



SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
MANAGEMENT

Declining Fertility: New Generations and New Perspectives **How university-educated members of Generation Z in Sweden explain their** **decision to delay parenthood**

Abstract:

This thesis aims to examine how university-educated members of Generation Z in Sweden explain their decision to delay parenthood. As declining fertility rates across the globe risk to strain the global economy, this topic has never been more relevant. Sweden and the Nordic countries have served as examples on which other nations have based their fertility strategies, but as the region has seen a sudden, and so far unexplained, drop in fertility, continuing this practice may be futile. By examining existing research on fertility decline this thesis will show that current theoretical frameworks fall short of explaining these new trends. Instead it will suggest the application of Social Exchange Theory and Generational Theory to identify drivers of the current trend brake. To prove the concept, 6 qualitative interviews with university students from generation Z will be carried out, and the answers will be coded and analysed from these perspectives. The results identify four areas that have significant impact on the generation's decision to delay parenthood: Economical Security, Safe Upbringing, Personal Fulfilment, and Environmental Concerns. The study contributes to current research by analysing each area and suggesting room for future research. New perspectives for policymakers are also identified as the overall results suggest that the drivers for the new generations are so widely different to previous generations that complete policy reforms or more targeted approaches might be needed.

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EOSK12

Bachelor's thesis (15 credits ECTS)

August, 2023

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Examiner: Sascha Klocke

Word Count: 12351

Acknowledgements

“You know who your true friends are when times get tough.” I’d like to give my utmost thanks to my friends and family who have supported me through the journey of writing this thesis. A special thanks goes out to them for being my sounding board and motivators and without whom this thesis might not have seen the light of day. Finally, I’d like to thank my teachers and classmates at Lund University for their large contribution to both my personal and academic growth over the past years. A special mention also goes to my supervisor Johanna Fink for her help and advice when writing this thesis.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The United Nations (2020) estimates that the world population will grow to about 9.7 billion people by 2050. The 2 billion increase in population from today's 7.7 billion people currently populating the globe can seem like a significant jump, however, during the same period elderly people, above the age of 65, are expected to outnumber children under the age of 5 (UN, 2020). This is due to a global fertility decline that is most predominant in developed Western countries (Andersson & Ohlsson-Wijk, 2022). For example, the population of Europe is expected to decline and in contrast, the population in sub-Saharan Africa will most likely double. The total population growth will come from only 9 countries; India, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Indonesia, Egypt, and the United States of America (UN, 2020).

While a growing population is problematic from a climate perspective (Feldstein, 2023), in fact, plummeting fertility rates are a significant issue for most developed economies as they can have serious economic implications that can ripple through the economy (Lee & Mason, 2011). There have been extensive studies made on the subject of predicting the economic outcome of an ageing workforce, as well as the policies proposed to mitigate the current trends and put fertility back on a positive trajectory (Nagarajan, Teixeira & Silva, 2016; Parsons & Gilmore, 2018; Lee & Mason, 2011). Typically, there exists a negative relationship between income and the total fertility rate, both within and among countries. This means that in any developed economy, as the level of education and GDP per capita rises the total fertility rate (average number of children per woman) will decline (Li, 2015). Major contributing factors to the global decline in fertility are, firstly, the rate of women in higher education, and, secondly, their integration into the workforce (Nagarajan, Teixeira & Silva, 2016). Lower replacement levels are not alone in causing an aging population and workforce. Low fertility rates in combination with lower mortality rates and longer life expectancies cause what we can call structural ageing of the population and workforce. Structural ageing of the workforce can have tremendous effects on economies and

societies as it is associated with falling productivity levels, decrease savings and increased government spending as a consequence (Nagarajan, Teixeira & Silva, 2016).

Simulations made by using old-age dependency ratio (OADR) and stock flow population models have been used to analyze several different scenarios in countries where negative population growth has been an ongoing trend. Japan for example and major European countries such as France and Germany are not far behind, based on different “policy measures from 2020 and simulated until the year 2050 have shown that it might be too late to reverse the damage already done in countries where negative population growth have been a trend as it would have to entail fertility rates quite far above replacement rates or extreme levels of migration (Parsons & Gilmore, 2018).

At the same time as fertility rates go down, the world is experiencing a shift in generations that are currently and soon to take on parenting. This new generation is called “Gen Z” and we can already see some shifts in their behavior compared to previous generations. Gen Z is highly influenced by the internet and social media and is the first uJgeneration to have grown up in this era (McKinsey, 2023). The major topics of how Gen Zs going to impact our society are primarily related to labour, consumption, and education (McKinsey, 2023). Research suggests that Gen Z have a different attitude towards employment as they wish to earn more money but work less (Megan Carnegie, 2023). For this to happen, they need higher education. There is also a trend towards self-expression, secularisation, and gender equality, which highly affects the way they choose to live their life and the structures of society (McKinsey, 2023).

1.2 Research Problem

As previously mentioned, the implications of a reduction of low fertility rates can be shrinking workforces and a reduced tax base which in turn can strain social welfare systems, healthcare, and pension programs as the dependency ratio rises, e.g. there are fewer working-age people than elderly. These economic issues are not something that will happen in the future, in Japan for example it is already happening. The prime minister of Japan, Fumio Kishida, recently stated that “Japan is standing on the verge of whether we can continue to function as a society,” (The

Guardian, 2023). This statement was in reference to the ever ageing workforce and the overall population in Japan is currently experiencing an annual population growth of -0.5% according to The World Bank (2021).

The Nordic countries in general and Sweden, in particular, have been seen as forerunners for quite some time in terms of relatively high fertility rates with the region's beneficial social policy setting. This has resulted in Nordic fertility trends heavily influencing theories of fertility (Hellstrand, Nisén, Miranda, Fallesen, Dommermuth & Myrskylä, 2021). As such, the region has served as a source of inspiration as other countries and regions are trying to combat the issue of fertility decline (Hellstrand et al, 2021). However, during the 2010s declining fertility rates in Western countries, which were most prominent in the Nordic region, have puzzled scholars since no connection has been made between the usual drivers of fluctuations in fertility rates, such as business cycle impacts, social policy reforms or changing gender relations (Andersson & Ohlsson-Wijk, 2022). This recent development can come to question the effectiveness and relevance of Nordic social policies and incentives in terms of boosting fertility rates (Jacobs & Paris, 2023), and may need to be revised (Hellstrand et al, 2021). Recent studies aimed at disentangling the recent drop in fertility rates in the Nordic region, focus on determining the long-term effects of the drop in fertility rates as well as establishing whether or not there will be significant changes in the cohort fertility trends long-term.

While there is a concern for fertility rates, Gen Zs are the ones that are currently and soon to be taking on parenting and having their first child. With such as controversial generation, one might question how their generation will affect the future fertility rates. As mentioned, this generation is obtaining higher education, more willing to invest time in a career, and more prone to individualism and self-expression, all things that point towards the trend of even lower fertility rates. Thus, it is valuable to examine the thoughts of Gen Zs in terms of fertility to understand how politicians and society can pivot the trend or perhaps deal with the consequences of lower fertility rates.

