Let's Go Barbie! Gen Z women's perceptions on the work environment as they approach entry-level jobs: A case study

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Abstract

As Generation Z (Gen Z) women increasingly enter the workforce, understanding their perspectives and expectations becomes critical for adapting workplace practices. This study explores Gen Z women's attitudes towards the workforce, utilizing organizational justice theory, to interpret their perceptions. Through a qualitative case study of five women business students from the University of Missouri–Kansas City, we examine how these young women envision their future employment environments. Our findings uncover that Gen Z women hold distinct expectations for workplace culture, emphasizing flexibility, work-life balance, and inclusivity. Apprehension about entering the workforce is evident, driven by perceived inequalities and a lack of direct experience with traditional work settings. These workers' awareness of workplace dynamics, including how their gender is perceived, how others express unconscious bias, and how flexible work conditions can affect their work-life balance, shapes their expectations and potential skepticism toward future employers. The study contributes to organizational justice literature by highlighting how Gen Z women may perceive fairness differently compared to previous generations. It suggests employers must reconsider traditional practices to attract and retain this new cohort. Organizations can foster a more equitable and appealing workplace for the emerging workforce by understanding and aligning with Gen Z women's values.

Synopsis

Purpose

This study explores the specific thought patterns of Generation Z (Gen Z) women soon to enter the workforce. Gen Z women are rapidly entering the workforce post-COVID with different attitudes, beliefs, and values than prior generations. Therefore, it is crucial to extend current Gen Z research, as this generation makes up approximately 24 percent of the current population and is the predominant generation joining the workforce with new skills, particularly technological skills, and devoid of any pre-pandemic workplace norms (Pichler et al., 2021).

Problem of Practice

In the current workforce dynamic, attracting and retaining Gen Z talent is a critical issue. Gen Z is flooding the workforce with new attitudes, beliefs, and expectations significantly different from those of previous generations. The challenge for organizations is to understand and adapt to these expectations to remain competitive in talent retention.

Talent attraction and retention are crucial to the sustainability of an organization (Schroth, 2019). Companies that attract and retain top talent have a competitive edge, as talented employees can drive innovation, efficiency, and productivity (Glass, 2007). A stable workforce also contributes to a positive work environment, where employees feel valued and are more likely to be engaged, motivated, and productive (Mawhinney, 2019). Organizations must reevaluate their practices to meet the evolving demands of Gen Z, by implementing policies to enhance their appeal as employers and improve retention rates among this critical demographic.

Results

In our exploration of Gen Z women's attitudes toward entering the workforce, several key insights emerge that underscore a generational shift in workplace expectations and the vital

role of organizational justice. This study reveals that Gen Z women prioritize work-life balance, flexible work arrangements, and an inclusive, respectful environment. These findings reflect a broader, generational shift toward a "work-to-live" philosophy, challenging traditional "live-to-work" attitudes. Our participants articulate a clear vision for what they believe the workplace should embody, emphasizing personal well-being, equitable treatment, and meaningful recognition of their work.

This research highlights the necessity for organizations to reevaluate and adapt their practices to meet the changing demands of the newest workforce entrants. The insights provided by our study suggest that Gen Z women are not only aware of the deficiencies in current workplace politics, but are also motivated to seek out employers who proactively address these issues. By implementing policies that align more closely with these values, such as equitable pay practices, transparent promotion paths, and rigorous anti-discrimination policies, companies can enhance their attractiveness as employers and improve their retention rates among this critical demographic.

Conclusions

For practitioners and researchers, the findings from this study offer a compelling glimpse into the future of work. Our study provides a roadmap for creating more just, flexible, and inclusive workplaces that resonate with the next generation of workers, setting a precedent for future organizational strategies. The detailed discussions and analyses presented in our paper not only enrich the literature on organizational justice and generational studies, but also serve as a call to action for employers to foster environments where every employee can thrive.

Practical Relevance

Gen Z women hold specific expectations for their work environment, including flexibility, inclusivity, and work-life balance. They express reservations about current workplace policies and display a lack of organizational loyalty, viewing jobs as stepping stones rather than long-term commitments. Organizations will need to adapt to these evolving expectations to attract and retain this emerging talent pool. By understanding the preferences of Gen Z women, organizations can create more appealing workplaces. By implementing policies that align with Gen Z values, such as performance-based pay, mental health support, and opportunities for skill development, organizations can enhance employee satisfaction and retention. This study provides actionable insights for organizations to foster a more equitable, flexible, and inclusive work environment, crucial for attracting and retaining this generation's top talent.

Methods

Research Question

Our study utilizes a qualitative methodology to explore the following research question: What are Gen Z women's attitudes toward entering the current workforce?

Method and Design

We designed our research to examine real-world phenomena using a holistic, single-case study approach (Yin, 2018). We utilize exploratory methods to analyze the concerns of Gen Z women entering the workforce and determine how employers can accommodate their new employees and alleviate apprehension. Participants completed a screening survey in Qualtrics to determine eligibility. We randomly assigned researchers the respondents who satisfied the screening requirements. Using open-ended questions during semi-structured interviews, we collected data to determine common themes on the perceptions of Gen Z women entering the workforce. We asked our participants about their career aspirations, perceptions of gender

equality, work-life balance, expectations (salary, flexibility, raises, scheduling), and organizational loyalty.

