitute a genuine reversal or transformation.

Chapter 2 examines the empirical evidence concerning gender equality attitudes in Generation Z. After introducing the concept of gender and its theoretical development, the chapter brings together findings from cross-national surveys and qualitative domain-specific research: particular attention is given to the paradox of proclaimed gender equality and practiced resistance to further equality measures, the widening gender gap between young women and men, gender stereotypes in practical contexts, and signs of backlash and political polarisation. The chapter therefore asks whether Generation Z is more or less egalitarian than previous cohorts, as well as in which areas attitudes are changing and how these changes differ according to gender.

Finally, Chapter 3 analyses social media from a psychological perspective as a context in which gender-related identities and attitudes are encountered and potentially reinforced, examining mechanisms such as social comparison, validation-seeking, self-presentation and algorithmic curation, and then focusing on online masculinity narratives, misogynistic content and the manosphere. Despite the focus on male members, the analysis also considers the experiences of young women, emphasising that digital influence cannot be understood exclusively through the experiences of young men. In this chapter social media is not established as a single causal explanation for changing gender attitudes: the aim is to examine how digital environments may contribute to the visibility, reinforcement and polarisation of pre-existing beliefs.

Together, the three chapters therefore approach the apparent reversal in Gen Z gender attitudes as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. By combining a developmental and historical perspective with empirical evidence on gender attitudes and a psychological analysis of digital environments, the thesis seeks to clarify what is genuinely distinctive about

Generation Z and what may represent the continuation of longer-term social processes. The central argument is that understanding contemporary gender attitudes requires moving beyond a simple opposition between progress and regression and instead examining the interaction between generational change, gender differences, socialisation and the rapidly changing digital contexts in which young people form their identities.

Chapter 1. Generation Z: psychological and social analysis

Generation Z, generally defined as individuals born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s (1997-2010/2) represents the first generation to grow up entirely within a digital and hyperconnected environment, in a world already shaped by smartphones, social media platforms and round-the-clock internet access (Dwidienawati et al., 2025; Ghodke et al., 2025). This defining characteristic distinguishes Gen Z in demographic terms but especially as a psychosocial formation whose modes of identity construction and social affiliation, as well as political orientation, bear the imprint of digital mediacy in ways that earlier cohorts never experienced. As the world's largest generational cohort, Generation Z has the potential to shape the future of entrepreneurship, politics and social norms significantly (Duong et al., 2025), yet the question of what exactly these young people believe and why their beliefs sometimes defy expectations remains empirically contested and theoretically unresolved.

This unresolved quality is nowhere more visible than in the domain of gender attitudes (Nennstiel & Siegert, 2026): unlike previous generations, Gen Z experienced socialisation, communication, growth and identity development through constant exposure to online platforms and digital media; for this reason, understanding the psychological and social characteristics of this generation is essential in order to analyse the emergence of new forms of political, cultural and gender-related polarisation.

Generation Z is often described as socially progressive, open-minded and also particularly sensitive to issues such as inclusion, diversity, mental health and gender equality. However, recent research has highlighted the presence of important internal contradictions within this cohort (Nennstiel & Siegert, 2026). Alongside progressive attitudes, scholars and media reports have identified growing ideological tensions, especially between young men and women, suggesting the emergence of a widening gender divide in values and political orientations.

Recent studies on political attitudes among Gen Z suggest that younger women increasingly position themselves more progressively than young men, particularly in post-

industrial societies. Campbell and Cowper-Coles (2025) argue that this divergence should not be interpreted as a completely new phenomenon, but rather as the continuation of a long-term historical trend in which women have progressively moved towards more left-wing political positions as a consequence of higher levels of education, participation in the labour market, and declining religiosity. Nevertheless, it is true that the gender gap appears to be slightly more pronounced among Generation Z, especially with regard to cultural values and attitudes towards gender equality.

At the same time, media discussions and contemporary analyses increasingly emphasise the role of digital culture and social media in amplifying these divisions; online spaces may contribute to the spread of more polarised narratives around masculinity, feminism and gender roles, particularly among younger users. Social media platforms function as tools of communication, but also as environments in which identities and beliefs or forms of social belonging are continuously negotiated and reinforced.

1.1 Identity development in digital environments

The formation of a coherent personal identity and the achievement of a stable sense of who one is and where one belongs in the social world is, in Erikson's (1968) foundational developmental framework, the defining psychological task of adolescence and emerging adulthood (Ghodke et al., 2025). Erikson theorized this process as a fundamental tension between identity consolidation and role confusion: the young person must explore available identity options and ultimately commit to a stable self-definition, or risk experiencing a prolonged and psychologically costly confusion about values and social role that can extend far into adult life. The resolution of this tension is not a single event but an iterative process, one in which exploratory periods of questioning and experimentation alternate with periods of provisional commitment, and in which the quality of the social environment encountered during exploration shapes the quality of the identity ultimately achieved (Ghodke et al., 2025). Marcia's (1996) elaboration of this framework identified four identity statuses: diffusion, in which neither exploration nor commitment is present; foreclosure, in which commitment occurs without exploration; moratorium, in which exploration is active, but commitment deferred, and achievement, in which exploration has led to stable commitment. These were identified as the primary configurations through which the identity formation process can be observed and measured (Ghodke et al., 2025).

Contemporary research applying these frameworks to Generation Z finds that the identity formation process among this cohort is characterized by a more fluid, iterative, and non-linear pattern than Marcia's original model contemplated: Gen Z individuals tend to cycle between moratorium and achievement repeatedly, revisiting commitments that earlier generations might have treated as settled, and maintaining a degree of identity openness into emerging adulthood that earlier developmental research associated with pathological diffusion rather than healthy exploration (Ghodke et al., 2025). Research suggests that this pattern is not simply a product of individual psychological characteristics, because it reflects the structural features of the digital environment within which identity formation occurs: an environment that makes available an unprecedented range of identity options, makes the costs of exploration lower through the anonymity and reversibility of digital self-presentation, but simultaneously makes the informational complexity of the identity landscape far greater than anything prior developmental theory anticipated (Roni, 2025).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) provides the structural framework most adequate to understanding why this is as it is (Ghodke et al., 2025). The theory identifies multiple nested environmental layers as the developmental context within which the self takes shape: from the microsystem of immediate interpersonal relationships, through the mesosystem of interactions between these environments, to the exosystem of social institutions, the macrosystem of cultural norms and ideological frameworks, and the chronosystem of historical time. For Generation Z, the digital environment has fundamentally restructured these ecological layers in ways that have no historical precedent. Social media platforms now function as virtual microsystems: spaces of direct peer interaction, self-presentation and social feedback that rival or even displace the face-to-face peer environments that had historically constituted the primary arena of adolescent social development (Ghodke et al., 2025; Roni, 2025). Simultaneously, the same platforms function as macrosystemic forces, generating transnational youth cultures and ideological positions that operate independently of any specific national or local context and that are accessible to any young person with a smartphone and a data connection. The identity formation task that Erikson described as occurring within a bounded local social world now occurs, for Gen Z, within a global information environment whose scale and diversity no prior developmental theory of any kind was equipped to anticipate.

The consequences of this restructuring for identity formation are both enabling and hazardous, and they are distributed unevenly across the population. On the enabling side, digital environments have expanded the spectrum of available identities and communities of affiliation in ways that can genuinely support selfhood: young people can find online communities organized around their specific interests and values or marginalized identities, including those related to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, and political orientation, that may be absent or suppressed in their immediate physical environments (Ghodke et al., 2025). For young people whose offline social worlds are restrictive, hostile, insular or even just too small to contain their sense of who they are, digital environments can provide the conditions for identity exploration and social belonging that are prerequisites for healthy development.

On the hazardous side, the same environments generate conditions that actively complicate identity consolidation. The constant influx of information with the diversity of available role models and the exposure to global events and conflicts through social media feeds can overwhelm adolescents at precisely the developmental stage when the construction of a coherent self is most cognitively and emotionally demanding, potentially prolonging moratorium indefinitely and making the achievement of stable commitment more difficult (Ghodke et al., 2025). Pervasive social comparison, meaning the tendency to evaluate oneself against algorithmically selected representations of peers and influencers or other public figures, is one of the defining stressors of Gen Z's psychological experience, operating through explicit comparison of appearance or achievement and through the more diffuse anxiety that one's life, relationships, and developing identity are inadequate by reference to standards that no real person consistently meets (Roni, 2025).

The Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) is the anxiety produced by the perception that others are having more meaningful and connected exciting experiences, and it is the emotional correlate of this comparison dynamic, as it constitutes one of the primary mechanisms through which social media platforms sustain engagement and shape the identity formation process. Dwidienawati et al. (2025), in a structural equation modeling study of 408 Gen Z participants, identify FOMO as a significant predictor of lower well-being, with its effects partially mediated through social support and personal resilience. The study's most theoretically important finding is that social support is the strongest overall predictor of well-being for Generation Z, operating both directly and through its facilitation of resilience: a result that underscores the continuing centrality of human relational

experience in the identity formation process, even in digitally saturated developmental contexts (Dwidienawati et al., 2025). The implication is that the digital environment mediates, amplifies, and in some cases substitutes the relational scaffolding that earlier developmental theories identified as essential to healthy identity formation (without simply replacing it), with consequences for identity development that depend on whether the relational experiences it facilitates are supportive or undermining.

Cyberbullying represents a further dimension of the digital identity environment with documented developmental consequences. Unlike its offline equivalent, digital harassment is not bounded by spatial or temporal context (Ghodke et al., 2025): it follows individuals across physical environments, denying them any refuge in offline life while its public character (the high visibility of humiliation to extended peer networks) amplifies its psychological impact at the developmental stage when peer esteem is most central to the self-concept. The exposure to negative generational stereotypes that circulate freely in digital spaces, depicting Gen Z as fragile, entitled, lazy or mentally weak, constitutes a related form of identity threat, operating through the mechanism of stereotype threat to undermine self-esteem and increase psychological distress among members of the targeted cohort (Ghodke et al., 2025; Stelling, 2023). These dynamics are not marginal features of the digital identity environment; on the contrary, they are among its most consequential structural properties, shaping the conditions under which identity formation occurs for a generation that cannot, at least in any meaningful sense, opt out of digital life.

The implications of the digital identity environment for gender identity development deserve particular attention, because they are among the most consequential for the attitudinal patterns examined in the following chapters. For young women, digital platforms have simultaneously provided unprecedented resources for feminist identification and community – the fourth-wave feminist movement is, in significant part, a digital phenomenon, and young women's rates of feminist identification have risen substantially in the social media era (King's College London, 2026) – and exposed them to algorithmically amplified appearance standards, traditional femininity content, and misogynistic discourse that shape their normative environments regardless of their explicit ideological commitments (Roni, 2025; UN Women, 2025). For young men, particularly for those experiencing social isolation and identity uncertainty, the digital environment has made available the manosphere's coherent masculine identity framework with a reach and accessibility that no

prior generation of gender-conservative content could achieve: two thirds of young men globally report regularly engaging with online influencers who address masculinity (UN Women, 2025) and this engagement constitutes one of the primary mechanisms through which digital identity formation produces the gender-conservative attitudinal outcomes documented in this thesis.