1.3 Aim and Scope

The purpose of this study is to understand and highlight perspectives on why Swedish graduates from Generation Z choose to postpone having children. Moreover, this is elucidated through the lens of theoretical frameworks pertaining to theories of Social Exchange, Generations, and Generation Z, aiming to provide a more explanatory perspective to the phenomenon. Thus, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how fertility rates might be affected in the shift of generations that will pursue parenthood through analysis and contextualization.

Hence the research question is as follows: *How do university-educated members of Generation Z in Sweden explain their decision to delay parenthood?*

2. Theory

This section will cover previous research made on the subject of declining fertility rates and reasons for why it is declining, both globally but especially in Western and Nordic countries. The section will also cover Social Exchange theory, Generational theory, and theories regarding Generation Z as it provides a lens of how we can understand the explanation of Generation Z's explanations as to why they decide to postpone parenthood.

2.1.1 Global Fertility

Kirk Dudley described demography as a “science short on theory, rich in quantification” (1996). In the 1920's the first broadly recognised theoretical framework, the Demographic Transition Theory (DTT), arose describing the demographic transition, in terms of population numbers, that happens when countries pivot from agrarian societies, characterised by high birth and high death rates, into industrialized economies, characterised by low birth rates and low death rates (Kirk, 1996). The model highlights how factors such as healthcare, urbanization and education are the main drivers that influence fertility and mortality rates (Kirk, 1996). These factors are still recognized as the most influential fertility factors today, however, research from 2016 suggests that factors such as education must be broken down further to look at female education, labour force participation and “new” factors such as changing cultural norms and family evolution (Nagarajan, Teixeira & Silva, 2016; Rotkirch, 2020). Similarly, DTT implies that as economies develop the societies around them develop simultaneously, which includes the shaping and shifting of norms and cultural population dynamics that can and should be used in guiding public social policy-making (Kirk, 1996).

The demographic transition and its effects can be seen globally as many countries are approaching the state of an aged population (Harper & Leeson, 2008). The current population growth stems from only 9 countries (UN, 2020) while some of the largest economies such as Japan and the United Kingdom are experiencing negative population growth (The Worldbank, 2022). A negative or stagnant population growth implies that the population is ageing, which means that the number of people aged 65 and older increases significantly in relation to the

overall population and outnumbers people aged 5 years or younger. This is expected to happen globally by 2050 (UN, 2020).

2.1.2 Economical Implications of an Ageing Population

The phenomenon of an ageing population carries substantial and intricate economic implications that many modern societies are currently ill-prepared to address, as highlighted by Lee and Mason (2011). When demographic trends shift towards an older age structure, a cascade of economic considerations comes into play, necessitating thoughtful and adaptive policies.

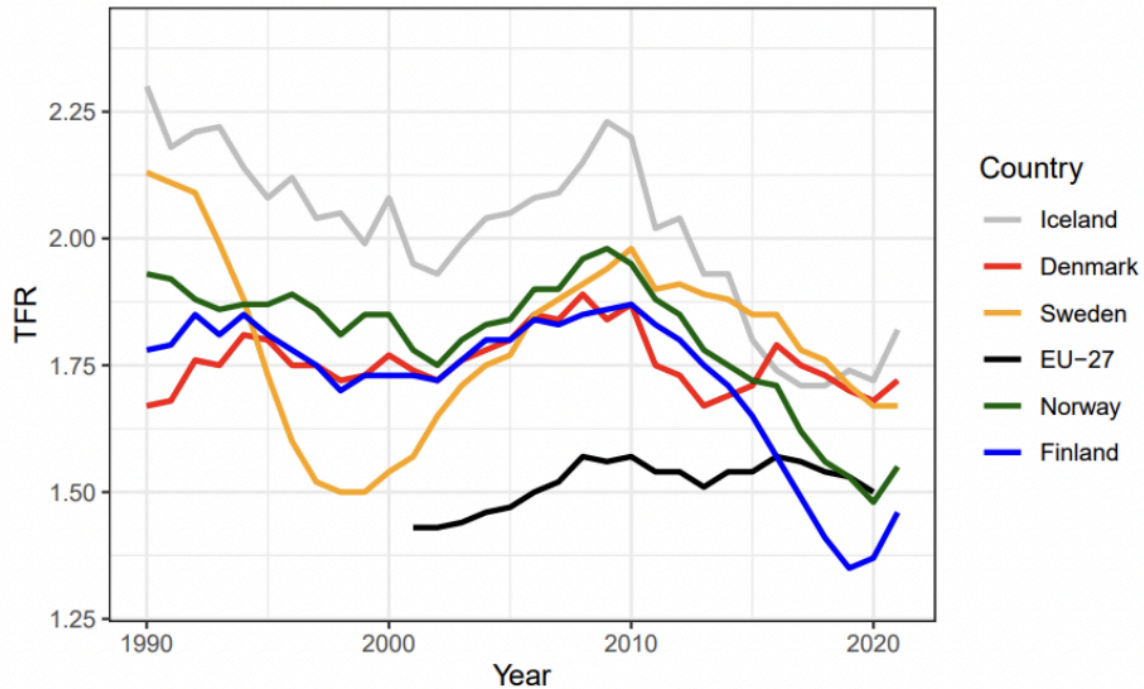
As the population ages, there is an increased demand for pensions and various social services. This places significant pressure on government budgets, as resources must be allocated to ensure the sustainability of pension systems and the effectiveness of social safety nets. This also means a higher strain on the tax-paying population because an ageing population also implies a shrinking tax base that must cover the increasing elderly segment of the population (Nagarajan, Teixeira & Silva, 2016). This is further true for the healthcare sector and the public cost associated with the increasing number of elderly who require health-related services which puts an inevitable strain on public budgets, as funds are redirected towards healthcare provision. This trend necessitates careful planning to ensure adequate funding for healthcare systems while also catering to other economic priorities (Lee & Mason, 2011).

2.1.3 Fertility in the Nordic Region

The general relationship between education and fertility is negative, meaning that as the population obtains higher levels of education, fertility rates are expected to drop (Li, 2015). Yet the Nordic region, consisting mainly of Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland and widely considered among the richest, most developed and best-educated regions in the world (Adapted from Gapminder 2017), has up until a few years ago not seen a fertility drop proportionate to its socio-economic status. As seen in Figure 1, the region has rather experienced a high and stable total fertility rate compared to the rest of the more economically developed world (Hellstrand, 2023).

This phenomenon has by extensive research, Andersson , 2021; Hellstrand, 2023 for example, been attributed to social welfare policies. The region is known for its substantial welfare system which includes extensive social policies put in place to ensure stable employment and financial stability when individuals choose to become parents (Hellstrand, 2023).

Figure 1. Total Fertility Rate, Nordic Countries and EU (Hellstrand, 2023)



The heavy investment into generous social policies aimed at family planning and child families has enabled the region to develop a dual-earner, dual-career model that has ensured high labour force participation regardless of man or woman, including mothers of small children whilst maintaining high fertility rates (Rostgaard, 2014). Two of the main social policies enabling the dual-earner, dual-career model are shared maternity and paternity leave schemes and childcare guarantees (Rostgaard, 2014). Shared maternity and paternity leave schemes enable families to make strategic and economically beneficial decisions regarding which parent should take on more or less of the responsibility of child care through the possibility of transferring paternal/maternal leave days between parents (Rostgaard, 2014). The countries have also implemented a childcare guarantee which means that children have the right to obtain a place at a

childcare institution, assuring that children can access childcare regardless of their parent's employment status in the labour market (Rostgaard, 2014).