Data Collection, Sample, and Analysis

We analyzed a sample of five Generation Z college students who are members of the Women in Business Club at the University of Missouri–Kansas City. The sample exclusively comprises all women students under 26 who anticipate graduating from college within the next two years. We limited our study participants to business majors, which delineated participants who met the criteria of having aspirations of pursuing professional business careers in the future. Table 1 includes the descriptive information of our 5 participants.

Table 1 Study Participants				
Pseudonym	**Major**	**Previous Work Experience**	**First Generation College Student**	**Starting Salary Expectation**
Rosella	Human Resource Management	Yes	No	$60,000
Francis	Finance	Yes	No	$60,000
Mona	Marketing	Yes	Yes	$50,000
Abigail	Marketing	Yes	Yes	$50,000

Madison	Business Management	Yes	No	$95,000

We each conducted at least one interview, approximating 30 minutes. We followed an IRB-approved script with open-ended questions that allowed participants to share their perceptions of entering the workforce. This allowed us flexibility in asking follow-up questions based on the participants' responses. See Appendix B for our complete interview guide. We informed participants about the purpose of the study and explained the procedures, their confidentiality, and anonymity. Participants provided informed consent before beginning the interviews.

We conducted, recorded, and transcribed our interviews using Zoom video conferencing. We cleaned the transcripts and generated aliases for the participants and other names provided during the interviews. We used Quirkos qualitative data analysis software to code and interpret themes within our data. To strengthen the validity of our results, our team reviewed one another's coding. Our results were the agreed-upon findings based on our cross-review process.

Practical Problem

Generation Z (Gen Z) women are rapidly entering the workforce post-COVID with different attitudes, beliefs, and values than prior generations. Therefore, it is crucial to extend current Gen Z research, as this generation makes up approximately 24 percent of the current population and is the predominant generation joining the workforce with new skills, particularly technological skills, and more college degrees earned than prior generations (Pichler et al., 2021). Gen Z, born between 1997 and 2013 (Schroth, 2019), has similar interests and beliefs as Millennials but also brings more unique skills, as listed above (Schroth, 2019). It is essential to

understand this generation's value system to accommodate them in the workforce better, prepare them to support the overall organization, and ensure hiring managers are prepared to integrate this new generation into the workforce (Schroth, 2019). Organizational justice is an important theory for understanding work behavior. Organizational justice is characterized by how fairly the employees feel they are being treated at work (Kian et al., 2014). As Gen Z women enter the workforce, it is valuable to understand new organizational dynamics, such as work-life balance, quiet-quitting, opportunities for advancement, compensation expectations, remote work, flexible hours, perception of women, retention (loyalty), and motivations to excel at work (Chandra et al., 2020; De Angelis et al., 2021; Glass, 2007; Maloni et al., 2019). Gaining a further understanding of these organizational dynamics can help hiring managers and organizations better support this generation. By taking a qualitative approach, this study uniquely uncovers the specific thought patterns of Gen Z women soon to enter the workforce.

Literature Review

Research has long recognized the workplace as inequitable for women (Joshi et al., 2015). Progressive feminist theory emphasizes conceptualizing women not merely as assimilated into a male-centric framework but as individuals deserving recognition for their distinct qualities and contributions. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted conventional workplace dynamics, thus highlighting the inherent inequities embedded within traditional work structures, particularly concerning women. This disruption underscores the inadequacy of conventional work expectations, particularly in accommodating employees' diverse needs and circumstances, with women often bearing this burden. Furthermore, the new cohort of workers who have entered the workforce after the pandemic lack exposure to pre-pandemic workplace norms

(Stiller Rikleen, 2021). This further accentuates the need to reevaluate and reconfigure workplace practices to allow for equal opportunities for all workers.

Organizational Justice Theory, rooted in equity theory, explains that individuals engage in comparative evaluations of fairness concerning their treatment relative to others within their organization (Colquitt, 2001). Through this comparative assessment, individuals adjust their work-related behaviors and work output in response to perceived disparities in treatment. Researchers of organizational justice theory previously combined frameworks to develop an overall construct that includes four components: distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice. *Distributive justice* refers to perceived fairness in outcomes from organizational or leadership decisions. *Procedural justice* describes the perceived justice of the systems or processes in place by leaders and organizations. *Interpersonal justice* explains the perceived justice in the relationships between colleagues and the sincerity and respect between colleagues. Finally, *informational justice* entails sharing, explaining, and disseminating information (Colquitt, 2001; Judge & Colquitt, 2004).

In this study, we apply organizational justice theory and its four components of organizational justice to decipher Gen Z women's perception of workplace fairness. While existing research has explored organizational justice, particularly concerning women, there is a paucity of research on how the incoming cohort of women workers, unburdened by pre-pandemic workplace norms, may differ in their perception of fairness compared with older generations.