The relationship between parenting style and identity development in digital environments adds a further structural dimension to this picture. Authoritative parenting characterized by warmth, presence, clear expectations and support for autonomy, as well as secure attachment patterns, are associated with healthier identity exploration and greater psychological resilience among Generation Z adolescents, providing the relational foundation that supports productive engagement with the identity formation challenges of digital life (Ghodke et al., 2025). By contrast, parenting styles characterized by emotional suppression or inconsistent responsiveness, as well as peer cultures that similarly discourage emotional expression and help-seeking, produce adolescents whose identity formation is more vulnerable to the destabilizing forces of digital environments and whose search for stable identity frameworks may lead them toward the clear, if distorted, answers that ideological online communities provide (Ghodke et al., 2025; Roni, 2025). The interaction between early relational experience and digital identity formation is thus not additive but multiplicative: secure attachment amplifies the benefits of digital connectivity, while insecure attachment amplifies its risks.

1.2 Values, beliefs and psychosocial characteristics

The psychosocial characteristics most consistently associated with Generation Z in the empirical literature present a picture of a cohort that is simultaneously more idealistic and more distressed, and more socially aware but more psychologically vulnerable, than any generation that preceded it. These characteristics are not independent of the digital identity formation processes analyzed so far: they are, for the most part, their product – the developmental outcomes of growing up in an environment that amplifies social comparison and accelerates awareness on many fronts, while simultaneously offering and withholding the relational belonging that psychological health requires.

Roni (2025) synthesizes the empirical literature on Gen Z's psychosocial profile around four broad domains that together constitute the generation's defining characteristics.

The first is a distinctive orientation toward collaboration and diversity: Gen Z members are, on average, more likely than their predecessors to value collective problem-solving over individual competition, more likely to approach social questions through a pragmatic lens that prioritizes measurable outcomes over ideological purity, and more likely to be exposed to and accepting of racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual diversity, reflecting both the multicultural composition of their social networks and the representational breadth available through digital media (Roni, 2025). The diversity-affirming orientation of Gen Z is, for many members of this cohort, a feature of their lived experience that distinguishes them from prior generations in ways they are conscious of and that shape their social and political identities.

The second defining domain is pervasive digital connectivity and the associated stressors of social comparison, FOMO, and validation-seeking that have already been examined in the context of identity formation (Roni, 2025; Dwidienawati et al., 2025). What the psychosocial literature adds to the developmental account is a more detailed picture of the mechanisms through which digital connectivity shapes well-being outcomes. Dwidienawati et al. (2025) find, against the dominant public narrative of digital harm, that screen time per se does not directly predict poorer well-being in their Gen Z sample without considering the quality of the social support that digital and non-digital environments together provide. Social support is the single strongest predictor in their structural equation model, operating both directly on well-being and indirectly through the facilitation of personal resilience. Extraversion, as a dispositional trait, independently predicts well-being, while FoMO predicts it negatively: this pattern suggests that the psychological costs of social media engagement are most pronounced for introverted individuals who are simultaneously most in need of social connection and least equipped, by temperament, to manage the social comparison dynamics that platform engagement generates (Dwidienawati et al., 2025).

The third and clinically most significant domain is the mental health crisis that defines Gen Z's generational experience more than any other single characteristic. Roni (2025) documents that 35% of American adolescents aged 12 to 17 have experienced major or severe depression, which is a rate that has doubled within a decade, and situates this figure within the global context of 280 million people currently affected by depressive disorders, with adolescents and young adults disproportionately represented. The causes of this crisis are multiple and not reducible to any single factor: economic precarity, climate anxiety, the social comparison dynamics of social media, the erosion of traditional community structures,

and (for young men specifically) the difficulty of finding culturally sanctioned frameworks for emotional expression and help-seeking in a social environment that, while valorizing mental health awareness, still maintains powerful norms of masculine stoicism (Roni, 2025; Ghodke et al., 2025). The mental health crisis is not a background condition against which Gen Z's attitudinal formation occurs independently, but one of the primary conditions that shapes receptivity to ideological communities, including the manosphere, that offer recognition and identity to young people who are experiencing distress without adequate relational or cultural resources to address it.

The fourth domain is high engagement with social causes, such as climate and social activism, racial justice and gender equality, coexisting with significant eco-anxiety and related forms of anticipatory distress about the future (Roni, 2025). This combination of activist commitment and existential anxiety is one of the most distinctive features of Gen Z's political psychology: the generation acts on the conviction that structural problems require structural solutions, while simultaneously experiencing the psychological weight of uncertainty about whether such solutions are achievable in time. The eco-anxiety dimension is particularly consequential for understanding Gen Z's social psychology, because it introduces a temporal orientation (a sense of living under the pressure of impending systemic crisis) that shapes the urgency and emotional intensity of this cohort's political engagement in ways that prior generations' political formation did not involve.

The psychosocial profile of Gen Z is further complicated by the societal stigma and intergenerational stereotyping to which this cohort is subject. Gen Z members are frequently depicted in media and intergenerational discourse as overly sensitive, entitled, shiftless or excessively dependent on technology, characterizations that constitute a form of generational invalidation with measurable psychological consequences. Research indicates that exposure to negative generational stereotypes can produce internalized stigma, reduced self-esteem, hyper defensiveness and heightened psychological distress through the mechanism of stereotype threat (Ghodke et al., 2025), and this is a primary example of the well-documented phenomenon called the *Stereotype Threat*, in which awareness of a negative stereotype about one's group impairs performance and reduces aspiration in relevant domains (Steel & Aronson, 1995). The paradox emerges clear: the very characteristics for which Gen Z is stigmatized – emotional expressiveness, sensitivity to social justice, willingness to seek mental health support, continuous boundary-setting – are also the features that distinguish this

cohort as potentially more equipped than its predecessors to build more equitable and psychologically healthy social relations, if those characteristics are supported rather than pathologized.

The gender-differentiated distribution of these psychosocial characteristics deserves explicit attention, because it provides the developmental foundation for the attitudinal divergence between young men and young women that is the central empirical focus of this thesis. Gen Z women are more likely than Gen Z men to report active feminist identification, to engage with progressive political content, and to seek mental health support, all patterns consistent with, and partly constitutive of, their higher rates of feminist identification (53% vs. 32% of Gen Z men) documented in the Ipsos and King's College London survey (2025). Gen Z men are more likely to report social isolation, less likely to seek help for psychological distress, and more likely to engage with the digital content ecosystems such as masculinity influencers and political commentary framed as countercultural truth-telling, through which the manosphere gains its attitudinal reach (UN Women, 2025; Roni, 2025). These gender-differentiated psychosocial trajectories are the developmental products of socialization processes, institutional exposures, and digital content environments that systematically channel young men and young women toward divergent psychological and attitudinal formations.

1.3 Internal contradictions

The internal contradictions within Generation Z's identities and attitudinal profiles are among the most analytically significant features of this cohort, and they have been insufficiently theorized in a literature that has tended to treat the generation either as uniformly progressive or as straightforwardly reactionary. Neither characterization is adequate: what the evidence reveals, when examined with sufficient methodological care and theoretical sophistication, is a generation that is genuinely and structurally divided along fault lines that are produced by identifiable historical and technological mechanisms and that have specific, consequential implications for the future of gender equality as a social project.

The most consequential of these contradictions concerns the relationship between Gen Z's professed values on diversity and inclusion and its measurable attitudes on gender equality. Gen Z is consistently characterized, across multiple independent research programs, as the most diversity-affirming cohort in recorded demographic history: more likely than any

predecessor to endorse racial equality, LGBTQ+ rights, gender non-conformity acceptance, neurodiversity awareness and multicultural inclusion as values, and more likely to have close relationships across lines of social difference (Roni, 2025). Yet the same generation produces, in its male members, a set of gender-related attitudes that on several key measures are more conservative than those of their predecessors. The Ipsos and King's College London survey (2025) finds that 28% of Gen Z men agree that a male homemaker is less of a man, compared to 12% of Baby Boomer men. 60% of Gen Z men believe that the promotion of women's equality has gone so far as to discriminate against men, and 31% of them agree that a wife should always obey her husband, against 13% of Baby Boomer men (Cursino, 2026). These figures are the expression of a generation that has failed to progress, but most importantly that has, on these specific measures, moved in a direction that inverts the expected trajectory of generational change, and this inversion is what Betts Razavi (2024) characterizes as a deviation from trajectory: a statistically meaningful rupture in the consistent intergenerational liberalization that had defined the generational succession from Baby Boomers through Generation X to Millennials.

A second major internal contradiction concerns the relationship between Gen Z's mental health awareness and the emotional stoicism promoted by the manosphere communities that disproportionately attract its male members. Generation Z is, by multiple measures, the cohort most likely to openly discuss mental health and most supportive of therapeutic cultures, a cultural shift with potentially transformative implications for the dismantling of traditional masculinity norms that associate emotional expression with weakness (Ghodke et al., 2025). Yet the same generation contains, in the segment of young men who engage heavily with manosphere content, a cohort whose primary cultural influences actively pathologize precisely this openness: young men who regularly follow masculinity influencers are more likely to report feelings of worthlessness and insecurity and are still definitely less likely to seek mental health support (UN Women, 2025). The phenomenon is structural rather than individual: young men are being shaped by their digital environments toward the emotional suppression that the research literature identifies as a primary driver of male psychological distress, at precisely the moment when the broader cultural environment is most hospitable to the vulnerability that would protect them from it.

A third contradiction concerns the relationship between Gen Z's pragmatic meritocratic values and the persistence of gender stereotyping in their situated evaluative

practices. Duong et al. (2025), in their qualitative study of Gen Z's engagement with gender in entrepreneurial contexts, find that this cohort consistently articulates a growth-and-expansion discourse that prioritizes capability and performance over demographic characteristics (a genuine meritocratic aspiration) while simultaneously applying evaluative standards that are systematically inflected by gender status beliefs operating below the threshold of conscious reflection. Gen Z members recognize, in the abstract, that gender bias is an inherited social problem that ought to be overcome, but they don't consistently overcome it in their own situated judgments. The gap between stated values and enacted behavior cannot be acknowledged or brushed off as hypocrisy, because it is the structural consequence of the automaticity of gender status beliefs, which persist independently of explicitly held egalitarian commitments (Duong et al., 2025). This contradiction is particularly consequential because it suggests that even those members of Gen Z who most sincerely endorse gender equality as a value may reproduce gender-conventional outcomes in their professional and social judgments, a pattern that limits the transformative potential of generational attitude change unless it is accompanied by structural interventions that change the conditions under which judgments are made.

A fourth contradiction concerns the relationship between Gen Z's heightened perception of inter-sex tension and its simultaneous endorsement of gender equality as a value. The Ipsos and King's College London (2025) survey finds that 59% of Gen Z respondents believe there is tension between men and women in their country, compared to 40% of Baby Boomers, making Gen Z the cohort most likely to experience its social environment as characterized by gender conflict, even as the same cohort is more likely than Baby Boomers to say that gender equality is personally important to them. This paradox reflects the specific ideological environment of the digital age, saturated with gender-war discourse from both feminist and anti-feminist sources, in which young people are simultaneously exposed to more egalitarian normative frameworks and more intense gender-political conflict than any prior generation. The perception of tension is itself a social fact with consequences, as it's known it shapes how young men and women relate to one another reinforcing the identity politics that drive attitudinal polarization, and it creates a cultural atmosphere in which the manosphere's narrative of inter-sex conflict finds ready confirmation in perceived lived experience (Campbell & Cowper-Coles, 2025; Betts Razavi, 2024).

These internal contradictions are diagnostic, and not solely evidence that Gen Z is simply incoherent or analytically intractable: they reveal the specific social pressures, psychological mechanisms, technological conditions and ideological forces that are shaping this generation's formation, and they identify the points of leverage at which interventions, (educational, institutional, social and cultural) could most productively be directed. The contradictions are the contingent products of contingent conditions and understanding them as such is the fundamental prerequisite for addressing them.