With this background, for the past three decades, the Nordic countries have consistently upheld a notable and consistent level of cohort fertility (Hellstrand, 2023). This trend has not only fueled discussions within the realm of fertility theories but has also firmly established the notion that the robust welfare systems in these nations play a significant role in encouraging higher fertility rates and the region has thus been seen as a forerunner in fertility theory (Hellstrand, 2023). However, a notable shift occurred during the 2010s, as these very countries experienced a marked and unexpected decline in their total fertility rates (TFR). This downturn led to historically low TFR levels that deviated from the long-standing narrative of fertility stability within the Nordic context (Hellstrand, 2023). Sweden, for instance, has not encountered a sustained and prolonged decline in fertility rates on this scale since the 1970s and the full ramifications of this societal change remain uncertain (Andersson & Ohlsson-Wijik, 2022). The new declining fertility trend in the region during the 2010s has puzzled demographers not only due to the history of the region but also since the usual suspects when approaching fertility change, factors such as economic cycles, transformations in social policies, and evolving gender dynamics, fall short in providing comprehensive explanations (Andersson & Ohlsson-Wijik, 2022).

Hellstrand, Nisén, Miranda, Fallesen, Dommermuth and Myrskylä thoroughly analyzed fertility statistics across five Nordic nations: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden and while the trend of delaying childbirth has garnered considerable attention, a more substantial and groundbreaking development was uncovered – a discernible decrease in the overall number of children born to each woman (2021). This notable decline in the total fertility rate per woman goes beyond the repercussions of postponing parenthood; instead, it signifies an independent and unique demographic phenomenon and the shift in completed cohort fertility signifies a complex interplay of factors beyond mere postponement, shaping a distinctive pattern in these Nordic countries (Hellstrand et al, 2021). It is argued that a prominent decline in first births is one of the major factors driving the total fertility decline in the region and in Finland data suggest that 75% of the decline is reputable to first births (Hellstrand, Nisén & Myrskylä, 2022). First births are

most likely to come out of unions, romantic relationships, and historically there has been a significant shift in family demographic patterns in high-income countries from high marriage, and high fertility rates towards a low level of fertility and a significant rise in the number of divorces and choosing to be childless has become a more prominent factor (Hellstrand et al, 2022). This can be seen with empirical evidence from Finland which implies that the reduction in first births is not exclusively attributed to the postponement of childbirth, while delaying parenthood does play a role, there's a more profound underlying factor at play (Hellstrand et al, 2022). There is a noticeable decline in the overall likelihood of individuals who eventually become parents choosing to have a child. This observation strongly suggests a fundamental shift in the fertility intentions and preferences of individuals (Hellstrand et al, 2022).

2.1.4 Fertility in Sweden

In Sweden the fertility decline in first births is not confined to any particular sociodemographic group, instead, it is an overarching theme between sociodemographic groups, however, the decline in first births is visible between groups when looking at labour market activity (Ohlsson-Wijk & Andersson, 2022). At the same time, the total amount of men and women active in the market for labour who qualified as high-income earners saw a prominent increase (Ohlsson-Wijk & Andersson, 2022). Insights from the 2021 Generations and Gender survey by Stockholm University (Andersson, Dahlberg, and Neyer, 2021) provide a strong indication that some of the dynamics at play. Specifically, the data highlight that individuals who are childless and hold a pessimistic view of the future, coupled with a lack of confidence in societal institutions, tend to exhibit the most hesitance towards parenthood (Neyer, Andersson, Dahlberg, Ohlsson-Wijk, Andersson & Billingsley, 2022). The same trend has been observed in Finland (Hellstrand et al, 2022) however, the slight bounceback in fertility trends during the covid-19 pandemic that kept the decline stagnant for the duration of the pandemic (Neyer et al, 2022) can arguably be treated as a strong counter-argument to future uncertainties being an underlying factor to the total fertility decline in Sweden during the 2010s. Still future uncertainty is a factor that should be taken into account as highlighted by several demographers (Neyer et al, 2022; Hellstrand et al, 2022; Alderotti, Vigonli, Baccini & Matysiak, 2021; Mills & Blossfeld, 2003).

As mentioned above, Anna Rotkrich has through her research highlighted the importance of recognizing that the wish for a child is connected with social and cultural norms both present and historical (2020). Furthermore, Rotkrich deals with the growing aspect of personal fulfillment and personal aspirations, the path to achieving that does not necessarily include children in many modern societies and external influences do not longer push individuals in that direction (2020). Neyer et al found through their research into fertility decline and other considerations regarding childbearing that research about the phenomenon that is the fertility decline in Sweden during the 2010s need to take personal aspiration, fulfillment as well as other sociological and economic factors into consideration (2022). As a result of more potential parents choosing to forego parenthood altogether, this current fertility trend could lead to a broader and more persistent fertility decline than seen during previous fertility recessions (Ohlsson-Wijk & Andersson, 2022). Combating the fertility decline has not been on the agenda for Swedish policymakers as of yet, this could be because the falling birth rates have not yet translated into an overall decline in fertility and total births (Ohlsson-Wijk & Andersson, 2022). Ohlsson-Wijk and Andersson attribute this to the large generation born in the late 1980s which entered their prime age of fertility during the 2010s (2022). Furthermore, the authors claim that if the current fertility decline remains persistent Sweden is at risk of experiencing future population age distortions which could severely affect dependency ratios that in turn could see Sweden suffering much of the economic implications described in this chapter under economical implications (2022).

2.2 Theoretical Approach

This study presents Social Exchange theory through a combination of previous research to provide an understanding of what influences people's decisions regarding parenthood and how it's influenced by your upbringing and parents. This gets further connected to Generational theory which argues that Generations are cycled, meaning a certain generation of parents, gets a certain generation of children. Generational theory is then exemplified by Generational Z, as a way to highlight certain characteristics and attitudes of Generation Z and provide an understanding of why they are prominent in this generation. This ultimately gives a lens on how to understand the reasoning behind the respondents' answers related to parenthood in this study.

2.2.1 Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory is one of the most widely used theories within the fields of sociology, social psychology and, management (Cropanzo, Anthony, Daniels & Hall, 2016). Social Exchange Theory (SET) was first theorised by the likes of George Homans, Peter Blau, and Richard M. Emerson and then further built upon subsequently by scholars (Cook, Cheshire, Rice & Nakagawa, 2013). Key components in SET focus on how individuals make decisions based on their expectations of the costs and benefits of their choices, the principle of reciprocity e.g fairness in the mutual exchange of interactions, the comparison level for alternatives which means scanning for comparable alternatives with higher benefits, and dependence levels as each individual shifts in their dependence on social relationships and social adherence and, equity which means time and effort invested contra exchange received (Homans, 1961).

In 2007, Patrick Heady suggested that during the process of decision-making regarding whether or not to become parents, individuals weigh the potential cost and benefits associated with parenthood, such as social status, economic and social support, emotional fulfilment, financial strain, time, and disruptions to career and personal aspiration. According to Heady, the decision of becoming a parent is not only a biological or personal decision, it is also heavily influenced by perceived costs, benefits and reciprocal expectations within families and societies (2007). Similarly, in a recent study by Anna Rotkirch, the importance of such factors is highlighted as Rotkirch delves into the socio-economic considerations, cultural norms, personal motivation and self-fulfilment aspects that all go into the decision-making process of becoming a parent (2020).