While workplaces have neglected to adapt to women's needs and unique circumstances, the pandemic showed that inflexible workplaces are not necessary to productivity (Kossek et al., 2021) and business outcomes (Chandra et al., 2020), and may leave employees feeling burned

out, particularly women who bear the burden of family responsibilities, cognitive biases, and other barriers that prohibit them from fully participating in the traditional workforce (Kossek et al., 2021). Gen Z is more interested in a "work to live" rather than a "live to work" mentality that prior generations have been less apt to adopt (Mawhinney, 2019), prioritizing a work-life balance (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021), hybrid or remote work (Stiller Rikleen, 2021), and unashamedly participating in "quiet quitting" practices (Klotz & Bolino, 2022). Gen Z has a deeper understanding of political and cultural phenomena that may affect their work, such as the historical lack of parental leave policies in the United States (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023), which is acting as a part of their decision-making process, long before these workers plan to have families. Gen Z women emphasize equitable pay to a higher degree due to a long-held understanding of the gender pay gap (Grow & Yang, 2018). Women from Gen Z may be less tolerant of workplaces that cater to a masculine norm. Gen Z women's evolving priorities and perceptions underscore a growing demand for workplace adaptability, equity, and recognition of diverse needs in fostering a more inclusive and sustainable professional environment.

The subset of Gen Z workers, particularly women nearing graduation from college, were in high school during the pandemic. Unlike older generations, they did not experience the transition of traditional 8-5 workplace structures to remote settings during the pandemic, nor did they subsequently navigate the reversion to pre-pandemic norms. This lack of direct experience renders them a distinct group for employers aiming to understand their perception of workplace fairness, especially concerning entry-level positions. Our findings indicate that Gen Z women espouse ideals more aligned with an aspirational "what should be" workplace culture rather than

the prevailing "what is." Employers in this competitive labor market must adapt to these

evolving expectations to attract and retain top talent.

Findings

Our case study concerning Gen Z women nearing entry into the workforce revealed

several findings that may benefit practitioners and researchers. The findings included insights

concerning workplace culture, workplace policies, workforce entry, and organizational loyalty.

Each of these findings relates to some, if not all, organizational justice dimensions. Within the

discussion section, we elaborate on how the participants' attitudes relate to the organizational

justice dimensions and how practitioners could benefit from these insights.

Finding 1: Gen Z women expect a "what should be" workplace culture.

Each participant discussed their expectations of how the workplace "should be,"

including the benefits offered, the inclusion of diversity, the interpersonal relations between the

company and its employees, and the acknowledgement of their contributions to the workplace.

The type of benefits that our participants expected ranged from flexible hours/workweeks to

being comfortable within the workplace. Multiple participants discussed flexibility and the work

modality regarding weekly work hours. Mona suggested:

> *"I would want something a lot more flexible than feeling like you have to be there from 9*
>
> *to 5 because then it just feels like that's your whole day…Yeah, unless there was some*
>
> *flexibility of like, you know, you can go three days and, like, you know, hybrid one day, or*
>
> *some type of structure that allows me to have that freedom and not feel like restrained*
>
> *and feel like my job is my everything."*

Mona's attitude towards flexibility was echoed across all of the participants with Abigail

discussing shorter workweeks: "*I mean, ideal would be like a 4 day work week…a good four*

days. Just so I'm not feeling burnt out, and my weekends are like two days off, just quick and over." Rosella described how feeling comfortable enough to be herself at work would be a benefit, "*you know that kind of feeling comfortable enough to speak your mind. Not necessarily speak your mind, but like give your opinion. As long as it's respectful, of course.*" She also describes how her comfort could help her attain flexibility, "*being able to negotiate that [in terms of hours worked each week] as well. I guess that goes back to the comfort thing.*" Mona also described how crucial social comfortability was within the workplace,

> "*I think that's my number one thing of really feeling comfortable with the people around and like, really enjoying that time...they're like your second family right? And you're spending most of your day with them like you might as well really like the people around you.*"

Our participants indicated how inclusion of diversity, in regards to gender, race, and age, was crucial and how this diversity can empower themselves and organizations. When asked how Abigail feels about entering the workforce as a woman, she replied, "*Yeah, I am terrified.*" These young women are concerned about what being a woman means for their careers. Mona described diversity, saying,

> "*How do I not see this as a disadvantage? And in fact, see it as an advantage…how do I use me being like a woman or me being Latina to be able to use that as my advantage rather than seeing the bad side of it.*"

Rosella further described the empowerment from diversity by saying,

> "*They cite it as a bad thing with the younger generations, because they're like that's not realistic…you have to change. And so why would you not want to hear out people who are like new to things and have completely different ideas.*"

Figure 1 illustrates how often each participant discussed diversity during the interviews. Our research team analyzed the interview transcripts and used Quirkos to make each of the codings. Any mention of workplace issues surrounding diversity were considered diversity codings. These codings included statements concerning the importance of different genders, races, and age groups within the workplace. Also, the diversity codings included any statements implying the need for equality within the workplace.