1.4 Shifts in attitudes across generations: a historical excursus from the 1990s to Generation Z

To evaluate what is genuinely novel in Generation Z's attitudinal profile and what represents continuity with longer historical trends requires situating the current generation within the broader arc of generational change in gender and social attitudes over the past three decades. The past thirty years have witnessed substantial, if uneven and contested, shifts in how successive cohorts have related to questions of gender equality, feminism, masculinity, and the distribution of social roles and public power. Charting these shifts provides both the baseline against which Gen Z's distinctiveness can be assessed and the causal context within which its formation can be understood.

The trajectory of intergenerational change in gender attitudes over the late twentieth century was, by most measures, one of consistent and cumulative liberalization. Baby Boomers, born roughly between 1946 and 1964, came of age in a social environment shaped by the consolidation of postwar gender norms and the first stirrings of second-wave feminist activism. Their aggregate attitudes on gender equality, albeit heterogeneous, were more conservative than those of subsequent cohorts across most measures: lower rates of feminist identification and independence, higher endorsement of traditional gender role divisions and greater likelihood of regarding women's domestic roles as natural and appropriate expressions of female nature rather than as socially imposed constraints on women's freedom (Ipsos & King's College London, 2025). The Ipsos and King's College London (2025) data provide a contemporary cross-sectional snapshot of where Baby Boomers stand: 43% agree that gender equality has gone far enough, so substantially lower than younger cohorts, and only 12% of Baby Boomer men believe a male homemaker is less of a man, a figure overshadowed by the equivalent among Gen Z men.

Generation X, born roughly between 1965 and 1980, came of age in a cultural environment where second-wave feminist gains had been institutionally consolidated but were simultaneously subject to the organized backlash that was documented in the following years: the cultural politics of the 1980s and early 1990s were marked by explicit repudiation of feminist advances in multiple institutional domains, such as workplace policy and family law or reproductive rights, and by the emergence of what scholars came to call post-feminist consciousness, meaning the claim that equality had been substantially achieved and that further feminist activism was therefore unnecessary and excessive, if not even harmful to social cohesion (Betts Razavi, 2024). Despite this cultural counterpressure, Gen X showed on average more progressive gender attitudes than Baby Boomers across most survey measures, continuing the liberalization trend and establishing what came to seem to be, by the early 2000s, a reliable pattern of intergenerational progress toward more egalitarian gender norms.

The Millennial generation, born roughly between 1981 and 1996, developed in a social and technological environment that accelerated this liberalization trend in multiple reinforcing ways: the rapid expansion of higher education, in which women came to outnumber men in most post-industrial societies, the rise of the internet as a platform for feminist organizing and solidarity, the global expansion of the #MeToo movement in 2017 and the emergence of fourth-wave feminism as a digitally organized and intersectionally oriented political formation all contributed to a substantial increase in feminist identification among Millennial women (Betts Razavi, 2024). Among Millennial men, the equivalent trend was less dramatic but consistent: rates of endorsement of traditional gender role division declined relative to Gen X men, and feminist identification among Millennial men, while still lower than among Millennial women, was higher than among their Gen X predecessors. By the late 2010s, the consistent intergenerational trend toward more egalitarian gender attitudes seemed sufficiently robust to support theoretical predictions of continued progress, predictions that the emergence of Gen Z's attitudinal profile has now challenged in multiple respects.

The historical excursus also reveals the specific mechanisms through which this novel polarization has been produced. The long-term liberalization trend was driven primarily by the expansion of higher education, the institutionalization of gender equality norms in professional and public life, the feminist cultural movements of the late twentieth and early

twenty-first centuries, and all the other forces that operated relatively uniformly across gender lines, producing cohorts that were more progressive than their predecessors on both the male and female sides. The intra-generational divergence within Gen Z has been produced by a different set of forces: the algorithmically curated digital content ecosystems that have, since the mid-2010s, systematically directed young men and young women toward divergent normative systems, reinforcing feminist identification among young women exposed to progressive digital communities, and reinforcing gender-conservative attitudes among young men exposed to the manosphere's content ecosystem (UN Women, 2025; Betts Razavi, 2024; Campbell & Cowper-Coles, 2025). The result is a generation that simultaneously extends the long-term liberalization trend among its female members and disrupts it among its male members: a configuration that the historical record offers no clear precedent for, and that the theoretical frameworks developed to explain intergenerational attitude change were not designed to anticipate.

Understanding this configuration (its causes, its internal dynamics, its consequences and implications for the future of gender equality) is the task that the following chapters of this thesis address. The empirical evidence on Gen Z's gender attitudes and the psychological analysis of social media's role in producing them, both depend on the conceptual and historical foundations that this chapter has sought to establish: an understanding of who Generation Z is developmentally, what psychosocial characteristics define this cohort, how its internal contradictions are produced, and what historical trajectory it both continues and disrupts. It is against this background that the specific empirical and analytical contributions of the thesis can be properly situated and evaluated.

The conceptual implication is that the central question of the thesis cannot be reduced to whether Gen Z is simply 'more progressive' or 'more conservative' than earlier generations: the more informative question is how different dimensions of gender attitudes have changed, whether these changes differ between young men and young women, how the developmental and media environments of Gen Z may help explain that divergence.

Chapter 2. Gender equality attitudes in Generation Z: evidence and reversal trends

Gender is among the most theoretically productive and politically consequential categories to have entered the vocabulary of the social sciences over the past century, yet its analytical content has never been stable or uncontested. To engage with Generation Z's gender attitudes is therefore to engage, however implicitly, with a conceptual history whose layers shape the very questions that contemporary survey instruments are designed to ask. Before the empirical findings of this chapter can be properly evaluated, it is necessary to trace the journey through which gender has been elaborated as a theoretical object and to clarify the operationalizations through which it becomes measurable as an attitudinal one.

The foundational move in this intellectual history is the distinction between sex, understood as a biological given, and gender, understood as a socially and culturally constructed system of roles, expectations, behaviours, and power relations that cannot be read off from biological difference. Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 formulation – that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman – constituted the inaugural articulation of femininity as a social achievement instead of a natural condition, produced through the accumulated pressure of cultural expectation and institutional constraint rather than expressed from an underlying biological essence (Duong et al., 2025). Subsequently, Judith Butler (1988) affirmed that “gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again” (p.526).

Gayle Rubin (1975) extended this approach into a structural analysis of what she termed the sex/gender system: the set of arrangements through which biological sexuality is transformed by social activity into a mechanism for the distribution of labour, resources, and social recognition along lines that systematically disadvantage women. Together, de Beauvoir's and Butler's phenomenological and Rubin's structural approaches, established gender as an object of political critique and sociological analysis, irreducible to nature and amenable to transformation (Duong et al., 2025).

The translation of this theoretical legacy into measurable attitudinal objects (the operationalization that makes gender equality a subject of quantitative comparative research) is itself a theoretically freighted choice with significant consequences for what the resulting data can and cannot reveal. Nennstiel and Siegert (2026), whose European microdata study of 82,187 Gen Z individuals across 24 countries constitutes the most methodologically comprehensive comparative analysis currently available, identify eight attitudinal dimensions of gender equality: spanning domestic labour norms, labour market fairness beliefs, perceptions of discrimination, and the political salience of gender equality as an issue; they also demonstrate that these dimensions are not reducible to a single underlying factor: an individual may hold egalitarian positions on shared parenting while endorsing gender-conventional assumptions about professional authority, and the patterns of cross-dimensional consistency or inconsistency carry their own analytical meaning (Nennstiel & Siegert, 2026). The Gender Equality Index, a composite national-level measure of women's outcomes and representation across societal domains, provides in this framework the macro-level contextual variable against which individual attitudinal patterns can be situated. Their finding that the relationship between national-level gender equality and individual-level egalitarian attitudes is neither linear nor uniform across dimensions constitutes one of the chapter's most theoretically consequential empirical results.

2.1 Study outcomes

The most striking feature of the cross-national survey evidence on Gen Z's gender attitudes is a structural paradox that runs through the aggregate findings of every major study: the simultaneous and apparently contradictory coexistence of strong nominal support for gender equality as a value and measurable resistance to its further institutional advancement. This paradox is not unique to Generation Z, but it does reach its most acute and visible expression in this cohort.

2.1.1 The paradox of proclaimed equality and practised resistance

The Ipsos and King's College London International Women's Day 2025 survey – conducted between December 20, 2024, and January 3, 2025, across 30 countries and with 23,765 adult respondents – provides the most comprehensive and granular cross-national mapping of this paradox currently available (Ipsos & King's College London, 2025). On the affirmative side, two thirds of respondents globally (68%) say that achieving equality between

men and women is personally important to them, with women significantly more likely to express this view (74%) than men (62%); 59% agree that outcomes in governance and business would improve if more women held positions of responsibility, and 54% believe that women will not achieve equality unless more female leaders emerge in business and government (Ipsos & King's College London, 2025).

These figures, taken in isolation, would appear to confirm the widespread characterization of contemporary publics as broadly committed to egalitarian values. Yet, in the same population, the same instrument reveals that half of all respondents (50%) believe that gender equality has already gone far enough in their country: 46% agree that men are being asked to do too much to support equality, and 45% agree that the promotion of women's equality has gone so far as to discriminate against men (Ipsos & King's College London, 2025). The coexistence of these positions within the same population reflects a genuinely split attitudinal landscape in which abstract commitment to equality and concrete resistance to its advancement are simultaneously held.

The generational disaggregation of these findings complicates the picture further, in ways that directly challenge the intuitive assumption that younger cohorts are reliably more progressive than older ones on gender questions. Among those agreeing that equality had already gone far enough, the distribution by generation in the Ipsos (2024) survey of 31 countries was the following: Gen Z 57%, Millennials 60%, Baby Boomers 43%. The youngest cohort is not the most progressive on this indicator, but it sits significantly above the oldest cohort in its endorsement of the proposition that further progress toward gender equality is unnecessary or undesirable. Critically, among respondents who agreed that men are being expected to do too much to support equality, younger men show higher rates of agreement than older men: 59% of Gen Z men endorsed this statement, compared to 57% of Gen X men and 43% of Baby Boomer men (Ipsos & King's College London, 2025). This generational inversion, in which the youngest male cohort is the most resistant to gender equality efforts, is the statistical expression of what is characterized as a deviation from trajectory: a break in the consistent intergenerational liberalization that had defined the generational succession from Baby Boomers through Gen X to Millennials (Betts Razavi, 2024).

The longitudinal trend data assembled by Ipsos across a 24-country average from 2019 to 2025 reveal the temporal dynamics underlying this cross-sectional pattern and

introduce important nuance into any straightforward backlash narrative (Ipsos & King's College London, 2025). Agreement that men are being asked to do too much to support equality rose from 41% in 2019 to approximately 52% by 2023–2024, before retreating by 5 percentage points to 47% in 2025; agreement that equality had gone far enough followed an analogous trajectory: rising over the same period and then partially declining in the most recent wave. Similarly, agreement that the promotion of women's equality discriminates against men declined by 4 percentage points between 2024 and 2025, and agreement that a male homemaker is less of a man fell by 3 percentage points (Ipsos & King's College London, 2025). These partial retreats are consistent with cultural backlash theory's prediction that reactive conservatism can be modulated by changing political discourse and public events; they do not, however, constitute a reversal of the underlying trend, since all indicators remain substantially elevated relative to their 2019 baselines. In particular, the proportion of respondents who identified as feminists also declined by 3 percentage points between 2024 and 2025, a finding that underscores the complexity of a moment in which both backlash and progressive identification are simultaneously in partial retreat (Ipsos & King's College London, 2025).