Applying this framework to Generation Z's

2.2.2 Generational Theory & Gen Z

Generational theory could perhaps be traced back to Karl Mannheim who in 1923 wrote an essay titled “The Problem of Generations”, in which he stated that one’s generation could have as much of an impact on the individual as social class and/or culture and, that generations are impacted by historical events and social events during their formative years. Mannheim even went as far as stating that “people resemble their times more than they resemble their parents”

(Mannheim, 1952). Generational theory is claimed by van Eck, van Twist and Newcombe to have been made popular by Strauss and Howe during the 1990s through the publication of their book *Generations: The History of America's Future* (2021). According to Strauss and Howe, generational identities are formed from pivotal events such as war or economic recessions (1991), furthermore, they claim that there is a historical cycle that repeats every 80-90 years. During the 80-90 year long cycle, there are four thematic definitions that typify each generation born in the cycle. The four themes are The High, The Awakening, The Unravelling and The Crisis, and are specified in Figure 2.

Figure 2. (van Eck et al. 2021)

- **The High** (which follows the crisis that ended the previous cycle). This period is typified by strong institutions and social collectivism, and weak individualism.
- **The Awakening**. This period is typified by increasing personal and spiritual autonomy of people. During this period social institutions may be attacked, impeding public progress.
- **The Unravelling**. This period is typified by weak institutions that are distrusted. During this period, individualism is strong and flourishing.
- **The Crisis**. This is an era of destruction, e.g., through war, where institutional life is destroyed. However, as this period ends, institutions will be rebuilt. Society will rediscover the benefits of being part of a collective, and community purpose will take precedence again.

Under each theme, a generational archetype is born and each archetype shares much of the same attitude regarding factors such as family, risk, culture and values as the same archetype born in previous cycles (van Eck et al. 2021). The four archetypes are named; Prophet generations, Nomad generations, Hero generations and Artist generations, they are described as follows in Figure 3.

Figure 3. (van Eck et al. 2021).

- **Prophet generations** are born near the end of a crisis, during a time of community cohesion and strong social order. Prophets are described as indulged children of a post-crisis era. Prophets are believed to grow up as young crusaders who in middle life become focused on morals and principles.
- **Nomad generations** are born during an awakening, when crusader prophets are attacking the status quo and its institutions. Consequently, Nomads are described as growing up under-protected and alienated in social chaos. Nomads are believed to grow into pragmatic and resilient adults.
- **Hero generations** are born after an awakening, during an unravelling, when social institutions are weak and individuals have to be self-reliant and pragmatic. They are more protected than the children born during the chaos of an awakening. Heroes are believed to grow up as young optimists, into energetic and over-confident and politically powerful adults.
- **Artist generations** are born after the unravelling, during a crisis, when external dangers recreate a demand for strong social institutions. Artists are believed to be overprotected by parents who are pre-occupied with the dangers of the crisis. Artists grow up into conformists and process orientated yet thoughtful adults.

There have been some contradictory views regarding the cut-off line of each generation (van Eck et al. 2021). According to Strauss and Howe (1997), the millennial generation includes everyone born between 1982-2004 and would be classified as a Hero generation. The generation succeeding them, born in 2004 and onwards, would be what they call an Artist generation. Strauss and Howe (1997) named this generation the Homeland generation but it is today more commonly referred to as Generation Z (Gen Z) (Eldridge, 2023). Critics have argued that the timing of Strauss & Howe's generational boundaries is too focused on American history and is therefore not applicable to the same extent to the rest of the world (van Eck et al. 2021). A more recent definition of Gen Zers has therefore emerged, consisting of people born in the late 1990s up until the early 2000s (Eldridge, 2023). This is the definition that will be used in this paper, and for interview selection purposes this paper will focus specifically on subjects born between 1997 to 2004 to make sure that subjects are well within the generational bound.

Within this context, Generation Z, falls within the definition of a Hero Generation as the cohort was born before the outbreak of the most recent economic and health crises and ongoing wars. As such, they are heavily influenced by the recession in 2008, the covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine (2023; Arora, Coe, Dewhurst & Enomoto, 2022). Gen Z is also heavily influenced by digitalization and as they are the first generation to have been fully brought up in the digital age that we now are living in and take for granted (Eldridge, 2023). The "individualism" listed by van Eck et al. (2021) as a characteristic of a hero generations "unravelling" is exemplified by the

fact that Gen Zers have grown up in diverse environments and display higher instances of single-parent, mixed-race, and LGBTQ+ parent families. Remarkably, 16 per cent of Gen Zers personally identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, surpassing previous generations, they also challenge gender norms, with over half indicating a preference for forms and profiles that offer gender options beyond "man" and "woman (Eldridge, 2023), further supporting her generations' inclination for displaying political interest and power. Similarly, Generation Z stands out for their pragmatic and early maturation, exhibiting a higher tendency to graduate from high school, pursue a college education, and make cautious career decisions. They surpass all prior generations in having at least one parent with a college degree and, the influence of the 2007–09 recession, experienced during their formative years, also plays a role. Witnessing economic instability around them, Gen Zers entered adulthood with a determination to avoid similar challenges (Eldridge, 2023).

3. Method

3.1 General Methodology

With the aim of contributing to a deeper understanding of how university education members of Generation Z in Sweden explain their decision to delay parenthood, a qualitative research method was applied. Considering the decision to delay parenthood is highly complex and deeply rooted within the mind of the individual, it is of utter importance to capture what is going on in the individual's mind. Hence a qualitative method was suitable as it enabled a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and the driving factors behind individuals' behaviours, decisions, actions and attitudes, meaning it could be analysed and contextualized (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative method also allows for deep penetration of individuals' reasoning which gives in-depth insights that quantitative research cannot provide (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.2 Data collection

3.2.1 Interviews

The study's method of data collection utilised primary data in the form of semi-structured in-depth interviews as this methodology creates an in-depth and diverse understanding of the topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). During these interviews, an interview guide was used that acted as a structured guide, highlighting the main themes of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Despite this structure, flexibility was considered, such as adapting the order of questions and include follow-up questions according to the context and the respondent's reasoning, in order to capture respondents' thoughts in an authentic way and promote an in-depth discussion (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This interview method aims at stimulating respondents to actively formulate their own thoughts and questions, and thus lead to a richer and more complex understanding of the topic (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

3.2.2 Sample

Since this research is aimed at a specific generation and that certain criteria must be met, such as being a university student in Sweden, purposive sampling was chosen as the appropriate method (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Purposive sampling allows the researcher to deliberately choose specific individuals based on criteria deemed relevant to the objective of the research (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Furthermore, purposive sampling is an efficient and cost effective method when the researcher is convinced that they can find a representative sample by using good judgement (Bryman & Bell, 2017). When using good judgement there is a risk of subjectivity through the introduction of personal biases, there is a risk of limited diversity if not being carefully managed and there is also a risk of reduced statistical validity since purposive sampling is a non-random sampling method (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

3.2.3 Interview Procedure

Before initiating the main interviews, a pilot study was conducted with an individual who was comparable to, but not included in, the later sample group. This pilot interview enabled the identification of possible challenges in terms of the themes and questions presented (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The conduct of the pilot interview revealed some ambiguities in the wording of some questions as well as suboptimal themes, resulting in adjustments to improve the quality and feasibility of the upcoming main interviews.