Figure 1: *Number of Diversity Codings*
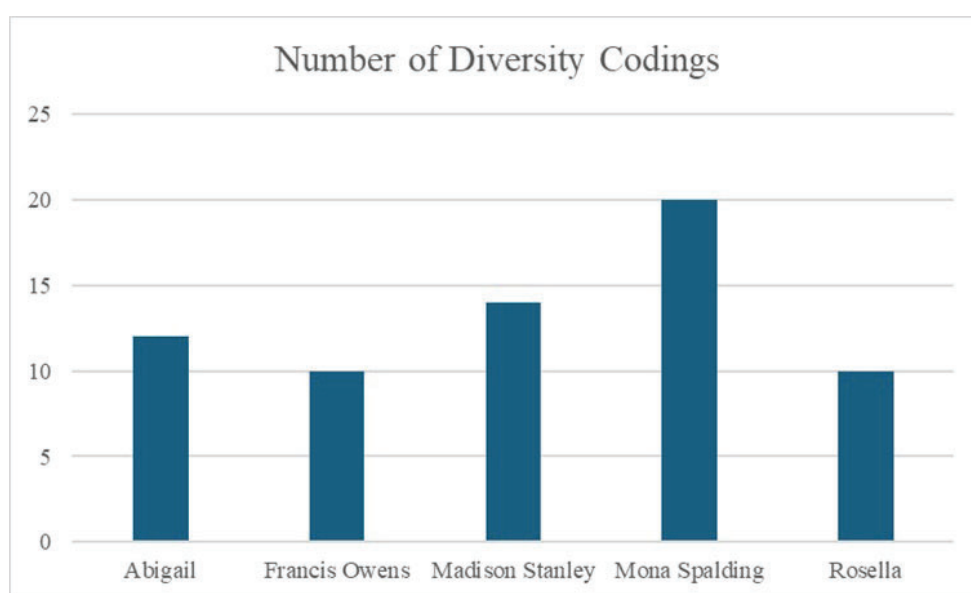
The participants revealed how respect and trust within the workplace were important to them in many ways. Francis suggested a way to demonstrate employers' trust and respect is by setting boundaries:

> "*trying to keep work during work hours…you hear the horror stories like people getting called at night and not being viewed very highly if they don't respond to those and don't like putting in that extra time…so just kind of respecting the hours in the contract, I think, at the minimum*."

Rosella viewed trust as an essential attribute of an employer:

"I really appreciate when companies respect the intelligence of their employees. And you

can see that in a lot of ways, like I know, unlimited PTO…I think it's a nice thought of:

'You're an adult, you can get your work done no matter where you are like we trust you.

Basically, we trust you to get that done.'"

Madison stated of her future colleagues, "*I have asked around about advice on how to like, get*

that trust and respect from them."

The final aspect of the participants' perspective of the workplace culture was

acknowledging their work and how it is meaningful to the company. Rosella states:

"*having a sense that your work actually sees the light of day and that it actually has a*

payoff. I think that's something for me that really helps…I appreciate that…it actually

worked like my thought process worked. It was good."

Abigail further described how her efforts should be recognized by saying, "*I want to work for*

somewhere that makes me feel good about going to work and so I will stay committed to that

organization…So this still deserves recognition for it."

Finding 2: Gen Z women acknowledge the current workplace policies and the issues with

those policies.

The participants were aware of many current workplace policies and were disgruntled

with the current maternity and paternity leave programs, the factors affecting pay raises and

promotions, and the resources for mental health. All of the participants agreed that there should

be better maternity leave options for females within the workplace, and a couple discussed how

organizations need better paternity leave. Abigail suggested:

I think it is super important that where I work does support that, not even just maternal,

but paternal. Because I [think] you need two parents. It's so much healthier to have two

parents, especially in the beginning stages. So why can't that be prioritized for both? I would love for that to be something I'm looking into before getting into a job, even if it doesn't specifically affect me."

Francis echoed Abigail's attitudes towards maternity and paternity leave by stating,

"*I think I would love that to be like a law, of course, so definitely the paid maternity leave for the first few months is definitely one that I feel like should be obligatory to women and honestly, men as well. I feel like I would love to get more of a paternity leave presence in the United States.*"

The Gen Z participants agreed that employers should base pay raises and promotions on skill, effort, or time spent, but that is not always the case. Abigail discusses how effort looks different between work modalities,

"*In your performance…probably like the time spent, because I know like what we talked about in class with the remote working and people who are in the office more doing all this work are kind of seen. If their screen grab doesn't show them doing the work, they're kind of passed up.*"

Mona describes how the factors affecting pay may not be equitable,

"*You have to go almost the extra mile all the time…I'm very much aware that, you know, a man probably doesn't have to try as much sometimes than a woman does. It's like that qualification like when applying for a job; they say that women feel like they need to fit every single checkbox in the job application, and men feel like, 'Oh, I just need like a couple, and I'll be good for it' so I think that really does seep into the workplace.*"

Mental health awareness was a topic of interest in the minds of our Gen Z women participants. Francis stated:

"I would like to work for a company that is understanding to an extent of like special circumstances that come up like occasionally, like a mental health day…So just working for a company that has that understanding kind of policy."

Rosella seconded the importance of mental health within the workplace,

"There is that human aspect of business where, like, I'm a human, and I do business. So I can't necessarily detach myself from all these emotions and stuff, and I don't think I should have to. Quite frankly, I think that's kind of an outdated way of thinking about businesses…so I guess that awareness of mental health is something that concerns me too."

Finding 3: There is apprehension about entering the workforce for Gen Z women.

Our participants have concerns about entering the workforce due to the difficulties in getting a job, the low expectations of entry-level positions, and the stigmas associated with the younger generation. Rosella discussed her feelings toward applying for jobs, *"I feel a little, I guess, I'll say, cautious about it. And maybe even a bit like it's out of my control, like I can put in as many applications as I want."* Abigail described her mixed feelings towards entering the workforce,

"I'm hoping it'll be better since it's more of a professional environment than like a restaurant. But I'm not gonna set my expectations of it being an amazing inclusive environment, especially if it's just an intro role because I feel like those are where you'd get kind of like picked on the most."