Optimism about the future trajectory of gender equality is strikingly and cross-nationally limited. Only 42% of respondents across the 30-country sample expect significant progress within the next five years: a figure whose variation across national contexts is extreme, ranging from 75% in Thailand to a mere 19% in Japan (Ipsos & King's College London, 2025). Across the 30 countries, 35% of respondents believe that attempts to give equal opportunities to women have not gone far enough, while 18% believe they have gone too far; this distribution sits uneasily alongside the percentage of individuals who believe equality has already been achieved, and that reflects the multidimensional character of gender attitudes documented in this thesis. Particularly revealing is the asymmetry in forward-looking optimism about young men and young women respectively: 55% of respondents expect young women's lives to be better than their mothers', while only 45% anticipate the same improvement for young men, and 56% believe that moves to promote equal rights for women have had a positive impact on today's young women, while only 40% believe the same for today's young men (Ipsos & King's College London, 2025). This differential in the perception that gender equality policies benefit women more than men, both reflects and actively reinforces the narrative of male disadvantage that constitutes one of the primary ideological resources of the gender-conservative backlash documented in this chapter.

The European microdata assembled by Nennstiel and Siegert (2026) complement and extend the Ipsos findings by providing a methodologically more rigorous and dimensionally richer picture of Gen Z's gender attitudes across national contexts. Drawing on six large-scale surveys covering 82,187 individuals born between 1995 and 2009 across 24 European countries, the study assesses gender attitude gaps across eight dimensions – gender role norms in domestic and public life, labour market fairness, perceptions of discrimination, the salience of gender equality as a political priority and several others – and finds that gender gaps within Gen Z are present across all eight dimensions examined, with young women consistently expressing more egalitarian views than young men (Nennstiel & Siegert, 2026). The magnitude of these gaps is, however, substantially domain-dependent: they are comparatively modest for norms relating to shared domestic and parenting responsibilities, where egalitarian expectations have become more broadly culturally embedded and considerably larger for attitudes relating to labour market fairness and the political salience of gender equality, precisely the dimensions most directly implicated in debates about institutional gender equality policy (Nennstiel & Siegert, 2026). The redistributive character of these domains and their direct implication for the distribution of advantages between men and women, appears to be where gender-conservative resistance is most consistently organized.

2.1.2 The intra-generational gender gap: from divergence to division

If the aggregate findings already confound straightforward progressive narratives, the within-generation breakdown by gender produces a picture that is, by the standards of historical survey research on gender attitudes, genuinely remarkable in its consistency and magnitude. So the level of gender-conservative attitudes among Gen Z relative to older generations is itself a revealing comparison, but the most analytically consequential finding to emerge from the contemporary literature is the unprecedented size of the attitudinal divide between young men and young women within this cohort, a divide that is larger than that documented in any prior generation in the systematic comparative literature and that shows no signs of narrowing (Campbell & Cowper-Coles, 2025; Nennstiel & Siegert, 2026).

The headline figures from the Ipsos surveys are unambiguous on this point: among Gen Z respondents in the 2025 survey, opinion is most sharply divided by gender on four key indicators (Ipsos & King's College London, 2025). First, on feminist identification, because 53% of Gen Z women define themselves as feminists, compared to only 32% of

Gen Z men; a gap of 21 percentage points that is the largest such within-generation difference recorded across all age cohorts in the survey. By comparison, among Baby Boomers, the equivalent figures are 39% of women and 32% of men: a gap of only 7 percentage points, meaning the within-generation gender gap on feminist identification has tripled between the oldest and youngest cohorts (Ipsos & King's College London, 2025). Second, on the belief that the promotion of women's equality has gone so far as to discriminate against men: 57% of Gen Z men agree with this statement, compared to 36% of Gen Z women, so a gap of 21 percentage points that is, again, the largest among any age group, and that compares to a gap of only 15 percentage points among Baby Boomers (Ipsos & King's College London, 2025). Third, on the statement that men are being asked to do too much to support equality: 59% of Gen Z men agree, compared to 36% of Gen Z women; a gap of 23 percentage points, once again the largest across all generations. Fourth, on the statement that a male homemaker is less of a man: 28% of Gen Z men agree, compared to 19% of Gen Z women, while among Baby Boomer men only 12% hold this view – a figure that directly inverts the expected direction of generational change and that is identified as among the most analytically striking features of the current attitudinal landscape (Betts Razavi, 2024).

The implications of these figures extend beyond their individual content to what they reveal about the structure of generational change. Prior to Generation Z, each successive male cohort had shown more progressive attitudes than its predecessor on gender role questions: the trend was sufficiently robust and consistent across survey instruments and national contexts to support theoretical predictions of continued generational liberalization (Betts Razavi, 2024). The Gen Z data break this trend by failing to continue it and more importantly by reversing it on specific indicators: young men in the youngest cohort are more likely than their grandfathers to believe that a male homemaker is less of a man and are more likely than men in every older cohort to believe that equality efforts have gone too far. This is not a marginal deviation within the normal range of generational variation: it's a statistically meaningful rupture that requires substantive explanation rather than statistical qualification (Betts Razavi, 2024).

The survey data also reveal important information about the specific experiential contexts from which these attitudes emerge. Among Gen Z respondents, men are twice as likely as women to report that they went to a school where girls received more favourable

treatment than boys (21% vs. 10%), and twice as likely to report that they have seen women in their workplace receive more favourable treatment than men (22% vs. 12%) (Ipsos & King's College London, 2025). Gen Z women, by contrast, are more likely to report having seen men receive more favourable treatment at work (27% vs. 19% of men). These divergent experiential reports, in which men and women describe the same institutional world in systematically different terms, reflect both the differential exposure to different aspects of gendered institutional life, and the operation of the motivated reasoning and selective attention that the attitudinal gaps themselves produce. Individuals are more likely to notice and remember instances of unfairness that confirm their prior sense of who is disadvantaged (Betts Razavi, 2024).

The European evidence from Nennstiel and Siegert (2026) confirms the existence of within-generation gender gaps across all 24 countries in their sample while introducing important cross-national and cross-domain nuance. Across countries, the gender gap is smallest for norms relating to shared parenting and domestic labour (domains where egalitarian expectations have become more broadly internalized across gender lines in European societies) and largest for the political salience of gender equality, perceptions of labour market discrimination, and fairness attitudes in professional domains. The relationship between country-level gender equality as measured by the 2024 Gender Equality Index and the size of these within-generation gaps is, strikingly, non-linear and in some cases reversed: more egalitarian national contexts are not associated with smaller within-generation attitude gaps on all dimensions, and on some measures the relationship is positive, meaning that countries with higher gender equality show larger intra-generational divergences (Nennstiel & Siegert, 2026). This counterintuitive finding challenges any simple modernization account and suggests that the mechanisms producing the gender gap within Gen Z are not simply the residue of traditional gender inequality that will dissolve as equality progresses, but may in fact be intensified by the conditions of relative equality in which young people in egalitarian societies develop, and these are conditions that may heighten the perception of unfairness among young men who feel that equality has come at their expense.

The political expression of this attitudinal divergence has been documented with particular clarity by Campbell and Cowper-Coles (2025), whose analysis of Gen Z's gender gap in political attitudes across post-industrial societies reveals that the attitudinal divide has direct electoral consequences. Gen Z men are overrepresented among voters for radical right

parties across multiple European democracies, including countries where the radical right has made historic electoral gains, while Gen Z women are shifting toward left-wing and green parties at rates that exceed any previous female cohort's political trajectory. The gender gap in party preference among Gen Z voters constitutes, in several national contexts, the largest such gap recorded in postwar electoral history, and Campbell and Cowper-Coles (2025) characterize the overall trajectory as a movement «from a gap to a gulf»: a qualitative intensification that is not simply the continuation of historical patterns at higher intensity but a genuinely new configuration of intra-generational political division.

2.1.3 Gender stereotypes in practice: evidence from entrepreneurial contexts

Survey-based attitudinal research is well-suited to mapping what individuals say about gender equality when asked directly, but it's less effective at revealing how gender beliefs operate in the situated practical contexts where their consequences for real-world outcomes are most immediately felt. Duong et al. (2025) address this gap through a qualitative study of how Generation Z individuals navigate gender stereotypes in the specific domain of entrepreneurial evaluation, providing a micro-level account of the mechanisms through which gender ideology is reproduced in practice, even among individuals whose explicit ideological commitments are egalitarian, and whose professed values would lead one to expect gender-neutral judgment.

The theoretical framework of the study draws on status belief theory – which holds that socially shared beliefs about the relative competence and social worth of different social groups operate automatically and below the threshold of conscious reflection, shaping evaluative judgments in ways that persist even among individuals who explicitly endorse equality – and gender framing theory, which examines how the gender of actors activates differential interpretive frames in observers and evaluators (Duong et al., 2025). Applied to the entrepreneurial context, these frameworks predict that Gen Z individuals will evaluate pitches differently depending on the pitcher's gender, even when pitch content is held constant, because their status beliefs operate independently of their explicit ideological commitments. The study's critical discourse analysis of Gen Z respondents confirms and elaborates this prediction, identifying three dominant discursive patterns in how this cohort engages with gender in entrepreneurial evaluation.

The first is what was called the growth-and-expansion discourse: the consistent tendency of Gen Z individuals to evaluate entrepreneurial activity through a performance-first, and capability-based lens that theoretically transcends gender by subordinating demographic characteristics to measurable results (Duong et al., 2025). This orientation toward gender neutrality is genuinely held, as it reflects the cohort's sincere commitment to meritocratic equal opportunity, and it represents a meaningful departure from older generations' more openly gender-conventional entrepreneurial discourse. Yet the same respondents whose explicit evaluative framework is meritocratic nonetheless apply evaluative standards that are inflected by gender: they hold women's entrepreneurial claims to higher standards of proof, interpret identical expressions of confidence differently depending on the presenter's gender, and they attribute identical failures to different causes depending on whether the entrepreneur is male or female (Duong et al., 2025). The mechanism is precisely the one that status belief theory describes: the automaticity of gendered status beliefs means that they operate in parallel with explicitly held egalitarian values, rather than being dissolved by them.

The second pattern, which is the intergenerational gender beliefs discourse, reveals that Gen Z members possess a sophisticated metacognitive awareness of gender bias as a social inheritance from prior generations, and articulate a genuine aspiration to transcend those inherited patterns in their own evaluative practice (Duong et al., 2025). This recognition of the problem does not, however, automatically produce its solution: the structural conditions that generate gender-differentiated outcomes in entrepreneurship (differential access to professional networks, venture capital, institutional credibility, risk-tolerant financial support) persist independently of individual intentions, and Gen Z's aspiration to gender-neutral evaluation does not alter those conditions by itself.

The third pattern concerns the relationship between stereotype awareness and career self-perception. Female respondents in the study report that their consciousness of gender stereotypes in entrepreneurship directly shapes their own aspirations and sense of belonging in the domain (Duong et al., 2025); a finding consistent with the stereotype threat literature, in which exposure to negative stereotypes about one's group impairs performance and reduces aspiration. Meanwhile, male respondents show markedly less awareness of gender as a relevant factor in their own entrepreneurial self-concept (Duong et al., 2025). This asymmetry, in which women carry the cognitive burden of navigating gender stereotypes

while men largely do not perceive that burden as operative, reflects and reproduces the asymmetric operation of gender status beliefs in a domain still culturally coded as masculine.