During each interview, a recording was made with the consent of the respective respondent with the aim to create as complete documentation and accurate interpretation of the interview as possible (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). After each interview, a transcription of the recording was made to facilitate a careful analysis of the respondents' answers, allowed for checking of the interpretations, and increased the credibility of the collected data through the possibility of ex-post verification (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

3.3 Analysis Approach

To analyse the collected data, coding was used, meaning the data was decomposed into its constituent parts and assigned labels, or codes, based on interpretations of the data (Bryman &

Bell, 2017). The codes were then compiled in order to find larger common categories to create a greater view of the data. These categories were “What feels safe to do”, “What do others expect respondents to do”, and “What do the respondents want to do”. Thereafter, the data was reduced to those themes that the author interpreted as answers to how the respondents explain their decision in delaying their parenthood. These themes were Economical security, Safe upbringing, Personal fulfilment, and Environmental concerns. By using larger thick quotes from the interviews, the themes presented in the analysis were used for argumentation and to keep as much of the narrative flow as possible to not lose the context of the answers (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

3.4 Quality of The Study

The quality of a study is reflected in its relevance, contribution to knowledge, and credibility. The relevance of the study is emphasised in Chapter 1, while the results and knowledge contribution are discussed in Chapter 5. The credibility of the study is examined in terms of reliability, transferability, dependability, and confirmation according to Bryman and Bell (2017).

To promote reliability, the author actively participated in the interviews, which increases the consistency of concepts and interpretations (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Validation from participants was also utilised through the sharing of interview notes for verification (Bryman & Bell, 2017). This allows participants to confirm descriptions and interpretations and strengthens reliability.

Regarding transferability, the difficulty of drawing general conclusions from a small group of 6 participants is recognised. The study however aimed for depth of understanding rather than breadth (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The researcher's own perspectives and values also complicate transferability, as it limits the analysis to their interpretive capacity (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Nevertheless, these interpretations give depth and meaning to the participants' responses, necessary in the qualitative method. Without these interpretations, the study would only be descriptive accounts of the participants' statements (Bryman & Bell, 2017), justifying the methodological choice.

To strengthen trustworthiness, the researchers carefully documented the research phases. This transparency facilitates scrutiny and provides insight (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

In terms of confirmation bias, it is difficult to conduct a fully objective study. Consequently, a conscious and unbiased approach was attempted by insulating the research from personal biases and theoretical orientations (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The interview guide included open-ended questions and completely free response options to avoid leading questions and give participants the freedom to express their opinions, thoughts, and reasoning.

3.4.1 Language Bias

Before starting the interviews, all participants were asked whether they prefer to communicate in English or Swedish during the interview session. Since all participants were Swedish and thus have Swedish as their native language, all favoured conducting the interviews in Swedish. Bryman and Bell (2017) highlight the importance of conversation analysis during interviews and the ability to decode the underlying meanings of the interviewees' answers. Hence it was suitable to let participants speak their mother tongue as people usually tend to feel more comfortable expressing themselves in their own language, which reduces any difficulties in finding suitable phrases to describe their thoughts. It also enables them to express abstract thoughts and reflections, as perhaps an interview conducted in English might have been limiting. However, the transferability of the study is affected, as the quotes then have to be translated by the author, which can result in a loss of nuance due to the translation of complex terms or cultural concepts.

3.5 Methodological Reflections

Despite the advantages that the qualitative method choice offers for this study, it is important to highlight the potential disadvantages. Common criticism of qualitative research is its tendency to be impressionistic and subjective as it can create difficulties when it comes to replicating the study and clarifying the exact working process of the researcher and how the conclusions were reached. Furthermore, it is challenging to generalise the findings from qualitative studies to contexts other than those in which the data was collected, as qualitative research is based on observations and unstructured interviews.

However, in the context of this study, it is crucial to include participants' interpretations and their subjective perceptions in order to gain a deeper insight into how Generation Z explain their decision to delay parenthood. Quantitative research often tends to disregard people's ability to interpret the world around them, and results can be distant from everyday contexts (Bryman & Bell, 2017). According to Bryman and Bell (2017), this creates a static picture of social reality, distanced from individuals who actively participate in shaping it. Given these criticisms and the overall aim of the study, the qualitative research method, even with its potential shortcomings, is considered the most appropriate for the study.

4. Empirical Analysis

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part, chapter 4.1, will analyse the results found in the thematically coded data with regard to the theoretical frameworks. The second part, 4.2 will consist of a broader discussion on the overall takeaways from the research.

4.1 Results

During the interview sessions, a number of recurring themes emerged as interviewees discussed their perspectives on parenthood. A shared sentiment among all respondents was their genuine desire to embrace parenthood and have children. However, certain factors have influenced them to defer parenthood to later stages of life in contrast to earlier generations. These factors can be categorised into four major themes: Economical security, Safe upbringing, Personal fulfilment and Environmental concerns.

4.1.2 Economic Safety

The first, and perhaps the least surprising theme that was found in the answers is related to economic safety. The majority of respondents answer that in 10 years, they see themselves having a good job with a good salary, indicating they have a stable economic situation for themselves and their families. The respondents however do not simply just want a stable job that gives them the money that they need to run a household, but quite a lot more money in order to live comfortably above average.

This can be seen in the answer of Respondent 1 when asked to elaborate on what a stable economy means to her.

“One where you can afford to have a house and live. Like buying clothes and things like that, but also to be able to travel and similar activities. So that, of course, is a situation that's a bit above average. So you can do things that you envision yourself wanting to do, and not just barely making it, but rather being comfortably well off and afford to buy what you want for your children and so on.”

Respondent 2 provides a similar answer when asked where she is in 10 years and then asked to elaborate on it.

“Then I’ll be 36. I’m gonna have a really good job. Loads and loads of money, haha, and perhaps one or two kids. [...] Yeah, and then I’m also thinking that I want to be in a relatively good financial situation. Just because it seems like having a child would be really tough, and if I’m also struggling with finances, well, that just feels a bit unnecessary, you know?”

The reason for wanting to have a lot of money may seem harmless, but to reach such financial goals require higher education, hard work and career advancements. This motivation to have more than the average household in terms of salary can therefore be seen as a reason why these respondents postpone parenthood and prove to be an obstacle for policymakers when trying to regain stable fertility cohorts. While talking about the financial situation, the respondents are very concerned about the cost of having a child. A lot of the respondents seem very aware of what economic liability a child could bring to a household. When looking at this through the perspective of social exchange theory, as described in chapter 2.2.1, the answers indicate that the respondents expect the costs of having a child to be too costly for the individual to exchange the wish to become parents with the financial burden it would entail as well as the disruption of one's personal aspirations and the following decline in living standard. Furthermore, the prospect of potentially earning more in the future which could enable the individual to have less of a trade off with their current living situation and way of life, as well as increase the chance of their child to have a better outlook on the future. This can be seen as potential for a smaller exchange cost in the future.