Mona worries about the stigmas of being a young woman in the workforce,

"It's kind of hard to get into real estate as a young woman, just because people don't take you as seriously. Sometimes you go to showings, and they think your clients are the real

estate agents instead of you…they kind of discredit you a little bit…she's just a kid or

something."

Finding 4: Gen Z women lack organizational loyalty.

Most of the Gen Z participants preferred to leave rather than be committed to a specific

company. Rosella suggested:

"*Company loyalty was a bigger thing in the past, and it's like nonexistent now. Pretty*

much like company loyalty doesn't really mean anything. I feel like maybe minimum a

year, maybe year and a half. If I like it, I'll stay there. But if I don't, I think that's kind of

the point where I would feel like, okay, I got a lot of learning opportunities from this. I'm

going to take those skills and apply it to the next place."

Mona reiterated the importance of learning new skills and how job hopping can help,

"*It's really good in the beginning stages of your career to like move often…to move often*

enough to have skills. Probably move like once a year or 2, probably because I think that,

especially early on, you have to get a lot of skills…I'm learning something new, and I

think that's a really big thing for me is like I have to feel like I'm constantly learning

something new and, like I said doing something purposeful to feel like I could stay at a

job."

Figure 2 depicts how often each participant discussed their lack of organizational loyalty. We

discovered this coding by analyzing the interview transcripts and used Quirkos to make each of

the codings. The organizational loyalty codings included any statements mentioning tenure or

length of time with a potential future employer or current employer. Table 2 provides a summary

of our participant's quotes.

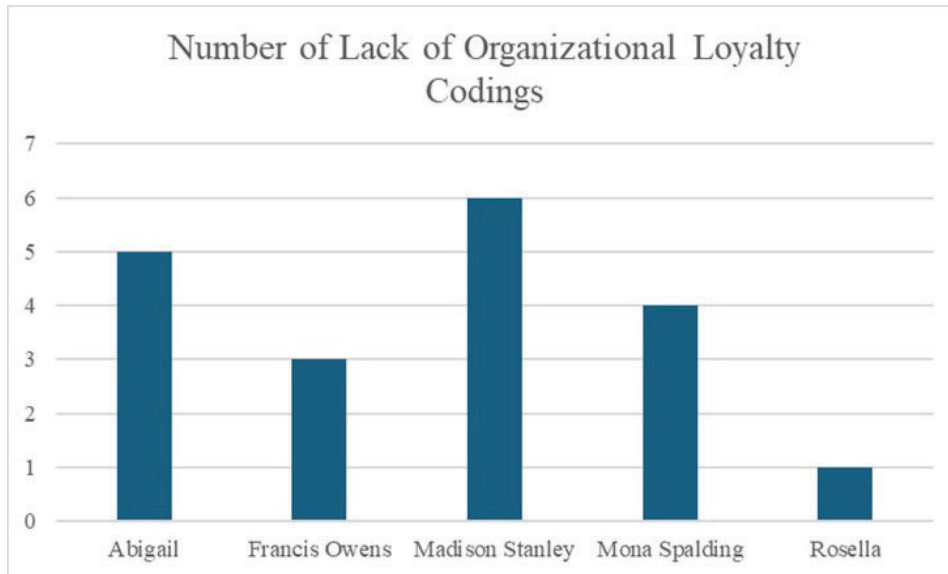Figure 2: *Number of Lack of Organizational Loyalty Codings*

Number of Lack of Organizational Loyalty Codings

Name	Codings
Abigail	5
Francis Owens	3
Madison Stanley	6
Mona Spalding	4
Rosella	1

Table 2: *Findings with Sample Interview Quotes*

Findings	Subcategories of Findings	Quotes
"What should be" Workplace Culture	Benefits Offered:	*"I would want something a lot more flexible than feeling like you have to be there from 9 to 5 because then it just feels like that's your whole day…Yeah, unless there was some flexibility of like, you know, you can go three days and, like, you know, hybrid one day, or some type of structure that allows me to have that freedom and not feel like restrained and feel like my job is my everything." - Mona*
		"I mean, ideal would be like a 4 day work week…a good four days. Just so I'm not feeling burnt out, and my weekends are like two days off, just quick and over." - Abigail
		"you know that kind of feeling comfortable enough to speak your mind. Not necessarily speak your mind, but like give your opinion. As long as it's respectful, of course." - Rosella
		"being able to negotiate that [in terms of hours worked each week] as well. I guess that goes back to the comfort thing." - Rosella
		"I think that's my number one thing of really feeling comfortable with the people around and like, really

		enjoying that time...they're like your second family right? And you're spending most of your day with them like you might as well really like the people around you." - Mona
		"like we were just talking about with schedules like I'm not locked into this. That kind of makes me feel more secure, in a way. So like, as far as scheduling goes out. If I don't have a like a rigid schedule that would make me feel like it has a longer lifeline for me." - Rosella
		"I think having that like totally inflexible schedule. It's outdated because nowadays people like really value being able to have that flexibility and not feeling so confined because I really think work should feel supplemental to your life, and it shouldn't feel like an obstacle because whether we like it or not, we have to work." - Rosella
	Inclusion of Diversity:	*"Yeah, I am terrified."* - Abigail
		"How do I not see this as a disadvantage? And in fact, see it as an advantage...how do I use me being like a woman or me being Latina to be able to use that as my advantage rather than seeing the bad side of it." - Mona
		"They cite it as a bad thing with the younger generations, because they're like that's not realistic...you have to change. And so why would you not want to hear out people who are like new to things and have completely different ideas." - Rosella
		"every time I'll go up and shake a man's hand, they shake mine a lot lighter and more gingerly than they do a man's, which...I see it as them trying to be kind, but it definitely still feels a little condescending...I like people to view me just as myself, and not necessarily like as a woman." - Francis
	Respect and Trust Within the Workplace:	*"trying to keep work during work hours...you hear the horror stories like people getting called at night and not being viewed very highly if they don't respond to those and don't like putting in that extra time...so just kind of respecting the hours in the contract, I think, at the minimum."* - Francis
		"I really appreciate when companies respect the intelligence of their employees. And you can see that in a lot of ways, like I know, unlimited PTO...I think it's a nice