The entrepreneurship case study is analytically valuable precisely because it's a domain in which the professed meritocratic values of Gen Z might be expected to override gender stereotyping most effectively, and yet the evidence shows that stereotyping persists and shapes both evaluative practice and career aspiration even here. This finding generalizes to a conclusion relevant across all the domains examined so far: the gap between Gen Z's stated commitment to gender equality and the gender-differential patterns produced by their situated judgments and structural choices is a pervasive feature of this generation's gender culture, one that survey data document but cannot fully explain.

Another pattern was identified as particularly important because it cannot be reduced to a single indicator of conservatism: Nennstiel and Siegert (2026) conducted an analysis using six large-scale surveys and eight distinct dimensions of gender equality attitudes among individuals born between 1995 and 2009; the resulting gender gaps are widespread, but their size differs by domain and country. This supports a multidimensional interpretation of gender attitudes: agreement with egalitarian norms in one area does not necessarily predict equivalent attitudes toward labour-market fairness, discrimination or the political salience of equality (Nennstiel & Siegert, 2026).

The qualitative evidence analysed previously adds a different level of analysis: its value lies in showing how gender beliefs may remain relevant in concrete evaluative situations even when respondents explicitly endorse meritocratic and gender-neutral principles (Duong et al., 2025; Nennstiel & Siegert, 2026). The study therefore complements survey evidence by illustrating the difference between declared attitudes and situated evaluations.

2.2 Contemporary evidence on gender attitudes

The concept of backlash, applied to the politics of gender, carries a specific theoretical genealogy that must be made explicit before it can be applied productively to the Gen Z case. Susan Faludi's (1991) analysis of the organized conservative reaction to second-wave feminist gains established the foundational insight. Backlash is a function of equality perceived as threatening and it gains momentum precisely in proportion to feminism's successes rather than its failures, because it is the perception of progress, and not progress

itself, that activates the status threat responses of those whose social position depends on the maintenance of gender hierarchy.

This insight was theoretically formalized by Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris in their cultural backlash theory (2019), which situates reactive conservatism within a broader account of value change in post-industrial societies: the rapid shift toward post-materialist values, including gender egalitarianism, LGBTQ+ rights, and multicultural inclusion, generates a structural status threat for segments of the population whose social identity and sense of belonging are organized around the traditional values being displaced, producing a counter-mobilization that cuts across class lines and is analytically distinct from, though potentially intensified by, economic grievance (Betts Razavi, 2024).

2.2.1 Backlash and the reversal of the long-term liberalization trend

Betts Razavi (2024) applies this framework to the Gen Z case with particular methodological care, arguing that the pattern currently visible in the data represents a deviation from trajectory (a statistically meaningful rupture in the consistent intergenerational liberalization that had defined the generational succession from Baby Boomers through Gen X to Millennials) rather than a mere fluctuation within the normal range of generational heterogeneity. The convergence of findings across multiple independent surveys conducted in different countries and using different methodological instruments, constitutes sufficient evidentiary warrant to treat this pattern as a real phenomenon requiring substantive theoretical explanation rather than measurement qualification (Betts Razavi, 2024). This claim is supported by the Ipsos trend data, which show that the partial retreat of backlash indicators in 2025 leaves all measures substantially elevated relative to their 2019 baselines, and that the within-generation gender gap on feminist identification has not narrowed despite the retreat of aggregate backlash sentiment (Ipsos & King's College London, 2025).

It is essential, however, to specify the limits of the backlash concept as applied here. Backlash is neither uniform nor irreversible, and substantial cross-national variation in the magnitude of gender attitude gaps within Gen Z was demonstrated (Nennstiel & Siegert, 2026). The within-generation divergence is more pronounced in some national contexts than others, and the relationship between national gender equality and gap size is domain-dependent and non-linear. The electoral expression of gender-conservative attitudes among young men is more intense in some political systems than in others, and it is shaped by the

specific configuration of party competition and political opportunity structures in each national context (Campbell & Cowper-Coles, 2025). The backlash is a tendency produced by identifiable structural and cultural mechanisms: it's not a law of political development, and not a permanent feature of any particular generation's attitudinal landscape either.

A dimension of the backlash that deserves particular attention and that the attitudinal data alone cannot fully illuminate is the role of perceived male disadvantage as an attitudinal driver. The perception, documented across multiple survey instruments, that gender equality policies have gone so far as to disadvantage men does not map straightforwardly onto the structural evidence: on most measurable dimensions, such as income, professional representation, political power and physical safety, men continue to enjoy substantial aggregate advantages over women. What drives attitudinal reactivity is experienced, and not objective, disadvantage: the subjective perception of status loss relative to expectations, which can be psychologically compelling regardless of its structural accuracy (Betts Razavi, 2024). Educational attainment gaps in which young women now outnumber young men in higher education in most post-industrial societies and labour market transitions associated with deindustrialization that have disproportionately affected men in lower-skilled sectors, along with economic precarity they create conditions within which this perception of relative disadvantage can take hold and intensify (Campbell & Cowper-Coles, 2025). The Ipsos and King's College London (2025) data show that the perception that gender equality policies benefit women more than men (held by a substantial share of respondents and disproportionately by young men) is among the most consistent predictors of the attitudinal positions examined throughout this chapter, suggesting that the narrative of male disadvantage functions less as an empirical claim than as an interpretive lens through which a wide range of gender-related information is selectively processed and evaluated.

2.2.2 Intra-generational polarization as a qualitatively new phenomenon

What renders the current attitudinal configuration qualitatively distinctive is not that some young men hold conservative gender attitudes, as it's important to note that this has always characterized some proportion of every generation. But the gap between young men and young women in this cohort is wider than it has ever been documented to be in any prior generation, and it is widening further along multiple dimensions simultaneously. As previously said, this development is portrayed as a transition from a gap to a gulf (Campbell & Cowper-Coles, 2025): a qualitative intensification of the intra-generational divide that

reflects a genuinely novel configuration of political and social division within a single cohort. The Ipsos data provide concrete numerical expression for this characterization: a 23-percentage point gap between Gen Z men and women on whether men are being asked to do too much for equality (59% vs. 36%), a 21-point gap on feminist identification (32% vs. 53%), and a 21-point gap on whether women's equality discriminates against men (57% vs. 36%) – all of which are the largest within-generation gaps of any cohort surveyed (Ipsos & King's College London, 2026).

The mechanisms producing this bifurcation operate simultaneously on both sides of the divide, and their interaction gives the polarization its self-reinforcing character. On the side of Gen Z women, the primary structural driver identified by Campbell and Cowper-Coles (2025) is the differential access of young women and young men to higher education and to the institutional cultures and professional normative environments that consistently reinforce egalitarian frameworks. Young women who spend formative years in university contexts are disproportionately exposed to feminist discourse and professional cultures whose formal norms privilege gender-neutral evaluation, and their attitudinal profiles reflect this institutional exposure (Campbell & Cowper-Coles, 2025). On the side of Gen Z men, a significant proportion is following a divergent cultural pathway organized through digital content ecosystems in which the normative frameworks most consistently reinforced are hierarchical instead of egalitarian. This means that the attitudinal divergence between young men and women isn't primarily the product of individual-level variation in beliefs, but the aggregate expression of systematically different institutional and cultural exposures that channel young men and women toward different normative environments during the same critical years of attitude formation.

The Ipsos longitudinal data capture the trajectory of this polarization over time, revealing important nuances in its dynamics (Ipsos & King's College London, 2026). Aggregate backlash indicators peaked in 2023–2024 before partially retreating in 2025; however, this retreat has been asymmetric across different attitudinal dimensions. The proportion agreeing that men are being asked to do too much declined by 5 percentage points from 2024 to 2025, and the proportion agreeing that equality had gone far enough fell similarly (Ipsos & King's College London, 2026). Yet the within-generation feminist identification gap (53% of Gen Z women against 32% of Gen Z men) remains unchanged, and the data on the specific experiential perceptions that drive the backlash, with young men twice as likely as young women to report having witnessed women receiving more favourable

treatment at work, show no comparable movement (Ipsos & King's College London, 2026). The aggregate retreat of backlash sentiment thus coexists with the persistence of the structural divergence that generates it, suggesting that the surface-level modulation of backlash indicators reflects changing discourse rather than changing underlying conditions.

The electoral expression of this polarization represents its most politically consequential dimension. Gen Z men are disproportionately represented among voters for radical right parties across multiple European democracies (countries including Italy, France, Germany, Sweden and others) while Gen Z women in the same countries are shifting toward left-wing and green parties at historically unprecedented rates (Campbell & Cowper-Coles, 2025). The gender gap in party preference among Gen Z voters constitutes, in several national contexts, the largest such gap recorded in postwar electoral history. The political consequences extend beyond electoral arithmetic: the over-representation of young men in radical right electorates creates incentives for political actors to address their grievances in terms that reinforce (rather than challenge) gender-conservative narratives, potentially deepening the attitudinal polarization through the amplifying feedback loop between political supply and political demand (Campbell & Cowper-Coles, 2025).

The second conclusion is theoretical: the evidence constitutes a significant challenge to linear modernization narratives, and the family of arguments predicting that socioeconomic development automatically produces progressive attitudinal change across successive generations. The relationship between national-level gender equality and individual attitudinal patterns within Gen Z is non-linear and domain-specific instead of straightforwardly positive (Nennstiel & Siegert, 2026); more egalitarian societies do not consistently show smaller within-generation gender attitude gaps, and on some dimensions the relationship is reversed. The Ipsos (2025) trend data reveal that aggregate backlash sentiment rose substantially between 2019 and 2024 even as gender equality indicators in many countries continued to improve, before partially retreating in 2025: a dynamic inconsistent with any simple account in which structural progress generates attitudinal convergence. The mechanisms through which macro-level social change does or does not translate into micro-level attitudinal transformation are more complex, more sensitive to digital information environments and cultural polarization dynamics, and more contingent on the specific configuration of economic and political conditions than modernization models can capture (Campbell & Cowper-Coles, 2025; Betts Razavi, 2024).

The available studies reveal a multidimensional attitudinal configuration in which broad support for gender equality coexists with resistance to further equality measures on selected issues. The generational comparison is especially relevant because Gen Z and Millennials are not consistently more egalitarian than older cohorts on several indicators, while some attitudes among young men depart from the direction of the long-term liberalization documented in earlier generational research (Ipsos, 2024, 2025; Betts Razavi, 2024).

The most consistent contemporary finding is the gender gap within Gen Z. Young women are more likely than young men to express egalitarian views across the eight dimensions examined by Nennstiel and Siegert (2026), and the Ipsos and King's College London (2026) data show particularly large differences in feminist identification or in perceptions of discrimination against men, and in the belief that men are being asked to do too much to support equality; moreover, explicit egalitarian principles may coexist with gendered evaluative patterns in specific contexts (Duong et al., 2025). Together, all these findings suggest that gender attitudes should be understood as multidimensional and situated rather than as a single progressive-traditional continuum, and that Gen Z marks a significant reconfiguration of gender attitudes, characterized by growing internal differentiation and, on selected indicators, a departure from the expected direction of generational liberalization.