Respondent 5 says the financial situation is something that really affects the timing of when to pursue parenthood and the same theme can be seen in the answers of several respondents.

“Yes, I would say so. After all, having children is expensive, so I think it's important to be financially secure before having kids, for the most part, I believe.”

Respondent 2.

“I would not be able to have a child right now. Like it’s my financial situation. So of course you want to have a steady income to, basically, just be able to buy things. It feels like it’s super expensive to have a child. Perhaps not in the beginning, but I suppose it gets later. The first child is probably quite expensive, you know. After that, you can reuse things, but, like buying a stroller for around 15,000sek you know.”

Respondent 6.

“...The idea is, for my part as well, that if you have more than one child, and as I said, kids do cost, so it's even more reassuring to have a financial foundation to rely on.”

This shows that the respondents are very pragmatic in their reasoning and that they understand the responsibility and consequences of having a child which corresponds to the Gen Z characteristics as described in chapter 2.2.2. This data also conforms with the idea that Gen Zers make cautious decisions about their career and the determination to avoid challenges such as being dependent on the current conjecture of the economy.

4.1.3 Stable Career

As a component of economic safety, the interviewees also discuss the importance of a steady career, implying that having progressed to a certain point allows for a bit more ease when a child becomes a part of the equation. When asked about the impact of career and education regarding the timing of starting a family respondent 2 says that although childbearing might be postponed by studies, it is possible to have children before working for some time however, it would feel much safer to have progressed career-wise first.

“Yes, but you know, I think that has a significant impact mainly because, well, it's sort of postponed when you choose to study and, yes, of course, it's possible to have children while studying and certainly, you don't need to work for several years before having children. But it does feel more secure to have gone through some challenging years

career-wise, perhaps before having children. So, I think, well, I want to have a good career before I have children”

Resp 6.

"So I see it a bit like this, the more you postpone starting a family and advance and such, the more you've solidified your position in the company, so then perhaps you're not as prone to being the one who is, or job, well, laid off first, and you maybe feel a bit more secure and have a better income and all that, and maybe you can then, should you change jobs and such, you've become senior enough that you can even switch to other companies. So yes, definitely. It plays a big role."

Resp 4.

"And feeling that you've started your career. That you've worked for a while. So that you're not a junior in some position and have to prove yourself. But that you can be a middle manager and lean back."

These answers, with special emphasis on the notions of not being junior in any position, be more vital at the workplace to avoid being layoff and the switch to management postins, do not conform with the picture painted by the literature on the subject which describes Sweden to have an extensive social welfare system put in place to act as a safety net for potential parents worried about their financial situation. Wanting to have a stable and progressive career in order to achieve financial safety is something that can also be explained by the upbringing of Gen Z. As Gen Z has been brought up during unstable economical situations such as the financial crisis in 2008, covid-19, and now entering a new recession in the aftermath of covid-19. When beholding Gen Z as a Hero generation, many of the same conclusions can be drawn. Hero generations are typically self-reliant and pragmatic and view social institutions as weak, this would mean the creation of a need to be able to manage without relying on or being constrained by society. Furthermore, through the answers one can detect, that the respondents wish to be able to invest time with their children and not feel forced to put in the same effort at work. This adheres to the principle of reciprocity as the investment of time into a relationship, in this case with the child, is expected to be of mutual benefit in terms of interaction.

4.1.4 Secure Upbringing

Eldridge argued that the majority of Gen Zers were raised by parents who would most likely adhere to Gen X as they were born between 1964 -1980 most typically, and Gen X parents were very dedicated to child safety. This can be seen in a similar way in most respondents' interviews. With key points such as being careful when thinking about where to settle the family home and not wanting to cause too many changes in the child's life, includes having the financial situation to settle down in a safe neighbourhood. This also requires settling the inner conflict or social transaction on whether or not to live where you think your child will be most happy or where the individual will be most happy. This is depicted when looking at respondent 2s answer when asked to describe factors influencing their decision on starting a family.

"Housing situation... One wants to live relatively spacious so that the children can have their own rooms. And it depends on where one wants to live. Maybe I want to live in the city, but do I want my children to grow up in the city? So, some considerations like that. But also, there aren't many around me who have children yet. So, I think it's for the future. But having stability, that's important."

Similarly when looking at Respondent 1s answer.

"No, I wouldn't be able to start a family until I knew I had financial stability. Both to be able to take care of the children, but also to have a stable home and a place where I want to live for a while initially so that there aren't too many moves and changes for the children."

The respondents also show a strong desire to provide their children and families with everything they want. This can be seen as a result of Gen Z being more aware of factors that can cause insecurities in their children's lives such as differing sexual orientation or mixed race background to name a few. It can also be seen as wanting to fit in with social norms and societal pressure on living standards and as a pragmatic generation the Gen Zers seem to choose education with the prospects of obtaining high-income jobs as the most likely road to reach that standard of living.

This is exemplified by the answers of respondents 4 and 5 when asked to describe factors influencing their decision on starting a family.

Respondent 4.

"So that one can take care of the family and provide children with what they want. Just like I wanted. And that's probably the main thing I think about. And feeling that you've started your career."

"Well, you want a stable income. It doesn't need to be excellent. Because they won't really notice anything during the first few years, I think. You have a few extra years to work on increasing your salary. So that they can do horseback riding or whatever they want to do."

Respondent 5.

"It feels like a security to have a good education, and that can lead to getting a good job which in turn ensures that my children can grow up without feeling like they lack something that others have."

Respondent 6 brings a new perspective regarding safe upbringing when explaining that you as a parent have the right to put a child into this world, the child however does not have the right to choose its parents or its initial circumstances. Furthermore, the respondent emphasizes their personal need for feeling safe and secure in themselves in order to provide their child with a secure and safe environment and existence. This can be seen as a result of Gen Zers being more aware of both their own and their potential families' mental health and, recognizing the importance of taking those aspects into consideration before starting a family. These factors combined are important reasons as why members of Gen Z choose to postpone parenthood.

Respondent 6.

"...but to have a role that can somehow generate income for the family in the foreseeable future, and also, if things don't progress, I still feel financially secure before having children. That's central to it all. Both financially secure, secure in terms of career, and

also secure as the person I am. You're really envisioning a secure and safe existence. So, when you do have a child, you can dedicate enough time to them and also offer them financial stability, ensuring a stable and secure life for the family."

"I would probably rather reason like this, wait a bit longer to ensure, I don't know, maybe compare it to, I don't know, in a young career and such, maybe wait two, three years, and see what it can bring you professionally can perhaps be translated, when you do have a child, into the child benefiting twice as much, or I have no idea, like, what should one say, return of investment, waiting a few years can potentially yield a much higher return for the child's life compared to getting it too early, so to speak."

"Because, like, it becomes a bit like this, I mean, I have every right in the world to bring a child into the world, or I can with all my rights bring a child into the world, but a child born through me has no rights at all to influence that it ended up with me and ended up in unfavourable circumstances, It's another person's life one should think about, or that's how I see it at least."