		thought of: 'You're an adult, you can get your work done no matter where you are like we trust you. Basically, we trust you to get that done.'" - Rosella
		"I have asked around about advice on how to like, get that trust and respect from them." - Madison
	Acknowledging for their Work:	*"having a sense that your work actually sees the light of day and that it actually has a payoff. I think that's something for me that really helps…I appreciate that…it actually worked like my thought process worked. It was good." - Rosella*
		"I want to work for somewhere that makes me feel good about going to work and so I will stay committed to that organization…So this still deserves recognition for it." - Abigail
Acknowledge current workplace policies and issues with those policies	Current Maternity and Paternity Leave Programs:	*I think it is super important that where I work does support that, not even just maternal, but paternal. Because I [think] you need two parents. It's so much healthier to have two parents, especially in the beginning stages. So why can't that be prioritized for both? I would love for that to be something I'm looking into before getting into a job, even if it doesn't specifically affect me." - Abigail*
		"I think I would love that to be like a law, of course, so definitely the paid maternity leave for the first few months is definitely one that I feel like should be obligatory to women and honestly, men as well. I feel like I would love to get more of a paternity leave presence in the United States.'" - Francis
	Pay Raise and Promotion Factors:	*"In your performance…probably like the time spent, because I know like what we talked about in class with the remote working and people who are in the office more doing all this work are kind of seen. If their screen grab doesn't show them doing the work, they're kind of passed up." - Abigail*
		"You have to go almost the extra mile all the time…I'm very much aware that, you know, a man probably doesn't have to try as much sometimes than a woman does. It's like that qualification like when applying for a job; they say that women feel like they need to fit every single

		checkbox in the job application, and men feel like, 'Oh, I just need like a couple, and I'll be good for it' so I think that really does seep into the workplace." - Mona
	Mental Health Resources:	*"I would like to work for a company that is understanding to an extent of like special circumstances that come up like occasionally, like a mental health day…So just working for a company that has that understanding kind of policy." - Francis*
		"There is that human aspect of business where, like, I'm a human, and I do business. So I can't necessarily detach myself from all these emotions and stuff, and I don't think I should have to. Quite frankly, I think that's kind of an outdated way of thinking about businesses…so I guess that awareness of mental health is something that concerns me too." - Rosella
Apprehension about entering the workforce	Difficulties Getting a Job:	*"I feel a little, I guess, I'll say, cautious about it. And maybe even a bit like it's out of my control, like I can put in as many applications as I want." - Rosella*
	Low Expectations of Entry-Level Positions:	*"I'm hoping it'll be better since it's more of a professional environment than like a restaurant. But I'm not gonna set my expectations of it being an amazing inclusive environment, especially if it's just an intro role because I feel like those are where you'd get kind of like picked on the most." - Abigail*
	Stigmas Associated with Younger Generation:	*"It's kind of hard to get into real estate as a young woman, just because people don't take you as seriously. Sometimes you go to showings, and they think your clients are the real estate agents instead of you…they kind of discredit you a little bit…she's just a kid or something." - Mona*
Lack of Organizational Loyalty		*"Company loyalty was a bigger thing in the past, and it's like nonexistent now. Pretty much like company loyalty doesn't really mean anything. I feel like maybe minimum a year, maybe year and a half. If I like it, I'll stay there. But if I don't, I think that's kind of the point where I would feel like, okay, I got a lot of learning opportunities from this. I'm going to take those skills and apply it to the next place." - Rosella*

		"It's really good in the beginning stages of your career to like move often…to move often enough to have skills. Probably move like once a year or 2, probably because I think that, especially early on, you have to get a lot of skills…I'm learning something new, and I think that's a really big thing for me is like I have to feel like I'm constantly learning something new and, like I said doing something purposeful to feel like I could stay at a job." - Mona

Lessons for Practice

Employers need to understand the perspectives of the future workforce in order to attract and retain new employees. Based on our findings, Gen Z women have expectations of what the workplace "should be," reservations concerning current workplace policies, mixed feelings towards their futures, and a lack of organizational loyalty. Our participants mentioned several formal benefits that have received attention in theory and practice, but a few were unspoken benefits, such as being comfortable within the workplace. These benefits encompass each of the organizational justice dimensions, from providing a comfortable environment to acknowledging mental health (Colquitt, 2001). Also, the participants discussed elements of the distributive dimension and informational dimension by elaborating on the importance of performance-based pay and trust between companies and employees with information (Colquitt, 2001). One of the formal benefits, flexible hours, was unanimously desired among the Gen Z women participants. The participants may want this benefit because it allows future employees more freedom regarding their time, contributing to prior literature regarding workplaces (Chandra et al., 2020; Kossek et al., 2021). One of the participants, Rosella, eloquently described this benefit as a way to feel empowered by the company,

"*like we were just talking about with schedules like I'm not locked into this. That kind of makes me feel more secure, in a way. So like, as far as scheduling goes out. If I don't have a like a rigid schedule that would make me feel like it has a longer lifeline for me.*"

The lack of loyalty amongst our Gen Z women indicated they consider these jobs as learning opportunities for their future and as a means to get better job opportunities. This unexpected finding shows that the new generation of workers view "a job" as a learning experience that they can use to further their career path. Employers may be able to recruit and retain more people by providing new ways to further an employee's skillset and give them opportunities to learn and grow within the company.