This reconfiguration has implications that extend beyond the sociological description of generational change: the evidence that perceived male disadvantage functions as an interpretive lens shaping gender attitudes, independently of structural reality, suggests that addressing the backlash among young men requires engagement with the experiential and relational conditions through which that perception is produced, rather than simply with its attitudinal expression. Betts Razavi (2024) and Campbell and Cowper-Coles (2025) independently converge on this conclusion: the progressive silence on the specific difficulties of young men's social position, so the reluctance to engage substantively with male experiences of disadvantage without attributing those experiences exclusively to the persistence of patriarchal norms, creates an interpretive vacuum that gender-conservative ideological frameworks are uniquely well-positioned to fill. The attitudinal data documented in this chapter are, from this perspective, a starting point to understand the social and cultural processes through which the next phase of gender attitude change, in whatever direction it proceeds, will be shaped.

Chapter 3 – Psychological analysis of social media as a context of identity formation

As we have seen, contemporary gender attitudes among Generation Z cannot be understood as a straightforward continuation of the progressive trajectory observed across earlier generations. Recent evidence rather points to a more complex configuration in which support for gender equality coexists with the persistence of traditional gender norms and, in some contexts, a widening attitudinal distance between young men and women (Ipsos, 2024; Campbell & Cowper-Coles, 2025; Betts Razavi, 2024). The International Women's Day 2024 survey conducted by Ipsos and the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London, for instance, reports substantial differences between young men and women in their perceptions of gender equality. The BBC's coverage of the survey further highlights that 31% of Gen Z men believe that a wife should always obey her husband, compared with 13% of Baby Boomer men, while the corresponding figures among women are respectively 18% and 6% (Cursino & Dean, 2026). Such findings do not establish by themselves a causal explanation for the apparent reversal of some gender attitudes, but they still provide an important starting point for examining the social environments in which these beliefs are encountered and reinforced.

Among the contexts most relevant to this process are social media platforms: for Generation Z, digital environments are not external to everyday social life but are deeply embedded in communication, peer interaction, self-presentation and identity development. According to Roni (2025), Gen Z is “the first generation to have experienced adolescence in an environment characterized by pervasive digital technology” (p.2), while other authors emphasize that the continuous influx of information and the diversity of available role models can simultaneously provide opportunities for exploration and create psychological overload (Ghodke et al., 2025). From an ecological perspective, social media may therefore be understood as both a virtual microsystem in which direct interaction and self-expression take place and a broader cultural environment through which norms and expectations are transmitted (Ghodke et al., 2025). Social media consequently represents more than a communication tool: it's a social context in which users encounter models of desirable

behaviour, receive feedback, compare themselves with others and construct narratives about who they are and how they should or shouldn't relate to other people.

The relationship between social media and psychological development, nevertheless, should not be reduced to a simple causal association between the amount of time spent online and negative outcomes. In a structural equation modelling study involving 408 Gen Z participants, no direct negative effect of screen time on well-being was found, and instead were identified factors such as social support, resilience and extraversion as important predictors of well-being (Dwidienawati et al., 2025). This finding challenges the idea that digital exposure is inherently harmful, suggesting that the psychological consequences of social media depend substantially on the quality of the experiences that digital environments mediate. Social media can facilitate connection, community, self-expression and access to information, and at the same time it intensifies social comparison, FOMO, pressure and exposure to harmful content (Roni, 2025; Dwidienawati et al., 2025). The relevant question is therefore how the structural characteristics of social media interact with developmental processes and individual vulnerabilities, as well as the specific content ecosystems to which users are exposed.

This perspective is particularly important for the study of gender attitudes. Social media platforms do not simply transmit pre-existing gender norms, because through recommendation systems and social feedback or the visibility of particular models of masculinity and femininity they can influence which norms become salient in everyday life. The present chapter therefore examines social media as a psychological context of identity formation, focusing on three interconnected dimensions: firstly it considers the psychological mechanisms through which digital environments may influence identity, including social comparison, validation, belonging, self-presentation and algorithmic curation; it examines online masculinity narratives, misogyny and the manosphere (with particular attention to the psychological reasons why some young men may find these narratives meaningful or attractive); and lastly it considers gender-differentiated experiences of social media, analysing how young men and young women may encounter different content environments and different forms of pressure, manipulation and normative reinforcement. The aim is to examine the mechanisms through which digital environments may contribute to its reproduction or amplification.

3.1 Psychological mechanisms of social media influence

A first mechanism through which social media become relevant to identity formation is social comparison. Social comparison theory, originally formulated by Festinger (1954), describes the tendency to evaluate one's own abilities, characteristics and social position in relation to other people: digital platforms intensify this process by providing users with a large and continuous pool of comparison targets, while the material being compared is frequently curated and selected orienting toward socially desirable outcomes. Roni (2025) identifies social comparison, FOMO and pressure to maintain an idealised online presentation among the psychological processes that characterize Gen Z's digital experience. Rather than encountering peers only in specific social situations, young people can now observe highly edited representations of other people's appearance, relationships, achievements and lifestyles throughout the day, and the resulting comparison environment can therefore make self-evaluation more persistent and less dependent on the immediate social context.

The implications of social comparison become particularly significant during adolescence and emerging adulthood, because that is when identity development involves experimenting with possible selves and evaluating how one is perceived by others. The digital environment is a setting in which the proliferation of identity models and continuous access to social feedback can intensify the developmental tension between identity consolidation and role confusion (Ghodke et al., 2025). Stelling's (2023) analysis of generational differences in personality and social media use likewise situates Generation Z within a social environment in which online self-presentation has become an ordinary component of everyday interaction. In this context, social media provide, besides models to imitate, metrics through which individuals can monitor how successfully a particular self-presentation is being received: likes, comments, followers and shares may therefore operate as informal signals of social acceptance, making the online presentation of the self a part of an ongoing process of evaluation.

This process can be understood as a cycle linking self-presentation, comparison and validation. Users present specific selected aspects of themselves, observe the reactions generated by those presentations and may subsequently modify their behaviour in response to the feedback received. Roni (2025) notes that social media can support identity exploration

and facilitate connection with like-minded people, while also creating pressure to maintain a desirable presentation; the same environment can consequently provide both opportunities for experimentation and incentives for conformity. When approval is associated with a particular appearance, behaviour or opinion, users may be encouraged to reproduce those characteristics: in gender-related contexts, this means that social feedback can contribute to the reinforcement of expectations concerning masculinity and femininity, especially when the content receiving the strongest engagement is also the content most visible to other users.

Fear of Missing Out constitutes a closely related mechanism through which the cycle of comparison and validation sustains itself over time. FOMO is identified as a significant negative predictor of well-being among Gen Z participants, with its effects partially mediated through social support and personal resilience (Dwidienawati et al., 2025). Because social activities or interactions and lifestyle choices are continuously rendered visible through digital traces, young people can experience the persistent impression that others are participating in more desirable experiences or occupying more socially valued positions, and that is an impression that encourages repeated engagement and makes belonging partly observable through quantified metrics of participation. The relationship between FOMO and well-being is therefore not simply additive: social support can attenuate its negative effects when it strengthens offline relational resources, but its absence, particularly among young men – two thirds of whom report feeling that no one truly knows them (UN Women, 2025) – can leave users more dependent on digital recognition and therefore more susceptible to the ideological communities that offer it most readily.

Belonging represents a second important mechanism. Digital communities can provide young people with recognition, companionship, even opportunities to discuss experiences that may be difficult to communicate offline, and social media can enable Gen Z users to build communities and find people who share their interests or experiences (Roni, 2025). Dwidienawati et al. (2025) similarly highlight the importance of social support and resilience for Gen Z well-being. The psychological function of online belonging is therefore not inherently problematic: on the contrary, it can be protective when it strengthens social support and facilitates meaningful relationships, and its relevance to gender attitudes emerges when belonging becomes tied to communities organised around particular interpretations of gender. In such settings, the need for recognition may encourage individuals to adopt or

maintain norms that are dominant within the group, particularly when dissent threatens access to social approval.

This mechanism is especially relevant to the emergence of gendered online communities. Identity formation does not occur in an ideological vacuum, as individuals encounter categories, norms or explanatory narratives through their interactions with others; a user who repeatedly receives affirmation and praise for presenting a particular understanding of masculinity or femininity and of gender relations may gradually incorporate that interpretation into their self-concept. A useful complementary perspective shows that Gen Z individuals may simultaneously endorse meritocratic and gender-neutral principles while applying gender-differentiated evaluative standards in specific situations (Duong et al., 2025). The findings suggest that gender beliefs can operate below the level of explicit ideological commitment: social media may contribute to this process by continuously refreshing the cultural cues through which gendered expectations are learned and interpreted.

A further mechanism concerns algorithmic curation. Contemporary platforms do not expose all users to the same information environment: recommendation systems learn from behavioural signals such as viewing time, searches, interactions and all the other forms of engagement, and subsequently personalize the content presented to each user. Engagement-driven platform structures can facilitate the circulation of harmful and increasingly extreme material (UN Women, 2025). The psychological significance of this architecture lies in the interaction between personal interests and platform incentives, as content that attracts attention is more likely to be recommended or encountered again, regardless of whether it is accurate and socially beneficial or psychologically healthy.

Repeated and personalised exposure might therefore alter the perceived boundaries of what is socially normal. A gender-related claim encountered once can be interpreted as unusual or irrelevant; repeated exposure to similar claims across videos, influencers, comments and online communities can make those claims increasingly familiar. Familiarity does not imply persuasion, and it would be methodologically inappropriate to assume that repeated exposure automatically changes an individual's beliefs: nevertheless, repeated exposure can interact with pre-existing attitudes, emotional states and social motivations. The role of social media and Internet algorithms may be relevant to the widening gender gap among younger generations, while also cautioning against interpreting this development as a complete rupture with previous trends (Campbell and Cowper-Coles, 2025). Social media

could therefore function less as an independent cause of attitudes than as an environment that selectively reinforces certain beliefs and makes them more psychologically salient.

The pathway through which algorithmic curation can shift attitudinal exposure is typically gradual rather than sudden. A user who engages with content about fitness, financial independence, well-being or dating advice will find that recommendation systems associate this material with adjacent content in which the same lifestyle goals are framed within a broader account of gender relations (Lott et al., 2025). The psychological significance of this progression lies in its imperceptibility: there's not a single moment of ideological conversion, and the user does not necessarily perceive themselves as moving from mainstream self-improvement content to increasingly gender-conservative material. Instead, the shift occurs through the accumulation of exposure, the social rewards of belonging to communities organised around shared norms, the gradual normalisation of interpretive frameworks that might have seemed unusual at an earlier point. Understanding this process as incremental rather than deliberate has important implications for how the relationship between platform architecture and gender attitudes should be theorised.

The effects of these mechanisms may also differ according to the gendered content environments in which users participate, since the digital lives of young men and women are not necessarily identical: research and reporting on Gen Z indicate differences in platform use, content consumption and exposure to gender-related narratives (Richardson, 2024; Cursino, 2026), and these differences matter because social validation and algorithmic curation both operate on the material available within each user's environment. For young women, comparison may be particularly connected to appearance and idealised femininity, whereas for young men it may be more strongly connected to status, physical competence, economic achievement and sexual success (Roni, 2025; Ghodke et al., 2025; Lott et al., 2025). The underlying psychological mechanisms are therefore comparable, but the normative content through which they operate may differ.