4.1.5 Personal fulfilment

When combining the theory of generations and social exchange theory a common factor in decision-making is personal fulfilment and the trade off between one's personal aspirations that not necessarily were formed with the idea of children in mind. In Social Exchange Theory one of the key aspects is scanning for alternatives where the gains are higher. With that in mind it can be said that there are not sufficient gains to be made when having children earlier in life compared to the trade off one has to make with their plan of executing higher education and pursuing an ambitious professional career. This can be seen in the determination of respondent 1 when elaborating on the question if cultural or social norms have influenced their thoughts on family planning.

Respondent 1.

"But I think the main thing for me has been just in the paths I've taken in my life, how I'm going to live my life, so it doesn't fit to have children earlier. And if I were to become

pregnant now, I wouldn't keep the child because it doesn't fit in with where I see myself and how I have my life."

Respondents 2 - 5 further emphasises the importance of personal fulfilment, and their answers highlight how social and cultural norms are evolving in the direction of children not being an outspoken necessity any longer. This gives a strong indication that if policymakers wish to impact the fertility rate trend and aim for the same trend to be stable around replacement levels this aspect is something that must be considered.

Respondent 2.

"I also feel like I want to live and have money for myself first before having children, and I think I'll probably choose to prioritize that a lot. It's also kind of a norm I guess, I mean, I want to travel, I want to do things, but it doesn't really align with the climate issue."

Respondent 3.

"I think I want to finish my studies and maybe have a stable job and life where I can take care of myself first" (...) "But I guess it's about how life looks and whether you have a job or a partner or, well, I can see myself being able to support myself and have the life I want before starting a family, you know."

"Yeah, absolutely. Right now, I don't think I'm considering how my career will be, or how it will be affected by my starting a family. Right now, I'm more focused on what I want to work with, what I want to study, and so on in the future. But at some point, I will probably think about how you might have to adapt based on how you want your life to look, you know."

Respondent 5.

"I value not only being a parent but also being myself and having my own life, and I think it will be a good mix with that many children (2)."

Respondent 6 is on the same track, however, they also highlight that in order to be a good parent you need to be in a good place in life, satisfied with achieving your most important aspirations that cannot involve children. In the same quote, the respondent also brings an important aspect into fruition, in general, as a man you can afford to wait longer with starting a family in terms of biology.

Respondent 6.

"And perhaps you also have a sense of security within yourself, that you feel like you have done the things you want to do or something like that, I mean when you have kids and all, you become a bit more tied up, you know. And then I also feel that if you are secure in that you have done things you want, or in some way, whatever. So it's just a general feeling like okay, now it's a good time for it, you know. And as a guy, I find it a bit easier to say that but, yes, I'd rather wait a little bit than push it. Generally, I think some people say like, "Yeah but he will be really old when he has kids", but you know, I myself have had older parents, I haven't experienced that that affected me negatively, and I strive for an active lifestyle, so I don't think it will limit my parenting when I get older, you know."

"The only thing that really affects my thinking is mainly my education and what that career gives me, you know, and what I want to achieve myself. That makes me wait a bit, you know."

4.1.6 Social Media & Social Pressure

Surprisingly most respondents said that did not feel pressured by social media or societal norms, at least not in the direction of having children earlier when asked about the influence of society and social media. On the contrary, Gen Zers claim that social media especially mostly push their plans on starting a family event further on the horizon.

Respondent. 1

"Mmm, no, I wouldn't say that. If anything, I would say it discourages me, or that it delays the age at which I would have children. Because I know that when people around

me who have children when they are young, others react like 'oh my god, look, she has kids,' because many people around me think that you should have children much later in life. And then, not looking down on them, that's a strong word, but they are like shocked when someone younger has kids. So I would rather say that social media makes you even more like 'well, I'm not going to have kids yet,' if you know what I mean?"

This is surprising because Gen Z is the first generation to have been fully brought up in the digital age and therefore digital forms of communication and media could arguably be seen as natural source of influence. Perhaps a part of the explanation can be found in the upbringing of Gen Z as well. As the digital age is so embedded in the DNA of Gen Zers, they might be too blind to the amount of impressions once immediate surrounding have on you. Science does tell us that our generation can have as much, if not more, of an impact on us as our parents.

Respondent 2.

"I feel like there's this damn pressure to have kids in that way too. It's like you're supposed to have the best things, and if you don't have the best things for your kids, then you're not a good parent, kind of. And maybe it's not like that, but I definitely think I would have been really stressed about having expensive and good things. It's already like that now even without kids."

"No, I don't see a picture of a baby and think, 'Oh, how cute, I should have a child.' Instead, I think more like, 'ugh like struggle,.' 'Ahh, sucks to be you'. 'I'm actually going to Rhodes'. No, I don't feel influenced or would want to, rather the opposite, I'm like, ugh, I don't want kids when I see people on social media, you know."

Respondent 2 explains how the pressure put on us by society and social media to only buy products from top ranges of suppliers can be a discouragement of having children in the first place. This can be connected to the distrust of institutions typically for the thematic cycle of Unravelling where a Hero generation is likely to stray from the traditional path of the family

starting and through their traits of individualism, pragmatism and overconfidence decide to do their own thing, such as choose not become a parent at all.

4.1.7 Environmental concerns

A theme originally not included in the scope of this study were environmental concerns. However when asked if there were anything else they wanted to lift in the conversation about starting a family several respondents reflected on the environmental aspects of having children, mentioning both the impact an increased population will have on the planet but also the quality of life the future generations will have on this planet if current environmental trends persist and the planet continues to decay as a consequence. This adds another dimension to the decision of becoming parents as this could pose as another cost to ones personal aspiration of being an environmentalist and personal fulfilment concerns that could contradict one another. This aspect could also be translated into the typification of the Hero generation, politically powerful, self-reliant and pragmatic. Taking it upon themselves to make an active contribution and fighting the climate crisis by choosing to forgo children when institutions are too weak to take that fight for them.

Respondent 2.

"I still feel that the climate, I mean, it feels like, should we bring a child into this world? What will be left of it? They won't be able to go to Rhodes, because Rhodes will have burnt down. Not because of you, when I talk like this. My kids won't be able to go to Ayia Napa and Rhodes because they will be gone. No, but it's like, damn it, what will be left of this planet? It's really bad for the environment to have children."

Respondent 4.

"Of course, one has a bit of climate anxiety. Do you want to bring a child into a world that is heading towards destruction?"

Respondent 5.

"The only thing I think about then is well, the environment, that we should take care of"

and protect our planet and maybe consider overpopulation and such things. But that's pretty much it."