Contributions to Theory

Our study contributes to theory by extending literature regarding Gen Z and women within the workplace and organizational justice theory. The participants' viewpoints regarding organization benefits reinforced the theory regarding Generation Z's work-to-live mentality (Gabrielova & Buchko, 2021; Mawhinney, 2019). Abigail and Mona suggested how flexible hours/workweeks could avoid employee burnout. Rosella further illustrated this mentality by suggesting:

"*I think having that like totally inflexible schedule. It's outdated because nowadays people like really value being able to have that flexibility and not feeling so confined because I really think work should feel supplemental to your life, and it shouldn't feel like an obstacle because whether we like it or not, we have to work.*"

Our participants resonated the importance of inclusion and equitable treatment within the workplace, which has previously been shown as an integral part of the interpersonal and

distributive dimensions of organizational justice (Kian et al., 2014; Le et al., 2020). Francis discussed how she has felt inequitable treatment through first encounters,

> "*every time I'll go up and shake a man's hand, they shake mine a lot lighter and more gingerly than they do a man's, which…I see it as them trying to be kind, but it definitely still feels a little condescending…I like people to view me just as myself, and not necessarily like as a woman.*"

This quote illustrates how equality can impact first impressions, which may alter a potential employee's decision to work at a company. Also, the participants mentioned several benefits that coincide with the dimensions of organizational justice theory including a comfortable environment (interpersonal dimension), acknowledging mental health (procedural dimension), performance-based pay (distributive dimension), and trust between companies and employees with information (informational dimension) (Colquitt, 2001).

Our findings suggest that Gen Z women, a subset of the incoming workforce, are aware of the issues with the current workplace policies and cultures, which affect where they want to work. This awareness of the current work environments and policies may lead to their apprehension towards entering the workforce and to their lack of organizational loyalty. Since this generation has access to more information than any other generation had at their age, they know the good, the bad, and the ugly about the workplace. This knowledge may negatively impact their perceptions of how companies may treat their employees. These perceptions lead them to be more skeptical than hopeful when it comes to entering the workplace.

Limitations

Our study has the following limitations, which may warrant future research. First, our study consisted of 5 participants, which is a fairly small sample size. We intend to expand our

sample in future research to determine whether the results hold for a larger sample. Second, there is a concern for the generalizability of this study. Since we conducted a case study, we analyzed a specific focal group (i.e., Gen Z women about to enter the workforce); however, future research is needed to determine whether the results hold for other focal groups. Third, some of the participants had previous work experience via part-time jobs or internships. There is a concern for a potential bias from their experiences, which influences their current perspective of the work environment. Future research is needed to evaluate whether there is a difference in opinions between Gen Z women who have had prior work experiences compared to those who do not have a potential bias.

Keywords

Generation Z, organizational justice, workplace culture, women in the workplace

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Appendix A: Method

Our case involves Gen Z women aged 18-26 who are nearing completion of undergraduate degrees within two years. Specifically, our participants are University of Missouri - Kansas City (UMKC) students pursuing a degree in business or related fields. Notably, they are active members of the University's Women In Business Club, indicating a vested interest in advocating for and enhancing workplace conditions pertinent to their demographic.

Methodology

We designed our research to examine real-world phenomena using a holistic, single-case study approach (Yin, 2018). We utilize exploratory methods to analyze the concerns of Gen Z women entering the workforce and determine how employers can accommodate their new employees and alleviate apprehension.

Following Yin's (2018) guidelines, we chose our comprehensive, single-case study method because our objective is to capture the common feelings our participants have on entering the workforce as Gen Z women. We seek the lessons these women can provide through their perceptions about the four dimensions of organizational justice before they begin their careers. Our participants' perceptions can give beneficial insight to employers, college faculty, researchers, human resource management, and others interested in attracting talent and creating and maintaining a welcoming organizational culture. We used our faculty connections with the University's Women in Business Club to conduct our research. We required our participants to have a graduation date within two years because their future careers are front of mind or, in some cases, already beginning through internships, externships, and full-time jobs.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Missouri - St. Louis reviewed and approved our research. Participants completed a screening survey in Qualtrics to determine

eligibility. We randomly assigned researchers the respondents who satisfied the screening requirements, interviewing a total of five (5) participants. Using open-ended questions during semi-structured interviews, we collected data to determine common themes on the perceptions of Gen Z women entering the workforce. We asked our participants about their career aspirations, perceptions of gender equality, work-life balance, expectations (salary, flexibility, raises, scheduling), and organizational loyalty. Table 1 includes the descriptive information of our 5 participants.

Table 1 Study Participants				
Pseudonym	**Major**	**Previous Work Experience**	**First Generation College Student**	**Starting Salary Expectation**
Rosella	Human Resource Management	Yes	No	$60,000
Francis	Finance	Yes	No	$60,000
Mona	Marketing	Yes	Yes	$50,000
Abigail	Marketing	Yes	Yes	$50,000
Madison	Business Management	Yes	No	$95,000

Data Collection

We each conducted at least one interview, approximating 30 minutes. We followed an IRB-approved script with open-ended questions that allowed participants to share their perceptions of entering the workforce. This allowed us flexibility in asking follow-up questions based on the participants' responses. See Appendix B for our complete interview guide. We informed participants about the purpose of the study and explained the procedures, their confidentiality, and anonymity. Participants provided informed consent before beginning the interviews.

Data Transcription and Coding

We conducted, recorded, and transcribed our interviews using Zoom video conferencing. We cleaned the transcripts and generated aliases for the participants and other names provided during the interviews. We used Quirkos qualitative data analysis software to code and interpret themes within our data. To strengthen the validity of our results, our team reviewed one another's coding. Our results were the agreed-upon findings based on our cross-review process.

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Intro and Consent:

Greet the participant and thank them again for their time. Maybe engage in a few minutes "small talk" to establish the relationship. State that before the interview begins, you'd like to review some information about the project and confidentiality with them.

Review informed consent information. Ensure they definitely understand that:

· Participation is voluntary and they may stop at any time.

· I will record the interview now; it will be stored on a secure, password-protected, and UMSL-approved place and will be deleted after the study is published.

· We will use quotes from the interview when we write up and present the results of the study, but names and company names will be replaced with fake names to protect your privacy.

If they are amenable to participating, start the recording, and obtain verbal consent on the record.

Basic Info:

Tell the participant that you would like to start with some basic questions and to confirm some information about their demographics. Say you know that they previously answered some of these questions before they scheduled the interview, but that you just want to reconfirm and also get their answers on the record.

1. Do you identify as a female?

2. How old are you?

3. Are you a business major? Or in a business-emphasis area?

4. Are you going to graduate in the next 2 years?

Interview Questions:

Intro and Career Aspirations

1. What are your career goals and what career path do you see yourself taking?

2. How do you feel about the transition of moving from being a student into the workforce?

3. What thoughts do you have on the current job opportunities available as you get ready to enter the workforce?

4. What are the most important factors for you in choosing a workplace?

Organizational Justice – Procedural Dimension:

· Perceptions of Gender Equality:

5. Do you have any concerns about being a young woman within the workforce?

6. Do you think your experience as an employee will be affected by being a woman?

· Work-Life Balance:

7. What does work-life balance mean to you?

8. What resources do you expect to have available to you from your job regarding work-life balance?

Organizational Justice – Distributive Dimension:

· Expectations:

9. What are your expectations regarding your starting salary?

10. What factors do you believe will affect your pay raises?

11. What are your expectations around remote, hybrid, and in person work?

12. What are your expectations around scheduling and work hours?

Organizational Justice – Interpersonal & Informational Dimensions:

· Retention (Loyalty):

13. How long do you expect to stay at your first job?

14. What factors will make you stay longer at the same workplace?

· Closing:

15. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your perception of entering the workforce as a woman getting ready to enter your career out of college?

Thank you for sharing your perceptions of entering the workforce as a generation Z woman. Your perceptions are important to us as researchers to help us understand the feelings and perceptions and needs of young women entering the workforce. If you would like to follow up with me or have any further questions, please don't hesitate to reach out. Thank you for your time.

Appendix C: IRB Approval Letter

UMSL | Research
University of Missouri–St. Louis

March 12, 2024

Principal Investigator: Katelynn Hopson (UMSL-Student)
Department: Business DBA

Your IRB Application to project entitled Let's Go Barbie! Gen-Z Women's Perceptions on the Work Environment as they Approach Entry Level Jobs was reviewed and approved by the UMSL Institutional Review Board according to the terms and conditions described below:

IRB Project Number	2100490
IRB Review Number	403966
Initial Application Approval Date	March 12, 2024
IRB Expiration Date	March 12, 2025
Level of Review	Exempt
Project Status	Active - Exempt
Exempt Categories (Revised Common Rule)	45 CFR 46.104d(2)(iii) with limited IRB review
Risk Level	Minimal Risk
Approved Documents	Informed Consent form for participants Interview Guide Screening Survey Updated recruitment flyer with UMSL email address.

The principal investigator (PI) is responsible for all aspects and conduct of this study. The PI must comply with the following conditions of the approval:

1. Enrollment and study related procedures must remain in compliance with the University of Missouri regulations related to interaction with human participants at https:// www.umsystem.edu/ums/rules/collected_rules/research/ ch410/410.010_research_involving_humans_in_experiments.
2. No subjects may be involved in any study procedure prior to the IRB approval date or after the expiration date.
3. All changes must be IRB approved prior to implementation utilizing the Exempt Amendment Form.
4. The Annual Exempt Form must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval at least 30 days prior to the project expiration date to keep the study active or to close it.
5. Maintain all research records for a period of seven years from the project completion date.

If you are offering subject payments and would like more information about research participant payments, please click here to view the UM Policy: https://www.umsystem.edu/ums/policies/ finance/payments_to_research_study_participants

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the UMSL IRB Office at 314-516-5972 or email to irb@umsl.edu.

Thank you,
UMSL Institutional Review Board