3.2 Online masculinity narratives, misogyny and the Manosphere

The mechanisms previously described become particularly consequential when social media provide users with explicit narratives about masculinity. The term “manosphere” refers to a heterogeneous collection of online communities and social media spaces

concerned with men's issues, that promote strict and aggressive ideas of masculinity and gender relations often sharing anti-feminist and misogynistic views. It is described as an ecosystem that includes, among others, men's-rights groups, incel communities, pickup artists, red-pill communities and traditionalist or conservative networks (UN Women, 2025). These groups differ substantially in their beliefs and degree of hostility toward women, so consequently the manosphere should not be treated as a single homogeneous movement. Many of these spaces are connected by a recurring narrative structure in which contemporary gender change is represented as a threat to men, traditional masculinity is presented as a solution to male difficulties, and feminism and gender equality may be framed as responsible for men's perceived loss of status (UN Women, 2025).

This distinction is important because online masculinity content does not necessarily begin with explicitly misogynistic material: young men might initially encounter videos concerning fitness, dating, financial success, entrepreneurship, confidence or self-improvement. Lott et al. (2025), in their qualitative analysis of 24 TikTok videos produced by three Estonian manfluencers, found that manosphere ideas were frequently integrated into apparently mainstream discussions of entrepreneurship, physical health, relationships and self-development; the study identified recurring discourses of social decline, male victimisation, dominance and suffering or discipline. Such findings demonstrate how ideological narratives can be embedded within ordinary lifestyle content, potentially making them less immediately recognisable as political or gender-ideological material.

The psychological appeal of these narratives cannot be adequately explained by assuming that young men are simply persuaded by misogynistic ideas: a more useful interpretation begins with the developmental and social uncertainties associated with adolescence and emerging adulthood. The contemporary discussion of young men needs to take seriously the genuine difficulties experienced by some members of Generation Z (Betts Razavi, 2024): insecurity, uncertainty about future roles, changing expectations of masculinity and difficulties in establishing relationships can create situations in which individuals search for explanations and sources of recognition. A community that provides a clear account of these experiences can therefore satisfy psychological needs for coherence, belonging and identity, even when the explanation offered is distorted or exclusionary.

The importance of recognition is particularly visible in the way manosphere communities frame male grievance. Such spaces can present men as victims of social change

and portray gender equality as having advantaged women at men's expense (UN Women, 2025), and this narrative can provide a simple causal explanation for experiences that are otherwise difficult to interpret: loneliness becomes evidence of women's behaviour, economic insecurity becomes evidence of feminist policy, while difficulties in relationships become evidence of an allegedly unfair gender system. The explanatory framework is problematic precisely because it converts complex social and structural conditions into a conflict between men and women. Nevertheless, its psychological appeal should not be dismissed, because narratives that offer recognition and a coherent explanation could be particularly attractive to individuals who feel socially invisible or uncertain about their position.

This point connects directly with the evidence on Gen Z gender attitudes discussed in Chapter 2. 60% of Gen Z men across the countries surveyed agree that women's equality discriminates against men, compared with 40% of Gen Z women (Ipsos, 2025). This result doesn't indicate that these men are members of the manosphere, nor does it establish that exposure to manosphere content produced their attitudes, but instead it reveals the presence of a perception of male disadvantage that overlaps with one of the central narratives circulating in manosphere spaces. Betts Razavi (2024) similarly identifies signs of a backlash among Gen Z men while stressing that the available evidence is heterogeneous and that the phenomenon requires further investigation. Social media can therefore be considered a potential context in which existing perceptions of male disadvantage are reinforced and connected to broader ideological narratives.

The scale of manosphere engagement among young men is substantially larger than is commonly acknowledged in mainstream discourse. Two thirds of young men globally engage regularly with online influencers who speak about masculinity, while two thirds of U.S. adult men, and half of younger men, report trusting at least one manosphere voice (UN Women, 2025). The psychological consequences of this engagement are documented through Movember Foundation data (UN Women, 2025): young men who regularly follow masculinity influencers are more likely to experience feelings of worthlessness and nervousness, more likely to take performance-enhancing supplements and exercise through injury in compliance with hypermasculine physical standards, more likely to place more value on wealth and popularity among their male friends, and substantially less likely to seek professional mental health support. These outcomes are particularly significant because they

reveal a contradiction internal to manosphere content: communities that present themselves as addressing male suffering and offering self-improvement systematically discourage the help-seeking and relational vulnerability that the research literature consistently identifies as most protective against that suffering. The cycle is self-reinforcing: psychological distress drives engagement with content that intensifies rather than resolves it, while attributing its causes to external sources rather than to the content ecosystem itself.

A further psychological mechanism is the construction of a highly prescriptive model of successful masculinity. Some narratives have been described to associate male worth with physical strength, emotional stoicism, material success, sexual confidence and dominance (UN Women, 2025). Likewise, manfluencer content connected discipline, physical development, entrepreneurship and control with idealised forms of manhood (Lott et al., 2025). Such prescriptions can be attractive because they translate uncertainty into concrete behavioural rules: become stronger, more successful, more disciplined, more socially dominant. At the same time, they could narrow the range of acceptable masculine identities by implicitly defining dependence or vulnerability and emotional openness as weakness.

This dynamic can transform comparison into self-surveillance, as men exposed repeatedly to idealised representations of wealthy, physically dominant or sexually successful men may evaluate themselves against standards that are difficult to achieve. It's been identified a discourse of suffering and discipline in which male difficulty is incorporated into a broader narrative of self-improvement, and the warning is that restrictive definitions of masculinity can contribute to psychological pressure and risky behaviours (Lott et al., 2025; UN Women, 2025). The contradiction is therefore significant: content may promise to solve male insecurity while simultaneously reinforcing the standards that generate it. In this sense, the psychological appeal of online masculinity narratives might lie in their capacity to offer certainty, structure and a sense of control, as well as in their ideological message.

The circulation of these narratives is further facilitated by the attention economy. Provocative claims emotionally charged language and representations of social decline can be incorporated into content strategies designed to attract attention (Lott et al., 2025), and the role of algorithmic systems is amplifying content that generates engagement. This creates an environment in which the most visible material is not necessarily the most accurate or psychologically beneficial, but that which produces a strong reaction. The resulting process can be gradual rather than deliberate: a user can move from apparently neutral self-

improvement content to increasingly gender-conservative material through a sequence of recommendations, without a single identifiable moment of ideological conversion.

Misogyny consequently needs to be considered within a wider identity ecosystem rather than as an isolated category of hateful content: different manosphere groups have distinct ideologies, but many circulate prejudice against women, gender myths and hierarchical understandings of gender relations (UN Women, 2025). The psychological concern is that users may encounter misogynistic statements, but more importantly that repeated participation in a community can provide social rewards for increasingly antagonistic interpretations of gender, because likes and comments, agreement and group belonging can transform an initially individual grievance into a socially validated collective identity.

At the same time, the available evidence requires caution: it would be incorrect to infer that every young man who watches masculinity content is misogynistic, that every manosphere participant is radicalised, or that algorithmic exposure inevitably changes political attitudes. Lott et al. (2025) provide a qualitative case study of a small number of TikTok videos, while Betts Razavi (2024) highlights inconsistencies in the broader evidence on Gen Z men. The most defensible interpretation is therefore conditional: certain digital environments may provide narratives that resonate with particular psychological needs, frustrations or identity uncertainties and could reinforce pre-existing beliefs, but the direction and magnitude of these effects depend on individual characteristics and social context.

3.3 Social media manipulation and gendered experiences

The psychological influence of social media should not, however, be conceptualised exclusively as a problem concerning young men, since the same platforms expose young women to gendered expectations and comparison pressures or forms of ideological content, although the specific content and mechanisms may differ. Social media can be described as a “double-edged sword” for Generation Z (Roni, 2025, p. 5): digital environments can facilitate communication, connectivity, identity expression and community formation while also increasing comparison, pressure and problematic engagement. A gender-sensitive analysis therefore requires attention to both sides of the digital environment, so another relevant question is how young women are exposed to and respond to competing representations of femininity, relationships and gender equality.

For young women, social comparison is frequently connected to appearance and idealised representations of femininity. There's a significant psychological relevance of curated online self-presentation and pressure to meet idealised standards, as images and videos presenting highly selective forms of beauty, lifestyle and bodily appearance can function as implicit standards against which users compare and evaluate themselves (Roni, 2025; Ghodke et al., 2025). The resulting process may easily affect self-esteem and body image, particularly when engagement metrics become interpreted as signals of social value. Importantly, these mechanisms are not exclusively female, but the cultural expectations surrounding feminine appearance make them especially relevant to young women.

A related process concerns the circulation of traditional femininity as an aspirational identity. The BBC's reporting on the 2025 Ipsos and KCL survey highlights the increasing visibility of content promoting traditional gender views and quotes experts describing social media as playing a huge role in changing gender attitudes (Cursino & Dean, 2026). Within this environment, traditional gender roles can be presented as lifestyle, relationship advice, domestic aesthetics or self-improvement, and not just as explicit political ideology. This distinction is important because ideological messages may be more difficult to recognise when they are embedded in apparently ordinary content: the presentation of traditional femininity as a personal choice or lifestyle can therefore contribute to the normalisation of gendered expectations without requiring users to identify themselves with a particular political position.

The attitudinal data from the Ipsos and King's College London (2026) survey provide direct evidence of the extent to which these normalization processes have produced measurable attitudinal shifts among young women. 18% of Gen Z women agree that a wife should always obey her husband, compared to only 6% of Baby Boomer women, a tripling of endorsement for this explicitly hierarchical position across generations, in a direction that directly inverts any expectation of progressive generational change (Cursino & Dean, 2026). Similarly, 36% of Gen Z women agree that the promotion of women's equality has gone so far as to discriminate against men, and 48% believe gender equality has already gone far enough (Ipsos, 2026). These figures demonstrate that the attitudinal consequences of gendered social media content are not limited to young men: the normative environments constructed by platform algorithms shape young women's understanding of gender equality as well, although through different content mechanisms and towards different attitudinal

endpoints. The non-consensual character of this exposure, so the fact that gender-conservative content reaches users who have not actively sought it out, through the logic of engagement-based recommendation, is particularly important, since it means that normalization can occur through accumulated exposure rather than through deliberate ideological affiliation.

For young men, the corresponding process can involve status-oriented masculinity content: fitness, financial advice, dating and self-improvement can function as entry points into broader narratives about male identity (Lott et al., 2025; UN Women, 2025). The psychological mechanism is again rooted in comparison and validation; users are presented with models of successful masculinity and are encouraged to evaluate their own performance against them. However, when these models are combined with narratives of male victimisation, personal inadequacy can be reinterpreted as evidence of an unjust gender order. The same platform architecture can thus transform an individual psychological concern into a collective ideological grievance.

The gendered experience of social media is also shaped by exposure to harassment and technology-facilitated abuse. Digital spaces can facilitate violence against women because of their scale, speed, anonymity and capacity to reach victims across contexts (UN Women, 2025). Such experiences have consequences beyond immediate distress: when online participation is perceived as unsafe, threatening and/or humiliating, individuals might modify how they present themselves, restrict their participation or they could even withdraw from certain digital spaces. The psychological effects of online hostility are therefore relevant to identity formation because they can alter the extent to which users feel able to experiment with or publicly express aspects of themselves.

The development of AI-mediated forms of abuse adds a further dimension to this gendered digital environment. The discussion of AI-powered online abuse highlights how technologies such as synthetic imagery and other generative tools can make harmful material easier to create and distribute (UN Women, 2025). The significance for gender relations is not limited to the content itself: the possibility of impersonation, sexualised deepfakes, doxing and other forms of abuse can affect users' sense of privacy, safety and control over their own digital identity. These developments illustrate how digital technologies can influence identity by presenting models to imitate as well as by creating risks that shape how individuals are willing to participate in online spaces.