This typification also coheres with the thematic definition of the Hero generations era, the Unravelling where institutions are distrusted and therefore seen as weak. As the Hero generation is also seen as over confident, this can arguably be seen as a symptom of ignorance where the individualistic and pragmatic side of Gen Z leads to them taking matters into their own hands which seemingly can lead to dire economical consequences on a broader scale instead. Causing more harm than good. A parallel can be drawn between Swedish policymakers being blind to the declining fertility rate because the total number of births has not yet been seen and Gen Zers trying to save the planet by foregoing children. Information that might be true in one aspect can cause harm if not approached in a completely holistic way.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 The Perspective of Social Exchange Theory

SET takes the standpoint of all individuals basing their decisions on reciprocity, comparison level of alternatives, dependency level on social adherence, and equity. Through the results, the decision process described by SET can be seen through the answers of all respondents, especially when considering the struggle, or tradeoffs, between personal aspirations, self-fulfilment and the prospect of parenthood. For example, when asked about how much the current social safety net that exists in Sweden impacts the respondent's decision-making, most respondents show little to no knowledge about what that actually entails in practice. The usual answer was that they know that it exists but not how it works. This can be interpreted in a variety of ways, one of which is that just knowing about the existing support does not carry enough weight in any of the mechanisms of SET. This means that there is neither enough equity for the individual invested in that knowledge that outweighs the benefits of postponing parenthood, nor is the average Gen Z:er likely to have the desire to be fundamentally dependant on the welfare system, or that the benefits there are to be gained through an earlier first birth are not sufficiently offsetting the gains that Gen Zers expect to make by postponing parenthood. This implies that if policymakers in Sweden have the aspiration to offset the current downward-sloping fertility trend, applying the

perspective of SET can most likely have a serious impact on the effectiveness of new policy. This has also revealed that it is not enough for policymakers to rely on the concrete implications of existing and suggested policies. The expected or perceived implications of the same policies must also be highly calculated to ensure policy effectiveness, and this does not only apply to the policy itself, it most definitely applies to other existing alternatives as well, such as postponing parenthood in favour of higher education and career ambitions.

The perspective of SET in this study has also helped to provide evidence of evolving social norms in Sweden. It is no longer a strong must in the social context of Gen Zers to have children as it has become acceptable to forgo the “normal” path of parenthood in search of personal fulfilment. This means that the cost of foregoing parenthood in pursuit of deeply rooted personal aspirations has shrunk, which in turn implies that efforts must be made to compensate for that fact if fertility rates are to be recovered. This development could be compensated for by either shrunken benefits or increased costs or by introducing a better alternative. Alternatively, policymakers could choose to go a completely different route. That route could take the shape of a complete structural reform where social systems such as pension and health care are made much less dependent on the current age distribution of the population and embrace population ageing. This would, however, entail a lengthy adjustment process for economic systems where there could be a substantial risk of the economic implications commonly associated with an ageing population being visible during the adjustment period.

4.2.2 The Perspective of Generational Theory

Generational theory tells us that there are several traits that commonly typify entire generations, moreover, the theory tells us that these traits can be predicted to a certain extent. This should mean that policymakers could direct policies to specific demographic groups in society based on their generation. When looking at the results of this study, strong definitions of Gen Z and the influence of their parent generation Gen X are predicted to have according to the theory. This can be exemplified in the four main themes found when coding the data, Economical security, Safe upbringing, Personal fulfilment and Environmental concerns.

Although the existing dual-earner, dual-career model is supposed to increase economic security and ensure that parenthood is financially manageable and evidently has done so in the past, the model has not kept up with the evolution of generations. All respondents expressed a desire to be comfortably well off with little to no dependency on social benefits. This can be seen as a result of societal pressure pushing the expectations of what a normal lifestyle is. It can also be attributed to the economic uncertainty Gen Zers experienced during their formative years and a following a deeply rooted agenda of never experiencing that again. This could be interpreted by policymakers as the dual-career, dual-earner model pushing lifestyle expectations to the point where it rather has a deterring effect on the population than the intended incentivized effect.

As Gen X parents were concerned about child safety this has been translated into the parenting thoughts of Gen Z as they convey concerns about where and under what conditions they want their potential children to grow up and that those thoughts are sometimes contradicting the parent's personal wants. This could indicate that one way of decreasing those conflicts of parenthood could be through thoughtful city planning where some family-friendly neighbourhoods are integrated into the city core. As a result, parents could be able to live closely connected to the city while still satisfying the need to feel like their children are growing up with plenty of room and greenery. The same solution could be seen as addressing part of the personal fulfilment needs displayed by Gen Zers.

The Environmental Concerns that arose in this study show the importance of a holistic way of consuming information and the need of distributing that information as Gen:ers show the predicted intentions of taking matters into their own hands because they distrust institutions. It also shows an increasing need for the public to understand the implications of a shifting population age distribution. This could impact the way of reasoning for potential parents of Gen Z.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Research Objectives

The aim of the study was to explore and gain understanding of the current declining fertility trend in Sweden and provide insights into the decision process of the next cohort of potential parents. This in order to understand how power holders can pivot and adapt to society to be able to handle such disruptive change. In order to do this the objective of this study was to answer the question: *How do university-educated members of Generation Z in Sweden explain their decision to delay parenthood?* Through a combined theoretical framework consisting of the Generational Theory and Social Exchange Theory and with the background of previous research on the subject.

It can be said that the sample of Generation Z used in this study highlights that in order to form the family and lifestyle they envision, certain priorities have to be made that actively postpone parenthood. Those priorities entail dedication to several years of university education, usually more than a bachelor's degree. This is a priority because this sample of Gen Zers perceive high levels of education as the most pragmatic path towards high-income career opportunities. Furthermore, the sample expresses a desire to further postpone parenthood in the aspiration of securing their employment for the foreseeable future as well as obtaining a higher salary base to provide for their children with economic security and a safe upbringing. By using the theoretical framework outlined in this study, tendencies adhering to the decision making process of SET based on the typification of Gen Z are clearly visible. Through the explanation given by the subjects of this study, it has been revealed that Gen Zers have little to no knowledge about the practicalities of the extensive safety net that exists in the form of social welfare. This must be seen as an issue of utter importance, because of the large public investment made in the welfare system, and because of the impact of the previous success of the same system that have influenced modern fertility theories.

Moreover, the growing environmental concerns combined with the typified ability of Gen Zers to take matters in their own hands can certainly cause a further decline in fertility rates as the damaged done to the environment by overpopulation is perceived to be far greater than the fundamental harm to society an ageing population will cause. This perspective has to taken into account when trying to influence Gen Zers thoughts on starting a family.

5.2 Practical Implications

The use of theory in this study could be used as a tool when crafting social polices aimed at a certain generational demographic. Both the Social Exchange Theory and Generational Theory offer valuable insights for policy-making regarding fertility rates. Social Exchange Theory highlights the importance of equity, perceived implications, and shifting social norms in influencing fertility decisions. Generational Theory emphasises the need to align policies with the evolving priorities and characteristics of different generations, particularly in terms of economic security and lifestyle aspirations. Furthermore, the perspectives used in this study can have practical implications with regards to the need of implementing ways of educating new generations in existing polices aimed at enabling parenthood. In essence, the practical implications highlight the importance of targeted communication, balanced benefits, addressing dependency concerns, and understanding generational values and characteristics when designing policies to impact fertility rates. Policymakers must take into account both the theoretical frameworks of SET and Generational Theory and the real-world factors that shape individuals' decisions.

5.3 Future Research

This study has shown that there is validity in complementing existing quantative research with qualitative research of the same nature as this research paper. When understanding the deeper reasons behind the factors driving the fertility decline, concrete ways of offsetting these development can be extracted. The results from this relatively small study, indicate that deeper gains can be made from applying the SET and Generational Theory when investigating declining fertility rates in more economically developed countries. The four areas identified also provide

good starting points for further research, where perhaps the final one, “Environmental Concerns”, should gain most focus as it highlights that the dichotomy between the environmental effects of a growing population and the economic effects of a declining population is an important aspect influencing Gen Zers decision to delay or forego parenthood.

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