These male and female experiences should nevertheless not be understood as entirely separate. Gender identities are relational: representations of masculinity are partly constructed in relation to representations of femininity, and narratives about women can simultaneously define what men are expected to be. Manosphere content, for example, can construct women as beneficiaries of social change and men as its victims, while traditionalist content can present complementary ideals of male provision and female submission (UN Women, 2025; Cursino & Dean, 2026). These narratives may therefore reinforce one another even when they are encountered in different content environments. Social media can become an arena in which gender identities are simultaneously performed, evaluated and contested.

This interaction is particularly relevant to the concept of digital bifurcation: diverging educational and cultural pathways are important contributors to the widening gender gap among younger generations (Campbell & Cowper-Coles, 2025). Social media could add an informational dimension to this divergence by exposing young men and women to increasingly differentiated content environments. Richardson (2024) describes marked differences in the online lives of Gen Z men and women, while the BBC's reporting on the Ipsos and KCL study illustrates the extent to which gender attitudes among younger users can diverge even within the same generation (Cursino & Dean, 2026). If users are repeatedly exposed to different normative frameworks, the digital environment may contribute to the consolidation of different understandings of gender and equality.

The Ipsos and King's College London (2026) survey data provide specific evidence for this informational divergence. Among Gen Z respondents, social media is the primary source of news for 70% of young women and 62% of young men, an 8-percentage-point gender differential that means young women are more dependent on algorithmically curated platform feeds as their primary information environment. This asymmetry is analytically significant: if platform algorithms direct young women and young men toward systematically different normative frameworks through their personalized content environments, then a higher rate of social media news consumption among young women implies greater exposure to the feminist and progressive content ecosystems that dominate female-oriented algorithmic feeds, while the 62% of young men who rely primarily on social media for news are being directed toward the masculinity-oriented content ecosystems that their behavioural data has caused platforms to construct for them. The information environment within which Gen Z forms its gender attitudes is therefore not a shared cultural space but an

algorithmically polarized one, in which the same platform infrastructure produces systematically different normative exposures for male and female users; a structural feature of the digital environment that is, at present, largely invisible to the users it shapes.

However, the direction of causality remains crucial: individuals do not enter social media without previous beliefs, identities and social experiences, and algorithms do not independently determine what a person believes; users select, interpret, respond to content, while platforms simultaneously shape the visibility of that content. Campbell and Cowper-Coles (2025) therefore provide a useful caution against interpreting the gender gap as a sudden or entirely digital phenomenon. Similarly, qualitative evidence demonstrates how online masculinity content can circulate through attention-driven systems but does not establish that such content directly produces the attitudes of all viewers (Lott et al., 2025). Social media are better understood as a dynamic environment in which pre-existing tendencies and platform-level mechanisms interact.

Taken together, all the evidence reviewed in this chapter suggests that social media constitute a psychologically meaningful context of identity formation in which gender norms can be negotiated and reinforced. At the individual level, social comparison, self-presentation, validation and belonging shape the way users evaluate themselves and others; at the structural level, algorithmic curation and engagement optimisation determine which forms of content become repeatedly visible. When these mechanisms intersect with gendered narratives, they can contribute to very different identity environments for young men and women: for some young men, online masculinity communities may provide recognition and explanations for genuine difficulties while simultaneously reinforcing restrictive or misogynistic interpretations of gender relations, whereas for young women, appearance-based comparison, traditional femininity narratives and exposure to online abuse may shape different but equally consequential experiences.

The evidence does not therefore justify the claim that social media have caused a general reversal of gender equality attitudes among Generation Z men, as such a conclusion would exceed what the available studies nowadays can demonstrate. A more cautious interpretation is that digital environments provide mechanisms through which existing beliefs can become more visible and socially rewarded, while algorithmically organised content ecosystems may amplify particular narratives and contribute to the polarization of gender attitudes. This interpretation is consistent with the broader evidence discussed in this

thesis and with the argument that the contemporary gender gap among younger generations should be understood as part of a longer-term transformation rather than as a complete break with the past (Campbell & Cowper Coles, 2025). Social media are therefore best conceptualized as one of the contemporary psychological and social contexts in which that divide can be reproduced, intensified and especially potentially challenged.

Conclusions

The evidence examined throughout this thesis suggests that the gender attitudes of Generation Z cannot be adequately described through a simple narrative of either continuous progress or straightforward regression. The generation remains strongly exposed to egalitarian values and, particularly among young women, displays high levels of feminist identification and support for gender equality; at the same time, several indicators reveal resistance to further equality measures and a significant divergence between young men and women. The central finding is therefore that the long-term process of generational liberalisation has become increasingly uneven within the generation itself.

The historical comparison provides an important basis for interpreting this pattern. Previous generations generally followed a broadly progressive trajectory in gender attitudes, with each successive cohort tending to move further away from traditional gender-role norms. Generation Z complicates this pattern because some of its male members display attitudes that are more resistant to gender equality than would have been expected from the previous generational sequence, but at the same time young women continue to extend the movement toward greater egalitarianism. The resulting configuration is therefore characterised by both continuity and disruption: continuity in the progressive development of gender attitudes especially among women, and disruption in the emergence of a stronger conservative or resistant orientation among a segment of young men.

The empirical evidence also shows that gender attitudes are multidimensional: support for equality in one domain does not necessarily imply equivalent attitudes in another, and the largest differences between young men and women tend to emerge in questions concerning discrimination, labour-market fairness, the political importance of gender equality and perceptions of male disadvantage. Qualitative evidence further indicates that explicit commitment to meritocratic or egalitarian principles can coexist with gender stereotypes in practical judgement. These findings suggest that changes in gender attitudes must be understood as a configuration of beliefs that may be internally inconsistent, thus they cannot be captured by a single measure of progress or conservatism.

The psychological analysis of social media adds an important contextual dimension to this picture. Digital platforms provide opportunities for identity exploration, connection, information and community, but they also expose young people to continuous comparison, validation pressures, status anxiety and highly personalised content environments; algorithmic curation can increase the visibility and repetition of particular narratives, while online communities can provide belonging and recognition around shared interpretations of gender. The manosphere is especially relevant in this respect because it can connect everyday concerns about relationships, status, self-improvement or masculinity with broader narratives of male grievance and opposition to feminism. However, the available evidence does not justify concluding that social media have caused the reversal in Gen Z men's gender attitudes: a more cautious interpretation is that digital environments constitute an important context in which pre-existing beliefs may be reinforced, contested and made more salient.

The findings also underline the importance of considering young men and young women together rather than treating one group as the sole subject of analysis. The digital environment is gendered, but the experiences it produces are interconnected: narratives about masculinity are frequently constructed in relation to representations of femininity, while feminist and anti-feminist content develop within the same broader communicative ecosystem. Social media can consequently operate as a double-edged environment, providing resources for empowerment and belonging while simultaneously facilitating comparison, stereotyping, hostility and polarization.

Some limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged, as much of the contemporary evidence is cross-sectional or based on surveys that measure self-reported attitudes, which limits the possibility of establishing causal relationships. The studies also differ in samples, countries, measures and methodological approaches, while qualitative findings cannot be generalised to the whole of Generation Z. In addition, the rapid evolution of social media platforms means that digital environments may change faster than the research designed to study them. These limitations make it particularly important to distinguish between evidence of association, theoretical interpretation and demonstrated causality.

Overall, the thesis supports the view that a meaningful transformation is taking place in the gender-attitudinal landscape of Generation Z, but that this transformation is best understood as an increasing internal polarisation rather than as a uniform generational reversal. The most significant development is the widening distance between young men and

young women, occurring within a generation that simultaneously expresses strong commitments to diversity and equality. Understanding this divergence requires attention to historical change, developmental processes, gendered socialisation and the psychological environments created by contemporary digital platforms. Future research should therefore continue to investigate how these factors interact over time, particularly whether the current divergence represents a temporary period of developmental and political polarisation or the beginning of a more enduring reconfiguration of gender attitudes among younger generations.

References

- Betts Razavi, T. (2024). The lost boys? A call to examine gender equality attitudes and the men of Gen Z. *SN Social Sciences*, 4(1), Article 11. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Butler, J. (1988). Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519-531. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>
- Campbell, R., & Cowper-Coles, M. (2025). From a gap to a gulf? Gen Z and the gender gap in political attitudes in post-industrial societies. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*. Advance online publication. <https://bristoluniversitypressdigital.com>
- Cursino, M., & Dean, G. (2026). *Social media plays 'huge role' in promoting traditional gender views, say experts*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles>
- De Beauvoir, S. (1949). *Le deuxième sexe*. Gallimard.
- Duong, L., Gugenishvili, I., Brännback, M., & Kickul, J. (2025). Gender stereotypes and Gen Z: Navigating gender beliefs transfer through entrepreneurial pitching. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*, 31(11), 293–313. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/org>
- Dwidienawati, D., Pradipto, Y., Indrawati, L., & Gandasari, D. (2025). Internal and external factors influencing Gen Z wellbeing. *BMC Public Health*, 25, Article 1584. <https://link.springer.com/article>
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Faludi, S. (1991). *Backlash: The undeclared war against American women*. Crown.
- Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117–140. <https://journals.sagepub.com>

- Ghodke, J., Gupta, A., Shah, I., & Singh, Y. (2025). Psychosocial aspects of Generation Z: A review. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 13(3), 4334–4349.
<https://ijip.in/wp-content/uploads/2025>
- Inglehart, R., & Norris, P. (2019). *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge University Press. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cultural-backlash>
- Ipsos. (2024). *Millennials and Gen Z less in favour of gender equality than older generations*. Ipsos. <https://www.ipsos.com>
- Ipsos, & Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London. (2025). *International Women's Day 2025: Global attitudes to gender equality*. Ipsos. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/giwl>
- Ipsos, & Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London. (2026). *International Women's Day 2026: Mind the gaps: Global attitudes toward gender equality in 2026*. Ipsos. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk>
- King's College London. (2026). *Almost a third of Gen Z men agree a wife should obey her husband*. KCL News. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news>
- Lott, K., Murumaa-Mengel, M., & Marling, R. (2025). Mainstreaming the manosphere: Discourses of contemporary masculinity among Estonian manfluencers. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12, Article 602. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-025-04903-y>
- Marcia, J. E. (1966). Development and validation of ego-identity status. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 3(5), 551–558. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication>
- Nennstiel, R., & Siegert, C. (2026). *A new puzzle of equality? Gender gaps in Gen Z's gender equality attitudes in Europe*. OSF Preprints. <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv>

- Richardson, R. (2024). *The gender chasm in the online lives of Gen Z*. Highly Flammable.
<https://highlyflammable.substack.com>
- Roni, S. H. (2025). Teenage psychology of Generation Z. *Journal of Psychiatric Insight Review*, 1(4), 1–9. <https://pub-637r2.dev/WMJ-JPIR117-Teenage-Psychology.pdf>
- Rubin, G. (1975). The traffic in women: Notes on the 'political economy' of sex. In R. R. Reiter (Ed.), *Toward an anthropology of women* (pp. 157–210). Monthly Review Press.
<https://philarchive.org>
- Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(5), 797–811.
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>
- Stelling, D. (2023). Do applicants from Generation X, Y, Z differ in personality traits? Data from selection procedures in aviation (1987–2019). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, Article 1173622. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10427927>
- UN Women. (2025). *What is the manosphere and why should we care?* UN Women.
<https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles>