

INVESTIGATING MEMORABLE MESSAGES AND NARRATIVES OF MOTHERHOOD
WITHIN GENERATION Z

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Hiley C. Kresse

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Abstract

Motherhood has been a subject of widespread sociopolitical discourse over the past several centuries. Historically, motherhood has been utilized societally as a way to control women by limiting their societal contributions to the domestic realm (Mill, 1870; Stanton, 1892). Due to deeply ingrained cultural narratives about motherhood, even as the women's rights movement has gained traction over the past century, cultural discourse and political decisions about motherhood and women's reproductive capacity are still being utilized to oppress women. On top of this, over the past several decades, the global birth rate has been on the decline. Within the Millennial generation this trend is heavily researched, but as it currently stands, little research has been done to understand Generation Z's attitudes towards motherhood. Given that Generation Z is on the precipice of these decisions, and that the past several years in the United States have led to significant changes in motherhood related discourse, now is the time to research the rising generation's relationship to motherhood. This senior thesis utilizes interviews conducted with sixteen female-identified members of Generation Z to explore the relationship between this generation and motherhood, all within a framework of memorable messages and narrative theory. I identify how cultural discourse towards motherhood is being used to socially construct mothering experiences and I expand understandings of motherhood beyond normative representations of mothering.

Keywords: Generation Z, motherhood, narratives, memorable messages, performance, social construction

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Chapter One: Introduction

Womanhood as Motherhood

Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: She is a womb, an ovary; she is female: this word is enough to define her. (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 21)

Throughout history, women have long been intertwined with the reproductive role they serve. Women's existence and worth has been tied to their ability and, as some see it, duty to carry and birth children. Understanding historical contexts of motherhood is essential to understanding contemporary attitudes towards motherhood. Within the United States, this is a truth that has been acknowledged in writing since at least the 19th century, tracing back to work of people like John Stuart Mill and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In his piece *On the Subjection of Women*, Mill (1870) argued that the institution of marriage is a form of slavery for women that is particularly degrading because they are not allowed to deny their husband (master) "the last familiarity" (p. 93). Mill was, of course, talking about intercourse between a husband and wife, which at the time was considered a necessary condition of the marital relationship. When Mill was writing *On the Subjection of Women*, the United States were still under coverture law which, "outlined the consolidation of the husband and wife into one legal entity, where the husband controls the power of the legal entity" (Deering, 2024, p. 300). Women at the time were not legally independent from their husbands; they faced restrictions on things from buying household goods and owning property all the way to having bodily autonomy. As Deering puts it, "the relationship between a husband and wife was more of a relationship between a person and property than between equal partners" (p. 303).

On the Subjection of Women was an argument in support of abolishing coverture and the institution of marriage, with Mill stating plainly, "the law of servitude in marriage is a monstrous

contradiction to all the principles of the modern world” (p. 95). While Mill’s piece called for the abolishment of a specific institution, he was more broadly advocating for the liberation of women, which he saw as possible only when women were freed from their marital and reproductive obligations to men. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1892) made the same argument when advocating for women’s rights, stating, “In discussing the sphere of man, we do not decide his rights as an individual, as a citizen, as a man by his duties as a father, a husband” (p. 112). In her 1892 “Solitude of Self” address to Congress, Stanton advocated for women to be afforded opportunities beyond the domestic sphere, opportunities they were being denied because their contributions to society were limited to their roles as mothers and wives. Like Mill, Stanton believed that for real progress towards female liberation to be made, women must be viewed as more than their reproductive capacity and must be able to inhabit roles beyond motherhood.

Over the past 150 years, the theorists and activists on the front lines of the feminist movement have reiterated the argument about female liberation and freedom from reproductive obligation, highlighting the embodied and systematic consequences of equating female existence to female reproductive capacity. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1949) wrote that once a woman hits menopause, she “finds herself freed from the servitudes of the female . . . she is no longer prey to the powers that submerge her” (p. 43). As de Beauvoir conceptualized it, freedom from reproductive ability was a step towards female liberation. Women were the “second sex” because of societally imposed oppression that asserted them as less than men while women who have hit menopause and are released from all reproductive/biological obligations form a “third sex” of sorts (p. 43). In her argument de Beauvoir stated that those who are post-menopausal are distinct from other women because they are not subjected to the reproductive societal pressures that define the experience of womanhood. A little over 70 years after de Beauvoir wrote about

the sociocultural positioning of menopausal women, the critically acclaimed show *Fleabag* featured a monologue which echoed several of her sentiments:

Women are born with pain built in. It's our physical destiny . . . We have pain on a cycle for years and years and years and then, just when you feel like you're making peace with it, what happens? The menopause comes. The fucking menopause comes...and it is...the most...wonderful fucking thing in the world. And yes, your entire pelvic floor crumbles and you get fucking hot and no one cares...but then...you're free. No longer a slave, no longer a machine with parts. (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2019, 0:12:02).

While progress has been made in the fight towards female liberation since the publishing of *The Second Sex*, the sociocultural pressures and expectations that tie womanhood to reproductive obligation are still very present, and if *Fleabag* is any representation, they are exemplified in relatively unchanged ways across decades.

Historical and contemporary conversations surrounding womanhood that tie femininity to reproductive function would suggest that motherhood is purely restriction; however, contemporary conversations surrounding what it means to be a mother call for a more nuanced approach. While understanding this relationship between womanhood and reproduction is crucial to understanding the historical and contemporary positioning of women in American society, it is equally essential to understand how the landscape for motherhood and women's rights has evolved over the past several decades. Examining generational trends and attitudes towards motherhood offers more insight into the current climate towards motherhood.

Generational Motherhood

Examination of birth rates in the U.S. over time reveals that there are often links between significant social or political events and the birth rate, suggesting that the sociopolitical climate

has a tangible influence on birth rates (Mather, 2012). For example, in the past, birth rates have hit all-time lows during times of great economic decline, like the Great Depression, the Energy Crisis, and most recently the Great Recession (Mather, 2012). However, within the Millennial generation, the global birth rate started to steadily decline, particularly in wealthy countries like the United States (Nix, 2023; Schaeffer & Aragão, 2023). This clear trend of Millennials waiting until later in life to have children and turning away from having children entirely has been subject to a lot of media coverage and investigation. Investigations have linked the declining birth rate to economic and political trends like increasing amounts of student debt, increasing property values, and better education/access to birth control and family planning (Coy & Reiter, 2018; Van Dam, 2023).

Attitudes towards motherhood in the Millennial generation are well researched. However, today, the oldest Millennials are in their early/mid-forties, and the youngest are in their late twenties/early thirties (Dimock, 2019). While a majority of Millennials are still in the typical age range for having children, Generation Z is on the precipice of this period of their lives. Over the past few decades, the age at which women are having their first child is rising; in 2011, the average age to have your first child was 25.6, and in 2021, that age had risen to 27.3 (Schaeffer & Aragão, 2023). Today, the oldest members of Generation Z are around 28-years-old, meaning that statistically Generation Z is beginning to make motherhood related decisions for themselves.

As Generation Z is coming of age regarding parenting, the sociopolitical landscape is changing almost daily. Reproductive rights are facing unprecedented attacks, from restrictions on abortion to fertility treatments like IVF (Walsh, 2024). Public officials are making and endorsing comments about women's relationships to their body and motherhood. Take, for example, Vice President J.D. Vance, who has a track record of criticizing political opponents for being

“childless,” as if they deserve less respect due to this fact (Treisman, 2024). In some ways, the social climate within the U.S. is making a return to hyper-conservative ideals, marked by the popularity of social media “tradwives” (Elmhirst, 2024; Freeman, 2020; Jerkins, 2024; Rascoe, 2024). In other ways, honest conversations about motherhood are happening in more public spaces than ever before, leading to an interesting dichotomy of traditional motherhood narratives being both reinforced and challenged by popular media (Charli XCX, 2024; Keatings, 2024; Reese, 2024; Robins-Somerville, 2024). Given the significance of recent developments in motherhood discourse, and the fact that Generation Z is on the precipice of parenting decisions, investigating what Generation Z feels and understands regarding motherhood is the best way to predict what relationship to motherhood female-identified members of Generation Z desire.

Preview of Subsequent Chapters

Chapter two contextualizes this study within relevant literature about communication and motherhood (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010; Heisler & Ellis, 2008; Johnson & Quinlan, 2019; Turner & Norwood, 2013) and an overview of sociopolitical trends regarding motherhood in the U.S (Charli XCX, 2024; Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization, 2022; Jerkins, 2024; Walsh, 2024). Utilizing Adrienne Rich’s (1986) dual theory of motherhood, where she conceives of motherhood as both an experience and institution, I first offer an explanation of institutional motherhood grounded through communication research about mothering performances and dominant narratives of motherhood. Following that, I provide an overview of current cultural and political events related to motherhood. After reviewing scholarly research and cultural trends about motherhood, I posit narrative theory (Frank, 2010; Peterson & Harter, 2022) and memorable messages theory (Doohan, 2023; DeGroot, 2024) as theoretical frameworks to examine ideas within Generation Z about motherhood.

Chapter three articulates the study design, measures, and analysis decisions for this qualitative study. This thesis is designed to address (a) how some female-identifying members of Generation Z perceive motherhood, (b) what these female-identifying members of Generation Z plan regarding motherhood, (c) what this suggests about Generation Z's overall attitudes towards motherhood, and (d) how memorable messages and narratives about motherhood informed those attitudes and decisions. To address these goals, I provide two research questions, rationale for study design (i.e., semi-structured interviews) and analytical choices (i.e., reflexive thematic analysis). The participants, recruitment strategies, eligibility requirements, and study facilitation are all detailed. In chapter four I present key findings to both research questions through detailed explanation of the themes that emerged during analysis. Chapter five provides a discussion of the study's key findings and its contributions to existing motherhood research. Finally, I close with chapter six to discuss the limitations of this project and promising future directions.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

What is Motherhood?

The term motherhood invokes a lot of different meanings, from a strictly biological experience to a social identity shrouded in discourse. In her 1986 novel, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience & Institution*, Adrienne Rich argued for the existence of two distinct facets of motherhood, the “potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction” and “the institution” (p. xi). The first facet Rich described refers to the strictly biological experience of motherhood. However, Rich, who explored motherhood through a feminist lens, was much more interested in the social factors that contribute to the experience of motherhood, a.k.a. “the institution.” Under Rich’s framework it must be understood that ever-evolving societal and institutional changes continuously reshape mothering experiences and expectations. To address her ideas, in the following sections I provide an expansive view of both facets of motherhood by covering contemporary literature on representations and performances of motherhood and by outlining the associated social and political trends.

Motherhood as Experience

Biological Experiences. At the most basic level, being a mother is equated to embodiment and giving birth. With this biological understanding of motherhood, physically getting pregnant, carrying a child, and giving birth is how people conceive of becoming a mother. Most individuals with female anatomy have this capacity to be a mother in a biological sense, and as Lyz Lenz describes it, “The story of motherhood is in so many ways the story of the female body” (2020, p. xx). How motherhood is discussed in society is through the lens of female anatomy and birthing capacity, meaning “pregnant or not, our life is defined by the reproductive role we’re expected to play” (Lenz, 2020, p. 53). It is because of this automatic

assumption of a motherhood role for biological females that being childless or unable to conceive is, “problematically framed as a female failure in a society where female value is linked to reproduction and women are assumed to be ‘natural mothers’” (Quinlan & Johnson, 2019, p. 33). This singular and reproductive-oriented articulation on how one becomes a mother ignores the very prevalent social expectations that are linked to motherhood and the parts of the mother identity not related to biology. However, to ignore the way that women have been tied to and defined by their anatomical capacity to become mothers is to omit centuries of prominent cultural discourse about motherhood and female anatomy.

Alternative Experiences. While the most normative view of how one becomes a mother is the strictly biological understanding of it, people can enter mothering roles without undergoing childbirth. As Rich described it, “Motherhood is earned, first through an intense physical and psychic rite of passage—pregnancy and childbirth—then through learning to nurture, which does not come naturally” (1986, p. x). While she discussed motherhood as something intrinsically tied to the physical “rite of passage” of pregnancy and childbirth, it is also linked to taking on a nurturing role, which is entirely separate from the “natural” and biological capacities that women have. People step into mothering and nurturing roles through adoption, family relationships, friend relationships, or even taking care of pets (Murphy, 2023). While these alternative forms of mothering are well established, communication and family scholars have researched how these alternative forms of motherhood are constructed as “second best” to biological motherhood (Baxter, et al., 2014). Women who step into alternative mothering roles are not subject to judgements about how they embody pregnancy, yet they are still subject to judgement because they did not experience the “rite of passage” that pregnancy is (Baxter, et al., 2014; Lenz, 2020; Rich, 1986). No matter how motherhood is experienced and embodied, whether biologically or

through an alternative route, the social construction and “institution” of motherhood shape the experiences of those in mothering roles.

Motherhood as Institution

As Rich described it, the institution of motherhood has been a “keystone of the most diverse social and political systems,” and it aims to ensure that women and their reproductive potential are “under male control” (p. xi). It is no question that women are oppressed based on their reproductive capacity, but Rich made it explicitly clear that in her view, “patriarchy could not survive without motherhood and heterosexuality in their institutional forms” (p. 26). Motherhood discourses, whether they be about biological or alternative experiences of motherhood, perpetuate patriarchal ideas about how best to perform femininity. In *Of Woman Born*, Rich explored in depth many different facets of the motherhood experience that help to socially construct or “institutionalize” it, from its relationship to fatherhood to the domestication of motherhood. While the cultural landscape around motherhood, and women generally, has evolved since Rich first wrote *Of Woman Born*, many scholars acknowledge motherhood as a socially constructed institution of sorts to this day. Although Lyz Lenz doesn’t use the terminology of institutional motherhood in her book *Belabored*, she calls motherhood “a personal and political reckoning, a negotiation of culture and myth and science” (2020, p. xxiii). This understanding of motherhood is what Rich meant by calling it an institution; the mothering experience is a cultural and political negotiation just as much as it is caring for a child. Recognizing motherhood as something that is a political and cultural reckoning makes it a prime subject to study through the lens of communication studies, to get a better understanding of how women sense-make and perform motherhood within various cultural discourses.

Mother Performance. Within communication studies, the institution of motherhood has been researched for how it influences both the performances and sense-making of motherhood. In one study, DeGroot and Vik (2021) explore motherhood through Goffman's dramaturgical theory, where they posit motherhood as "selective self-presentation" where mothers "maintain face for themselves and perhaps the entire family" (p. 44). DeGroot and Vik's research examines how mothers engage in impression management through their motherhood performance, which is influenced by the ways motherhood, more specifically good motherhood, is socially constructed. Further reinforcing this idea, and drawing from Goffman, Heisler and Ellis (2008) discuss the idea of a "mommy face," where a motherhood performance is constructed based on societal standards for motherhood (p. 449). Both DeGroot and Vik (2021) and Heisler and Ellis (2008) found that motherhood was performed differently to different people based on who upheld social constructions of motherhood most strictly. Other scholars have examined motherhood through gender theory, like Malacrida (2009), who discussed the mother performance as something in line with Judith Butler's ideas of gender performance, since "ideal motherhood is so central to discourses and practices of femininity" (p. 103).

The communication discipline boasts an extensive body of work about performing motherhood given that mothering performances are inevitably informed by the social and communicated factors which construct what motherhood should look like. Discourses, messages, and narratives are commonly studied for their role in this social construction. Heisler and Ellis's (2008) study which utilized Goffman to understand "mommy face" also explored the role memorable messages play in the construction of a mother identity. Cronin-Fisher and Parcell's (2021) study utilized relational dialectics theory to "explore the interplay of discourses in new mothers' meaning making about their dissatisfaction with motherhood" (p. 3).. All this literature

about discourses, messages, and narratives of motherhood reinforce the idea that mothering performances and experiences don't exist without and cannot be separated from these social and communicated factors that construct motherhood experiences.

Dominant Motherhood Narratives. Given that performances of motherhood are based on the sociocultural construction of motherhood, understanding dominant narratives of motherhood is essential to understanding the institution as a whole. Dominant narratives of motherhood are not created in sociocultural vacuums; there is a relationship between history, social contexts, demographic factors, and the experience of mothering (Christopher, 2012). One of the most prevailing cultural discourses around motherhood is the idea of the “good” mother, and it is important to note that “what are acknowledged as good mothers change with time, fashion and context, and have a variety of effects” (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010, p. 2). Currently, being a “good” mother is often intertwined with ideas of “intensive mothering,” where mothers are primarily responsible for the childcare and wellbeing of their “sacred, innocent, and pure” children (Cronin-Fisher & Parcell, 2019, p. 2). Good mothers are happy, fulfilled, and never push their children aside for their own convenience (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010).

Often poised at odds with the idea of the “good” mother is the working mother. Working mothers must work not only within the narrative of what it is to be a good mother, but they also must still be able to embody a good worker identity (Turner & Norwood, 2013). Take, for example, discourse around breastfeeding, which recommends that mothers breastfeed their children for six months to a year (Turner & Norwood, 2013). Labor laws in the United States, which only allow up to 12 weeks of unpaid maternity leave, mean that working mothers must operate within what is required of them as a worker and what is required of them as a mother, which are at odds with each other (Turner & Norwood, 2013). Constructing a good mothering

identity as a working mother is often at odds with the dominant narrative of what it means to be a good mother, because working mothers are often “tired, busy, and guilty” as opposed to at-home mothers who supposedly “live in a state of bliss” (Johnston & Swanson, 2003, p. 22).

Beyond ideas about working mothers, general ideas about who can be a good mother, “cuts to the heart of our cultural biases and systemic inequalities” (Lenz, 2020, p. xx). Good mothers are often represented as white, middle-class, beautiful, and domestic (Johnston & Swanson, 2003). Women of color are underrepresented in conversations about motherhood, and when they are represented, they are “othered” because they fall outside the normative ideas of motherhood (Johnston & Swanson, 2003; Nichols, et al., 2015). For black women specifically, their experiences of mothering are often projected onto the narratives of the “mammy,” “the matriarch,” and “the welfare queen” (Nichols, et al., 2015). Women with disabilities are often othered in conversations around motherhood as well; if motherhood is seen as natural nurturance, those who have difficulties understanding or meeting their children’s needs due to their disability fail to be “good mothers” (Malacrida, 2009).

Existing literature illustrates the hegemonic idea of who and what good mothers are. A good mother can financially support her children, always attends to them, is nurturing and happy, and is white, beautiful, and domestic (Johnston & Swanson, 2003; Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010). Mothers who fall outside these boundaries of good motherhood experience tensions based on competing cultural ideas of hegemonic motherhood and any “othering” identity (Nichols, et al., 2015; Malacrida, 2009). Given that ideas about motherhood reflect cultural and systemic biases, the best way to be an “ideal mother” and to perform this identity evolves with the times (Johnson & Quinlan, 2019). To understand what ideal motherhood looks like for Generation Z, the current sociopolitical and cultural climate towards motherhood must be investigated.

Motherhood and Generation Z

Setting the Scene for Generation Z

In the United States, significant changes in motherhood related discourse have emerged over the past few years. In 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* overturned *Roe v. Wade*, abolishing federal protections for abortion. While this decision is one of the most obvious and most significant attacks on reproductive freedoms, nationwide there have been attacks on reproductive freedoms at almost every level, with states not only restricting access to abortion but criminalizing it as well (Center for Reproductive Rights, n.d.; Guttmacher, n.d.). Not only is there intense scrutiny and constraint being placed around access to abortion, but other motherhood-related decisions have come under attack as well. Vice President J.D. Vance has publicly made comments about how leaders in the Democratic party are unfit to hold office and make decisions for the country because they are "childless," despite the fact that one of the women this comment was aimed at is a stepmother of three (Treisman, 2024). Right now, especially, it feels as though there is a light being shined on women and the choices they make—or the choices they are unable to make—regarding having or carrying a child.

The topic of motherhood is pervasive in much of the life of female-identified people because wanting children is so often considered to be standard to female existence. As Lenz wrote in her 2020 book *Belabored*, "Pregnant or not, our life is defined by the reproductive role we are expected to play" (p. 53). If a female-identified person doesn't want to have children, that opinion and choice then prompts more questions in ways that the desire to have them does not. Despite sociocultural norms and values that position pregnancy and motherhood as default aspects of women's identities, the global birth rate has recently declined, particularly in wealthy

countries like the United States (Nix, 2023; Schaeffer & Aragão, 2023). While this pattern has been observed by multiple outlets across multiple years, these trends overwhelmingly indicate a generational shift in women's relationships with motherhood. For example, research points to the Millennial generation (born 1981-1996), as compared to previous generations, having fewer children, waiting longer to have children, or not having children all together. Studies like those by the *Washington Post* (Van Dam, 2023) point to more readily available birth control and family planning, medical concerns, and financial concerns as reasons for the lower birth rate within Millennials.

Behind the Millennial generation comes Generation Z (born 1997-2012), which is the most statistically diverse and most educated generation in the U.S. so far (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). In America, Generation Z is only 52% white, as compared to 61% of Millennials (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). That same study also found that of 18- to 21-year-olds no longer in high school, 57% of Generation Z is enrolled in either a 2- or 4-year college, as compared to 52% of Millennials when researched at the same point. Today, the oldest members of Generation Z are around 28-years-old, and the youngest are around 12.

With the oldest members of Generation Z entering their mid-to-late twenties, Generation Z is now about to enter crucial years for motherhood related discourse. As stated earlier, the average age for women to have their first child has risen over the past several years, 27.3 is that new average as of 2021 (Schaeffer & Aragão, 2023). Given current trends related to age and motherhood, it is likely that older members of this generation will begin to either explore motherhood personally or need to navigate social and relational expectations regarding their choice. Taken together, this suggests a strong need for the exploration of Generation Z's perceptions and decisions. Within the U.S. specifically, Generation Z is experiencing

motherhood related battles that are unique to the generation, due in part to trends in popular culture and policy decisions over the past few years.

For Generation Z, the landscape of motherhood that we are coming of age in is ever-changing. Whatever decisions we make we must decide upon while the sociopolitical culture around us polarizes almost every option. Pop culture and political elements all work together to weave a complex tapestry of what to desire, what to expect, and what is allowed regarding motherhood. To better understand Generation Z and their current perceptions of motherhood, it is important to examine the current cultural context of motherhood, from pop culture to politics.

Popular Culture

Social Media. As discussed above, media representations and cultural discourses around motherhood help to socially construct the experience of being a mother. When discussing this topic, the idea of the 1950s perfect housewife comes to mind as a notable representation of a mothering experience which very clearly set expectations for other mothers. The second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and '70s was a stark departure from the idealized housewife of the 1950s. *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 1963) and Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972) both explored the dissatisfaction/horror of the monotonous life that many women of the 1950s were trapped in. However, while many previous generations have had their reckoning with the ideal of the housewife, many members of Generation Z have been actively consuming the myth on social media.

Since 2020 there has been a clear emergence of “trad wives” on social media (Elmhirst, 2024; Freeman, 2020; Jerkins, 2024; Rascoe, 2024). “Trad wife” is the more common way of referring to traditional wives, those who spout caring for their families and obeying their husbands as their female duty. Influencers like Nara Smith (Jerkins, 2024) and Ballerina Farm

(Kircher, 2024) have risen to prominence over the past year, with a combined 15 million Instagram followers, 20 million TikTok followers, and 11 children between the pair. These trad wives are selling the ideal of being a homemaker, posting highly aestheticized videos of them looking polished, dressed in nice outfits without a strand of hair out of place, and cooking elaborate meals to provide for their families. This is the exact template for many of Nara Smith's viral videos: videos that portray her in her spotless kitchen in an exaggerated, high fashion outfit, while she makes things from scratch for her family. While it is not hard to recognize the unrealistic expectations that social media trad wives are selling, Nara Smith's account is a bit of a parody in itself; the larger picture implications may be lost. As Morgan Jerkins wrote for a 2024 *Mother Jones* piece, "Given the misogynistic messaging and white-centric ideals some of these influencers peddle, they are indicative of larger forces at play—henchwomen in an ongoing effort to functionally erase modern women from the public sphere" (para. 3).

British influencer Alena Kate Pettitt was one of the first of the modern "trad wives" (Elmhirst, 2024; Freeman, 2020). Her rise, which included blogs posted to a site called "Mrs. Stepford," and the publishing of two books called *Ladies Like Us* and *English Etiquette*, marked the beginning of the online trad wife trend in early 2020. However, by 2022 the trend had exploded and morphed into "something between a money-making exercise and an amped-up, kink version of cottagecore with political and religious overtones" (Elmhirst, 2024, para. 25). While early online trad wives, like Pettitt and Estee Williams refuted the connection between trad wives and any political/religious movement, specifically right-wing political movements, more and more recent creators have blurred these lines (Elmhirst, 2024). Creators like Nara Smith and Ballerina Farm have both made their Mormon faith and values public, and trad wife content creator Abby Roth (sister of conservative commentator Ben Shapiro) has posted many

videos aimed specifically at conservative women (Elmhirst, 2024). In a post-*Stepford Wives* and *Feminine Mystique* world, the emergence of the trad wife trend is at the least confusing, and at worst a concerning preview of how post-Dobbs conservative messaging has become mainstream. As Johnson and Quinlan (2019) wrote, “IG and other social media are integral to the mothering/parenting experiences of a new generation” (p. 190). For Generation Z, the trad wife trend has the power to inform and shape perceptions and experiences of motherhood, signaling a potential emphasis on more “traditional values” when it comes to mothering experiences in Generation Z.

Music. Despite the significance of trad wives in the digital landscape of today, Generation Z has also born witness to several less traditional representations of and conversations about motherhood. The summer of 2024 was deemed by many “brat summer” in reference to the June release of Charli XCX’s critically acclaimed album *brat*. One track on the album titled “I think about it all the time” is Charli’s dialogue with herself regarding her desire to have children. As she recounts meeting one of her friend’s children for the first time, she sings, “She’s a radiant mother and he’s a beautiful father, and now they both know these things that I don’t.” On the song she wonders if she is missing out by not having a child, while also wondering if having a child would cause her to miss out on her career. The song ends unresolved, with her simply stating that she “thinks about it all the time.”

Following the release of *brat*, the album quickly became a cultural phenomenon, and many writers/journalists began to echo Charli’s musings (Keatings, 2024; Reese, 2024; Robins-Somerville, 2024). Charli XCX is a 32-year-old Millennial, and this work seemed to strike a chord with many in the same age group as her. In an article for *The Cut*, Shannon Keating wrote, “We’re standing on a generational precipice, Charli XCX and I” (2024, para. 2). In this same

article Keating repeats Charli's thoughts, sharing her curiosity regarding parenthood and her fear that parenthood would involve sacrificing her career. Keating's relationship to parenthood differs from Charli's in one more significant way: "As a woman married to a woman, I would need to be much more thoughtful and deliberate; I'd have to *really, really, really* want a child" (para. 11). On her Substack, Ashley Reese shared her own, "I think about it all the time" moment, and her deliberations on motherhood following the death of her husband. Reese writes that she doesn't wonder whether she wants kids but shares her fear that her journey into motherhood will be "so sterile and so lonely" (para. 13) since she will be using IVF to get pregnant with her late husband's sperm.

In June 2024, *Paste* published Grace Robins-Somerville's article, "Are We Entering the Golden Age of Baby Fever Anthems?" This article pointed to "I think about it all the time" as well as to works by Lana Del Rey and Adrienne Lenker, to name a few other artists. In this piece, Robins-Somerville writes, "It's an interesting mini-phenomenon to observe—these female artists, well into their careers, grappling with their mixed feelings about the prospect of bringing children into their lives, and the ways in which this doing so would alter their self-perception, public image, and artistry" (para. 13). While the struggle of "having it all" might feel like a conversation of the past, these artists are being very candid about how their desire for children stands in opposition to many of their career goals. Robins-Somerville expands on this, writing, these songs in which women weigh the pros and cons of possible motherhood feel, in some ways, like a testament to how little progress we've made . . . it's hard to be optimistic when women still have to ask whether they can "have it all" a question that feels both outdated and frustratingly relevant. (para. 14)

While “I think about it all the time” opened the floodgates for more honest conversations surrounding motherhood, many of these conversations end unresolved. Charli XCX, Lana Del Rey, and Adrienne Lenker are just a few of the Millennial women facing these questions right now and putting a voice to the struggle, providing a glimpse at the questions that have already begun and will continue to befall members of Generation Z. Even though these conversations may not have the same level of publicity as trad wives with millions of followers, there is a clear appreciation for these alternative/less traditional representations of motherhood within the Millennial generation, and it sets the stage for Generation Z to follow in Millennials’ footsteps and engage in more alternative conversations of motherhood.

Politics

Reproductive Health Access

Beyond popular culture, the political landscape of today must be examined for the influence it has on Generation Z and the potential it has to influence motherhood/parenting decisions. One crucial part of this puzzle is the history and contemporary state of reproductive health access, which politicizes motherhood and places restrictions on healthcare that pregnant people can receive. In Kristin Luker’s 1984 book *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, she writes that in the abortion debate,

Motherhood is at issue because two opposing visions of motherhood are at war.

Championed by “feminists” and “housewives,” these two different views of motherhood represent in turn two very different kinds of social worlds...While on the surface it is the embryo’s fate that seems to be at stake, the abortion debate is actually about the meanings of *women’s* lives. (pp. 193-194)

As Luker describes it, those who are pro-life and pro-choice are trapped in a battle where one half (pro-life) sees pregnancy and motherhood as a gift that is a “natural” part of women’s lives and should be treated specially, and the other half sees it as a choice that should be treated no differently than other choices women make regarding their life (i.e., career choices). For those who are pro-choice, restrictions to abortion and other reproductive health access help cement women as “second class” citizens by not affording them the same resources as men and enforcing a division of labor between men and women (Luker, 1984). Abortion and other reproductive health access has been in the news recently, as prominent debates and policy decisions have emerged on the issue (“Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization”; Ducharme, 2024). To fully understand these recent policy developments, care must be taken to understand the contemporary history of abortion discourse and policy in the United States.

In 1987, President Ronald Reagan declared in a speech that he was directing the Surgeon General to conduct a comprehensive medical report on the health effects of abortion (Foster, 2020). Reagan, who was originally elected less than a decade after the landmark 1973 Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortion federally, had been staunchly against abortion throughout his campaign and time in office (Foster, 2020). By requesting this report, he was employing anti-abortion Surgeon General Everett Koop to investigate the medical realities of abortion (Foster, 2020). Despite Koop’s bias against abortion, he followed through in 1989 with an unbiased report; after combing through hundreds of studies about the psychological impact of abortion and conducting his own interviews with women who had had abortions, he was unable to hand President Reagan a scientifically based take-down of abortions (Foster, 2020). In his letter to the President where he explained this, Koop wrote, “I regret, Mr. President, that in spite of a diligent review on the part of many in the Public Health Service and in the private sector,

that scientific studies do not provide conclusive data about the health effects of abortion on women” (Koop, 1989).

One of the more controversial Supreme Court cases in history, *Roe v. Wade* was not the beginning (or the end) of the fight for birth control within America. The 1965 case *Griswold v. Connecticut* was the legal precursor to *Roe v. Wade*, by asserting the right for married couples to use contraception without government intervention (“*Griswold v. Connecticut*.”). The *Griswold v. Connecticut* opinion cited the first, third, fourth, ninth, and fourteenth amendments as the justification for the court’s decision; conversely, in the *Roe v. Wade* decision the first, fourth, fifth, ninth, and fourteenth amendments were cited (“*Griswold v. Connecticut*.”; “*Roe v. Wade*.”). *Roe v. Wade* built off the *Griswold v. Connecticut* decision, using essentially the same legal precedent to assert that the Constitutional right to privacy extends to the woman’s choice to terminate her pregnancy in the first trimester. This was the first federal protection granted for abortion in the history of the United States.

While it reigned as legal precedent for around 50 years, in 2022 the Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* overturned federal protections for abortion and returned abortion rights to the states (“*Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*”). Several states, like Tennessee, Texas, and Idaho, to name a few, had “trigger bans” in place which were intended to ban or limit abortion in the case that federal protections for abortion were overturned (Center for Reproductive Rights, n.d.). As of today, abortion is only protected by state law in 21 states and Washington D.C. (Center for Reproductive Rights, n.d.), and in states where it is not protected, “increasingly draconian penalties” are being enforced against those who seek out or aid in abortions (Myers, 2022, p. 385). As Caren Myers put it, all

these attacks on abortion, “seem blinded to any considerations of women’s lives or health” (2022, p. 388).

Political debates over family planning and contraceptive use in the United States don’t end with abortion. In early 2024, the Alabama Supreme Court ruled that frozen embryos have the legal rights of children, meaning that healthcare providers could be prosecuted for destroying frozen embryos (Ducharme, 2024). Following this decision, many fertility clinics in Alabama halted their services related to in vitro fertilization (IVF), a technology that helps adults who struggle with infertility have children (Ducharme, 2024). While this ruling received pushback, and there is bipartisan support for IVF, in the summer of 2024 Senate Republicans blocked a bill that would provide nationwide support for IVF treatments (Walsh, 2024). Globally, since the conception of IVF technology, over 10 million babies have been born using this technology, and IVF accounted for about 2% of all births in the United States in 2018 (Yale Medicine, n.d.). For many people with medical conditions that make fertility difficult, IVF has been a source of hope that they may one day be able to have a child. Attacks on reproductive healthcare from all angles has served to crush the hope and autonomy of women, regardless of whether they want to be a mother or not. As touched on earlier, within a pro-choice framework of understanding, abortion is a tool not to protect the embryo or the fetus, but to undermine women’s autonomy and personhood (Luker, 1984). For Generation Z, growing up in an era of such prominent reproductive health related discourse, the underlying messaging that accompanies certain political decisions and reporting has the potential to be a major influence on motherhood decisions.

Climate Change and Uncertainty

Beyond political decisions related to reproductive health, there is major uncertainty surrounding other areas of policy, namely environmental policy. In February of 2019, then first-year Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) posed the question “is it okay to still have children?” on Instagram live (Taylor, 2019). Her question was rooted in the fact that due to the impacts of climate change future generations are going to experience harder lives (Taylor, 2019). Climate change means food instability, it means increased numbers of natural disasters, it means people and wildlife getting displaced because of unlivable conditions; it is, simply put, a “radical destabilization of life on Earth which complicates the act of bearing children in ways that society has yet to grapple with” (Crist, 2020, para. 6). In an age of discourse about carbon emissions, having a child is discussed not too differently from the ways that having a car is—both are framed as individual choices with the ability to reduce the overall climate catastrophe (Crist, 2020). However, as Elizabeth Rush writes in her 2023 book *The Quickenings: Creation and Community at the Ends of the Earth*, “too often this logic has been used only in select cases—to restrict poor people of color’s rights to regenerate, while the fertility of white women, like myself, isn’t directly targeted” (p. 69). In this way, while a distinctly contemporary issue, climate change discourse as it relates to motherhood reinforces age-old ideas about who deserves to be a mother and who gets to be a “good mother” (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010; Nichols, et al., 2015).

The Quickenings is the story of a journalist who decided to have a child the same year she returned from a research expedition to Antarctica. Throughout the book Rush rectifies her personal desire to have children with her physical experience of climate change,

Should I have a child, their greenhouse gas emissions will cause roughly fifty square meters of sea ice to melt every year that they are alive. Just by existing, they will make

the world a little less livable for everyone, themselves included. This weighs on me, but my desire to make a family persists (p. 68).

In an age of climate uncertainty, where no one knows just how impacted life on Earth is going to be, people are becoming increasingly wary about bringing new life into the world. However, for others, like Rush, “Having children can be an act of radical faith that life will continue, despite all that assails it” (p. 69). There is not enough research yet on whether climate change is truly impacting decisions to have children, but cultural discourse around climate change has more people, at least publicly, asking if it is okay to have a child (Crist, 2020; Taylor, 2019). For Generation Z, this discourse has the potential to influence decisions about motherhood, as many members of the generation may be asking themselves this same question of whether or not they should have a child.

Theoretical Framework

Memorable messages (Doohan, 2023; DeGroot, 2024) and narrative theory (Frank, 2010; Peterson & Harter, 2022) act as two lenses through which the expectations, perceptions, performance, and experience of motherhood can be better understood. Above I provided an overview of relevant literature on motherhood, particularly literature that explains the social construction of motherhood and the performance of motherhood. Those sources clearly illustrate a connection between cultural discourses, narratives, messaging, and how people experience and perform motherhood. One way that understandings of motherhood are influenced is by memorable messages, which are any messages that have a long-lasting impact on their recipient, particularly messages that are action-oriented and tell recipients what they should and should not do (DeGroot, 2024). In motherhood research, memorable messages have been shown to have material impacts on mothers, particularly on relationships within support systems, impacting

who people choose to confide in (DeGroot, 2024). Memorable messages theory has also been used to explore how messages impact perceptions of motherhood within those who are childless (Doohan, 2023). Through these studies, memorable messages have been shown to have tangible impacts on perceptions of and choices regarding motherhood.

Beyond memorable messages, narratives also influence how people perform and experience motherhood. Narrative theory broadly posits that, "People derive a sense of what to believe and how to act from stories" (Peterson & Harter, 2022, p. 2). In Arthur Frank's *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology*, Frank explains that "Narratives make some possibilities available and foreclose others" (2010, p. 124). Within Frank's framework, the narratives that people are exposed to create boundaries for people to live within, which reflects much of the existing literature about motherhood as an institution. As Tasha Dubriwny writes in *The Vulnerable Empowered Woman: Feminism, Postfeminism, and Women's Health*,

The narratives about women's health in public discourse have material consequences precisely because we act in the world based on perspectives and identities offered to us in the stories that make up our lives (2010, p. 6).

While extensive research has been done on how narratives and messages influence motherhood experiences (Cronin-Fisher & Parcell, 2021; Doohan, 2023; DeGroot, 2024; Heisler & Ellis, 2008), few studies have been grounded specifically in narrative theory, like Heisler and Ellis (2008) which draws instead on dramaturgical theory and Cronin-Fisher and Parcell (2021) which draws on relational dialectics theory. Narrative theory provides a rich framework for understanding motherhood as an institution, and by combining the theories of memorable messages and narrative, I aim to fill a gap in motherhood research by exploring motherhood

related choices and perceptions of motherhood conjointly under a framework of memorable messages and narratives.

Research Questions

In the above literature review, I outlined the history and landscape of motherhood related discourse and research within the United States. I also provided an overview of the literature regarding generational trends as they relate to perceptions of motherhood and motherhood related decision making, and illustrated what some trends in attitudes and decisions about/towards motherhood may be for Generation Z. While sources exist which hypothesize what those trends may be based on the current sociopolitical landscape, little research has been done to investigate what members of Generation Z feel and believe regarding motherhood. Given the contributions of memorable messages and narratives in understanding how different social constructs shape lived experiences, this thesis seeks to better understand Generation Z's perceptions of and decisions about motherhood through the theoretical frameworks of memorable messages and narrative theory.

To guide this exploration, I developed the following research questions:

Research Question 1a: How do the stories of motherhood that Generation Z women receive influence their *perceptions* of motherhood?

Research Question 1b: How do the stories of motherhood that Generation Z women receive influence their *choices* regarding motherhood?

Research Question 2: What are the memorable messages that Generation Z women receive in those stories of motherhood?

In the next chapters, I explain my research methods, including study design and methods for analysis, followed by study results and implications.

Chapter Three: Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore the narratives and messages Generation Z received about motherhood. Specifically, I sought to understand (a) how some female-identified members of Generation Z perceive motherhood, (b) what these female-identified members of Generation Z plan regarding motherhood, (c) what this suggests about Generation Z's overall attitudes towards motherhood, and (d) how memorable messages and narratives about motherhood informed those attitudes and decisions. Situating this thesis in historical and contemporary discourses on motherhood, as well as communication research on motherhood, I argue that exploring narratives and memorable messages leads to a better understanding of what female-identified members of Generation Z feel is or isn't possible for their futures. Through an exploration of memorable messages, narrative, and decision-making about motherhood, I sought to more holistically understand (a) the relevant narratives and messages of motherhood for Generation Z, (b) how these narratives and messages make people feel, and (c) how these narratives and messages inform future decisions. To address these questions, I engaged in interview-based research which I designed and analyzed using Tracy's (2013) qualitative methods and Braun & Clarke's thematic reflexive analysis (2006, 2020, 2022).

According to Braun & Clarke's framework for thematic reflexive analysis, analysis is "recognized as an interpretative act, where meanings are created" (2006, p. 17). To discuss analysis as a passive act, where meanings simply "emerge" from the data is to misrepresent the role the researcher has in analysis and the importance of the researcher's positionality (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through my analysis, I focused on: (a) understanding and exploring perceptions of the contemporary institution of motherhood, (b) understanding how these perceptions are informed by narratives and messages, and (c) making sense of what this realistically means for

Generation Z for decision-making regarding motherhood. In the following sections, I explain how this approach to analysis informed not only my methods of analysis, but also my methods for study design.

Data Collection

To collect data for this study, I conducted 16 in-depth semi-structured interviews. In the following sections, I explain the research methods used in the recruitment and interview process.

Recruitment

Eligibility Criteria. While creating my study design, I created the following eligibility criteria for participating in my interviews: participants had to be over the age of 18, Generation Z (born between 1996-2006), currently living in the United States, and female identified. I landed on the age-based criteria based on the consensus that the Generation Z/Millennial cusp is 1996 (Dimock, 2019; Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Beyond the upper limit of my age criteria, I made sure to specify that to participate, those interested must be over the age of 18. According to Pew Research Center, the average generation spans anywhere from 15-18 years (Parker, 2023), meaning that the youngest members of Generation Z could currently be as young as 11 years old. Based on IRB guidelines, for research participants to give informed consent, they must be over the age of 18, thus I specified the bottom limit of my age range as well, to avoid any confusion.

For my other eligibility requirements, I determined that participants must be currently residing in the United States due to the limited time and scope allotted to my project. While there is merit and need to explore global narratives and messages, I felt that on my personal timeline, having a narrower focus would allow me to get the most depth from my research and analysis. The language “currently residing” was intentionally utilized so I was able to interview immigrants or people residing in the U.S. on visas, who would be able to contribute to my focus

on narratives and messages in the U.S. and would be able to provide a more global perspective as well. Similarly, I specified that participants must be “female identified” to participate in interviews. Since one element of my project was asking about future plans regarding motherhood, I wanted to focus specifically on people who will make parenting decisions through the lens of motherhood as opposed to fatherhood. The language “female identified” was used to include people outside of the gender binary, whether that be trans-women, non-binary individuals, etc. I felt that restricting participation to those with female anatomy only would exclude an already marginalized population that makes motherhood related decisions from this conversation, thus anyone who the language “female identified” resonated with would be able to participate.

Recruitment. After obtaining IRB approval, participant recruitment began with a call for participants posted to my personal Instagram account on January 22, 2025. This call for participants was re-shared to 19 public accounts within the first day of being posted, including the Ohio University School of Communication Studies Instagram story. Interested participants were directed to a QR code or link, which would prompt them to fill out a preliminary survey via Qualtrics. This survey went through eligibility criteria, and asked if participants are female-identified, Generation Z, and currently residing in the United States; if yes was answered to all these questions, participants were then prompted to provide their name and email address so they could be contacted for next steps. Within 24 hours of the call for participants being posted, this survey had 26 completed responses, and by the end of the first week of posting, 34 completed responses.

Everyone who filled out the interest form was then contacted by me via the email they indicated on the interest form. Potential participants were reached out to in batches of 5-6

participants at a time, with the last batch of participants being contacted on February 3, 2025.

This initial contact email provided more details about the study's purpose, a PDF copy of the consent form, a Qualtrics form to indicate consent and fill out demographics, and a Microsoft Bookings link to schedule the interview. In total, 18 interviews were scheduled, but two participants did not show up for their scheduled interview time, so in the end only 16 interviews were conducted.

Participants. From January 29 to February 14, 2025, I interviewed a total of 16 participants. On the consent form, participants provided the pseudonym they wanted to attach to their interview; the table below offers a breakdown of participants' self-identified demographics, along with the pseudonyms each participant provided. Looking at the table below, the participant sample is in many ways homogeneous. The biggest lack of diversity across participant demographics is seen in the categories of race, gender identity, sex assigned at birth, and nationality. In total, 100% of my participants were white and assigned female at birth. Only one participant (6.25%) identified as non-binary, all other participants identified as cisgender women. Of all 14 participants who reported their nationality everyone reported American as one of their, or their sole, nationalities, with 92.85% of that sample (13/14 participants) reporting American as their sole nationality; the only outlier was one participant (Jane Doe) who is Russian American. It is also worth noting that since participants were given the choice to pick their own pseudonym, there are a few cases of repeated names throughout the data sample. For example, I have participants Nicole, Nicole Davis, and Nichole Mitchell. In the following chapter as I share my findings, ages and last initials will be attached to participants to easier identify who made what comments.

While there was a lack of diversity as it relates to gender identity, race, and nationalities, I was able to get a sample that was diverse in ages, with participant ages spanning seven years from 19-26. There was also some diversity of sexual orientations represented, with 56.25% of my participants identifying as bi/pansexual versus 43.75% of participants identifying as heterosexual. Three of my participants (18.75%) reported having a disability, with reported disabilities ranging from reproductive related conditions like endometriosis to hearing/inner ear disabilities. Beyond the demographics represented in the table below, one of my participants (Erica) was pregnant during the time of the interview and another of my participants (Louise) was already a mother.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Name	Age	Sex at Birth	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Race/ethnicity	Nationality	Identify as a person with a disability?
Margaret	25	Female	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual or Pansexual	White	American	No
Jane Doe	22	Female	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	White	American, Russian	No
Marie	21	Female	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	White	American	No
Erica	24	Female	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	White	American	No

Nicole	21	Female	Nonbinary, uses she/they pronouns	Bisexual or Pansexual	White	American	Yes
Louise	26	Female	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	White	Not disclosed	No
Light	23	Female	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	White	American	No
Mel Rose	22	Female	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual or Pansexual	White	American	No
Kay	19	Female	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual or Pansexual	White	Not disclosed	No
Rosie	23	Female	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	White	American	No
Robin	21	Female	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual or Pansexual	White	American	No
Grace	23	Female	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual or Pansexual	White	American	No
Nicole Davis	22	Female	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual or Pansexual	White	American	Yes
Jane	21	Female	Cisgender Woman	Bisexual or Pansexual	White	American	Yes
Nichole Mitchell	23	Female	Cisgender Woman	Heterosexual	White	American	No

Brook	21	Female	Cisgender	Bisexual or	White	American	No
Finley			Woman	Pansexual			

Facilitation

To learn about the stories and messages Generation Z has received about motherhood, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with the 16 people who fit all the following criteria: female identified, born between 1996-2006, and currently residing in the United States. Utilizing the framework of Braun and Clarke (2022), interviews were semi-structured to “more closely resemble the ‘messier’ flow of real-world conversation: questions and topics are carefully considered but the interview centers the interaction and co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant” (p. 13). In the context of this study, all interviews began with the same interview protocol, which was split into two main sections: conceptualizing motherhood and conceptualizing mothering plans. The original protocol had nine guiding questions and 17 potential follow-up questions. The excerpt below, taken from the original interview protocol, models what this structure looks like:

Interview Protocol Excerpt

What was motherhood like for someone in your family? This could be your own mother or another maternal figure (for example, an aunt, a grandmother, cousin, etc.)

Example follow-ups:

How did partnership or family dynamics impact or shape their experience?

How did health and medical factors impact or shape their experience?

How did age impact or shape their experience?

According to Tracy, semi-structured/unstructured interviews like this are “meant to simulate discussion” and “cede control of the discussion to the interviewee” (2013, p. 139). Following the lead of the interviewee, follow-up questions were asked as needed based on the depth and breadth of shared responses; if the story of motherhood provided included factors like age and health/medical factors, then those follow-up questions were omitted. In some cases, follow-up questions were improvised based on answers given by participants. For example, in at least two interviews, participants were asked about the perceived differences between motherhood versus fatherhood, based on their responses to the probe about partnership/family dynamics.

As interviews proceeded, some questions were reworked or scrapped entirely to make the interview protocol more cohesive and productive. For example, the questions: “Thinking about the memorable messages you shared, how have they shaped the ideas you have for your future?” and “Thinking about the stories you shared, how have they shaped the ideas you have for your future?” were collapsed over time into a singular question which asked about stories and messages together. This decision to collapse these questions into one was based off feedback from earlier interviews, asking the questions back-to-back often generated repetitive answers; therefore, having two separate questions didn’t add to the protocol. Within Braun and Clarke’s (2022) framework, the goal of interviews is “gaining an in-depth exploration of each participant’s story, not a uniformly structured account” (p. 13). In line with this framework, the protocol was altered slightly with each interview to suit the individual needs of each participant and follow their conversational lead. All interviews were conducted and transcribed via Microsoft Teams, with each interview typically lasting around 20-25 minutes. This resulted in a total of 203 pages of transcribed interview data.

Data Analysis Procedures

Quality

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, I worked within consideration for Tracy and Hinrich's (2017) eight standards for qualitative quality. As they outline, qualitative quality is best achieved through adherence to standards of, (1) worthy topic, (2) rich rigor, (3) sincerity, (4) credibility, (5) resonance, (6) significant contribution, (7) ethics, and (8) meaningful coherence. In the above chapters I explain gaps in the existing literature around my topic due to evolutions in the sociocultural landscape and theoretical considerations, explaining why this research at this time is a worthy topic. In this chapter, I explain in detail the research methodology I utilized, the process of applying for and receiving IRB approval, and the standards of data collection and analysis I abided by, showing commitment to rigorous and quality standards of data collection and analysis and illustrating how ethical considerations guided my data collection process. Throughout this chapter, as I explain my use of Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2020, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis, I describe my subjectivity and positionality in-depth, aligning with Tracy and Hinrich's (2017) standards for sincerity. In the following chapters, as I share my findings and discussion, thorough descriptions, connections to previous literature, and connections to the rest of the data set are used to ensure credibility, resonance, significant contribution, and meaningful coherence.

Coding

Each interview was transcribed using the built-in transcription software on Microsoft Teams. In addition to the interview transcripts, I took handwritten notes during each interview summarizing the main points from the interview. Following interviews, I manually combed each transcript while re-listening to interview audio to de-identify them, fix typos, and help make sense of grammatical errors in transcription. After combing interviews and fixing typos, the

transcripts made up a total of 203 pages. Once all transcripts were combed and prepared, I began to analyze them utilizing the six steps of Braun & Clarke's (2020) reflexive thematic analysis: "familiarization; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining, and naming themes; and writing up" (p. 39).

Beginning with data familiarization, I listened to each interview audio at least once while combing through transcripts and fixing errors. Before moving into the coding process, I made sure to reread my handwritten notes from my interviews, and I attached participant demographics to the top of each interview, to help contextualize answers for each participant. Once I felt familiar with both the subject material of each interview and with each participant's information, I was ready to move into phase two: coding. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), codes are basic elements of raw data which differ from "units of analysis (your themes) which are (often) broader" (p. 18). In this initial coding, I combed the interviews and highlighted any significant words or phrases (codes). Following the coding of each interview, each of these codes was added into a column in an Excel spreadsheet and labeled "Participant Name – All Codes." First-level/initial codes included: "hard for her," "tired mom," "sole identity," "sacrifice of your own needs," and "hardest thing you'll do."

Following initial coding of all interviews, I created a column next to the initial codes for each participant titled "broader themes," and begun the process of "sorting the different codes into potential themes, and collating all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 19). Guided by these broader themes, I color coded the Excel spreadsheet to get a visual representation of which interviews shared themes, which helped to inform the reviewing process that followed generating initial themes. As I began to review and revise initial themes, I created a document with each of my research questions on it and

organized and revised themes according to my research questions. During this review process, all themes were reviewed based on if the data within the themes “cohere[d] together meaningfully” and if the themes were distinct from one another (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 20).

Once all themes had been reviewed, revised, and organized based on their coherence and significance to research questions, I moved on to step five: defining and naming themes. As I began defining and naming themes, I created my codebook where I organized themes and sub-themes. An excerpt from my codebook is included below, where I name my theme, provide a definition, explain the codes that make up the theme, and provide examples of the theme from data. While all initial coding and initial theme generation was done independently, after my codebook was created, I met with my advisor and further revised my themes.

Table 2

Codebook Excerpt

Category/Theme	Definition/Explanation	Example(s)
Biological Motherhood	<p>Many participants discussed motherhood as a partially biological experience, where being pregnant and giving birth are essential to the experience.</p> <p>Biological Motherhood includes the following codes:</p> <p>“Physically gives birth”</p> <p>“Her actual kids”</p>	<p>“I think a lot of people like when they first think of the term motherhood. I think it automatically kind of diverts to it has to be like a biological thing. In terms of like a woman has her own kids, like she’s the one that carries them, she births them, then works on that.”</p> <p>(Grace)</p>

	Biological thing	“I would define or describe
	Has her own kids	[motherhood] as being, kind of,
	Carries them	just being the main caretaker
	Births them	for a child. And identifying I
	Biological kid	think as a mother in that role. I
	Biological mother	I see it as being both for, of
	Having a kid	course, like biological
	Physically gives birth	mothers...” (Robin)
		“I would absolutely like see
		motherhood not just as, like
		obviously like some person,
		like physically gives birth to
		another person, that’s
		motherhood.” (Erica)

Positionality

Throughout the process of data analysis, which I outlined above, I was informed and guided by the reflexive thematic analysis procedures of Braun & Clarke (2006, 2020, 2022). Essential to their framework for reflexive thematic analysis is the understanding that, “researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum” (2006, p. 12). Rather than viewing subjectivity as a pitfall, Braun and Clarke posit it as an “analytic resource” (2020, p. 3), which is in line with their understanding of analysis as “an art, not a science; creativity is central to the process”

(2022, p. 9). With subjectivity being understood as an essential part of reflexive thematic analysis, reflecting on subjectivity and researcher positionality is an essential part of analysis. Below I outline my positionality, both with the theoretical framework and personal experiences which inform my analysis.

Sensitizing Frameworks. As outlined in the above literature review, I am conducting this thesis within a framework of narrative and memorable messages theory. Both theories focus on how cultural and interpersonal communication influence people's perceptions of what they believe is or is not possible for themselves, and combining theories enriches this study's ability to more holistically understand the communicated factors that influence Generation Z's relationship with motherhood. As Frank posits with narrative theory, every story is interpreted differently within every individual's respective "inner library" (2010, p. 55). While I outline my personal positionality and "inner library" more below, my theoretical background is more rooted in narrative theory than in memorable messages. By acknowledging this I don't seek to discredit memorable messages, only to acknowledge that narrative theory is where I have more experience through an intentional act of scholarly self-reflexivity.

Given the dynamic and interwoven relationship between memorable messages and stories, during interviews when participants were asked separately to share each one, they would often share both. Either stories were given to explain and provide context to messages or messages were stated as the conclusion of a story. However, while narratives shared by participants tended to reveal trends in more cultural or macro-level communication, memorable messages had a more interpersonal focus. While my theoretical background did lend itself to a more narrative lean in my findings, the framework of memorable messages increases the depth

and breadth of this research, and thus interviews were coded for memorable messages even when there was overlap with participant shared narratives.

Positionality Statement. My personal interest in doing this research comes partially from my background and the stories and messages of motherhood I was exposed to growing up. As the daughter of a woman who left the Catholic church, I grew up hearing stories about the lessons and norms my mother was raised on in her community and family. She's a first-generation college student, and one of the first women in her family to get married and have children after she was older than 20. Her decision to have children, and the way she chose to do so, was in direct opposition to essentially everything her community and family taught her regarding motherhood. My mother had children, did so on as much of her own terms as she could, and that was a lesson I have always picked up on. I have always felt because of her that, if I ever have children, I will have the capacity to determine what the terms of that experience are going to be. As I write this piece, I am a childless senior in college, but I do imagine children being a part of my future someday. However, I know from talking to many of my friends that my desire to have children is not universal.

In high school, I recall having a conversation with a friend who has a very different relationship to motherhood than I do; she expressed her desire to not have children and referenced her mother as a reason for not wanting this. In her situation, her mom had her first kid at 26, and my friend felt like her mother had missed out on different experiences by having children at that age. For this friend, she perceived having a child as something that takes away from life experiences because she had been exposed to stories and messages regarding motherhood that made her feel this way. This is the memory that I call back to when I think

about what inspired me to do this research—it is a curiosity about motherhood stories and messages combined with a desire to better understand my peers.

While I want and plan to have children eventually, many of my closest friends do not share this same desire. Sometimes, like in the example above, this is due to their experience with their own family and how that has impacted their perception of motherhood. Other times, however, the political, social, and environmental state of the world deters them from wanting children. Furthermore, identity factors have complicated any desire for children. These factors are all things I have personally reckoned with; I am coming of age and exposed to similar media as my peers, and I have had to think about how my queer identity is going to impact my desire for children. While I do not claim to share in all the same experiences and perspectives as my peers, I think the similarities in the social environments that we have been raised in has prepared me to take in, examine, and appreciate these stories with my own perspective.

Chapter Four: Findings

To understand the effect of memorable messages and narratives on Generation Z's perceptions and decision-making regarding motherhood, I posed two research questions focused on understanding these narratives and messages and the sense making that accompanies them. In the following sections, I outline my findings and offer answers to each of these research questions.

Research Question 1

In the following section I offer an answer to RQ 1a and 1b, which asked:

RQ1a: How do the stories of motherhood that Generation Z women have received influence their *perceptions* of motherhood?

RQ1b: How do the stories of motherhood that Generation Z women have received influence their *choices* regarding motherhood?

RQ1a

I aim to provide an answer to RQ1a by presenting key themes related to perceptions of motherhood, as informed by interviews with female-identified members of Generation Z. In sum, the findings related to this research question highlighted perceptions of: (a) embodying and enacting motherhood; (b) understanding motherhood; (c) motherhood as loss; and (d) motherhood as choice.

Embodying and Enacting Motherhood

As displayed in the above literature review, motherhood is not simply a biological act or experience, it is a performance and an institution. Throughout interviews, as participants were asked about their definitions or descriptions of motherhood, and were prompted to tell stories,

they recounted many ways of performing motherhood they have witnessed. Below I outline the main themes in how my participants viewed embodying or enacting motherhood.

Normative/Dominant Motherhood. While throughout history motherhood has repeatedly been conceived of as not simply a biological act, several participants understood motherhood as an experience enacted through biological, or adoptive channels. When asked how she would define or describe motherhood, Grace (23) stated,

I think a lot of people like when they first think of the term motherhood. I think it automatically kind of diverts to it has to be like a biological thing. In terms of like a woman has her own kids, like she's the one that carries them, she births them, then works on that.

While Grace's initial reaction to describing motherhood was to define it as a biological experience, she went on to explain how the experience of motherhood extends beyond this channel for some,

I don't think it automatically has to relate to that (biology) because you know there are so many people who cannot have kids and then you know, they adopt and like they still go through like the ups and downs and the joys of motherhood.

Often, participants positioned other embodiments of motherhood *in contrast to* this dominant expectation; biological motherhood when compared to other embodiments was characterized as a distinctly different mothering experience purely because of the social merit afforded to dominant and biological experiences of mothering. Erica (24), echoed Grace's sentiments, and described motherhood as, "caring for...another person that you consider to be like your kin." In Erica's definition, the channels for embodying motherhood extended beyond the biological experience, and into adoptive channels, "like obviously like some person, like physically gives birth to

another person that's motherhood. But there's also motherhood in, you know, adopted families...there's so many variations of it.”

Erica hit on the experience of motherhood as something that has variation within it, which was an idea that was repeated among other participants, like Jane (21), who said:

I guess if I were to define motherhood, I would say it is the choice and commitment to helping....I guess mold the, some sort of youth. So even if it's not a biological child, or even an adoptive one, it's just a way to foster the youth that. That you both choose and commit to do so.

While Jane, Erica, and Grace all took care to recognize how motherhood is an experience that gets embodied in different ways, words like “automatically” or “obviously” when referring to biological/adoptive motherhood assert these forms of motherhood as the mothering norm. Even though all of these participants discussed mothering outside of these dominant/normative boundaries, biological and adoptive channels were most readily named as ways to embody motherhood, affirming their position as the dominant way to experience motherhood.

Discourse Dependent. Opposed to these normative ideas of motherhood, participants described motherhood as something that is embodied in other ways: through careers, through friendships, through other familial relationships, etc. As Jane (21) summed it up:

I made it a point in the definition to make it inclusive to all sorts of mothers, because I don't think that mothers necessarily means that you have a child. I think that you could be a maternal figure to so many children, whether it's through your profession, whether it's through, you know, being an aunt figure or just any sort of like, teacher, mentor in that way. I think a lot of women out there aren't able to have children of their own, whether that's by choice or you know, a medical thing or whatever. And that's a journey that

they're on, but that absolutely does not mean, make them less of a maternal figure to people out there. And so I just think that my definition kind of encompasses everybody and includes all the women out there who want to be a mother figure, whether that's through, you know, laboring and taking care of their own children or others.

In Jane's conceptualization, being a mother or maternal figure can encompass all these different relationships, whether they be professional or interpersonal relationships.

Other participants built on the idea of embodying motherhood in professional spaces through discussing the jobs of trip leaders, schoolteachers, social workers, academic advisors, etc. Erica (24), whose mom was a schoolteacher when she was younger, described her mother was having her "actual kids" and her "kids in the classroom," stating, "I think there's a lot of like, crossover of, like being a mother of, like, small children and then also being a fourth-grade teacher." Brook (21), talked about her role as a trip leader, describing it as "one of the first situations that I am kind of put in that mother situation, I guess, or mother role." Light (23) discussed feeling this in her job as a babysitter as well, stating,

Now I'm starting to think that motherhood comes up in a lot of different ways. Like being a babysitter, I love. And those kids that I watch are, you know, I I practice everything that I you know, everything that I talked about here. I try to put that into practice when I am watching the kiddos that I babysit for and like seeing, you know, what this would be like and having some practice at it.

Participants who discussed embodying motherhood in professional spaces all discussed this through the lens of "caring professions," where they are put in either close physical or emotional proximity to those they work for/with, simulating a mothering situation.

Other ways of embodying motherhood which participants discussed were in familial relationships, outside of the typical mother-child dynamic. Several participants, like Brook (21), Erica (24), and Nichole M (23), all discussed motherhood as something they embody in their role as older siblings. On her role as an older sister, Nichole M stated, “being an older sister, there's a lot of times where I really wanted to step up and guide my siblings, and I I took on a little bit of that parental role.” Echoing Nichole’s sentiments, Erica said,

Because I was, so I'm the oldest of the siblings. So motherhood to me was always something that I've considered like a natural part of my life because I felt like I was. I mean I would call my siblings my kids because I felt like they were that sometimes. Louise (26), who is the mother of a one-year-old, talked about the mothering that older siblings embody from her perspective as the youngest in her family. She described feeling lost when she became a mother because growing up; she was never put in that mothering role as an older sibling or older family member, “whereas your older siblings like, they probably took care of you as a child, and so they kind of have, like an idea of, like what to expect.”

Beyond the professional or familial realm, participants discussed other discourse-based ways of embodying motherhood. Grace (23), self-described herself as a dog mom, “I say this all the time, I'm a dog mom. Because I do have a dog, the love of my life.” In her initial definition of motherhood, Erica (24) described it as caring for someone who you consider “kin.” As she elaborated on her definition of motherhood and her use of that term, she said,

I think kin was a good word and people you consider to be your kin 'cause you can even say, like people are plant moms and dog moms. And I think like again, even the, even when we see women who are not wanting to be mothers, they still want to care for something and I feel like we see that come out through their friendships or, you know,

caring for plants or caring for, you know, their animals or caring for their, like, really deeply involved in you know, social organizations, and they care deeply about other people.

From the mothering situation of being a schoolteacher, or the mothering situation of being an older sister, to the terms “mom friend” or “dog mom,” mothering roles are seen everywhere.

While there is more cultural and societal recognition of mothers in a more traditional (biological or adoptive) sense, there is clear understanding and recognition of how mothering roles are not constricted to a single context.

Understanding Motherhood

Above I outlined the different ways of embodying/enacting motherhood that participants reflected on during interviews. While these ways of enacting motherhood play into how participants understood motherhood, participants also reflected on understanding motherhood as something that mothers both negotiate by themselves, and something they have negotiated for them.

Understanding by Mothers. Heavily tied to the idea of motherhood being possible in a variety of contexts and situations, several participants understood motherhood as something mothers can define on their own terms. As Grace (23) put it,

I think just seeing how everybody has kind of crafted their own sense of what motherhood is in their life, and finding individuals that aren't just, you know, their biological parents, I think is a really beautiful thing...It can come in so many different forms. In different people and how it's expressed by different people, through different people is not going to be the same.

Grace's definition leaves room for people to negotiate what motherhood means to them; it is flexible for how everyone wants to express and embody motherhood in their individual life. Brook (21) understands motherhood similarly, describing it as a "social feeling," that is without "an exact definition that we can all follow." Digging deeper into this idea, Nichole M (23) discussed how in her hometown, "there were a lot of people who were active in my life and took on maternal roles at times who definitely were not related to me." Outside the bounds of more traditional motherhood, these maternal figures embody the ideas of motherhood that Brook and Grace discuss above, by stepping into that role and crafting their own mothering identity separate from dominant/normative ideas. While the above section on embodying motherhood goes into more detail and depth about all the different ways this social feeling and understanding of motherhood can be enacted, it is no doubt that many of my participants share the idea that motherhood is less about a strict familial structure and is instead more about a commitment and individual identity negotiation.

Understanding for Mothers. In contrast to understanding *by* mothers, the understanding *for* mothers theme highlighted whose voices were elevated in the sensemaking surrounding motherhood. While participants described understanding and defining motherhood as something people in mothering roles can negotiate for themselves, it was also recognized that motherhood does come along with a series of societal expectations, which make defining motherhood on a solely individual level nearly impossible. As Nicole D (22) simply put it, "My first thought of motherhood is just the identity and the amount of social expectations that are placed upon that label." Along with those expectations, motherhood is defined by "pressure to constantly be perfect" as Mel (22) observed. One of the driving forces behind these expectations for motherhood are the expectations for fatherhood, which create a dichotomy that serves to put

more pressure on mothers than fathers. Elaborating on her point about the expectations placed upon the label of motherhood, Nicole D stated,

Well, something else I find interesting about motherhood is the way that it's not talked about in the same way that fatherhood is. Motherhood comes with a different slew of expectations that fatherhood does not. Fatherhood doesn't necessarily always include the mental and emotional aspects or maturity that motherhood does. It's more so like the financial, the grounding. And motherhood that's something so often talked about is like being something of strength, but it's not recognized in a substantive way.

Several participants repeated this message that fatherhood is less tied to emotional expectations. As Brook put it, "I think that a lot of people see mothers as pulling a lot of the emotional weight, and fathers as pulling a lot of the physical weight." Building off these ideas, Nichole M said,

I think that a lot of motherhood is influenced by fatherhood in a way, and I think that's just really telling of again, like society and how we live in like a patriarchy. Like, I'm not trying to, like, get all again like political in a sense, but I think that that is something that really plays a role because even when it's times where I think that fathers are absent, I think that there's still way more expectation for that mother to, to have it together than it is for that father to even show up for, like a visitation.

When participants recounted the dynamic between their parents growing up, this dichotomy was very prevalent in many of their lives. Jane Doe (22) had a father who worked a blue-collar job outside of the home and a stay-at-home mother. As she described their dynamic, she said,

So he was he was out of the home quite a bit of the time. And I do remember that, especially when I was younger, as I got a little older, he was around more because he retired from farming, but he was still kind of out and about and he did, I guess in terms of housework, like the traditional male things that you would do if that makes sense. So he would like, mow mow the lawn. He would fix like, like I guess fix any like vehicle malfunctions. Anything that had to be done like outside he would do and my mother would stay inside the home. And so she would do things like the cooking, cleaning, laundry. He never did any of that. I've never seen him do that once actually, if he had to eat, he would go out to eat. I don't. I don't even think he knows how. So in that sense, there was kind of that expectation of like you know, I guess men and women have their role in the home and it just is more fluid if people abide by those expectations.

Other participants, like Nicole (21), described motherhood and fatherhood as existing in two “very gendered camps,” where their mother stayed at home and taught things like crafts, and their father’s role only involved sports. Kay (19), who also had a stay-at-home mother, said that her mother, “handled all of that” regarding her learning disability. Kay’s father “really wasn’t” involved in the process of attending school meetings and such, rather he “handled like extracurriculars and work.” Louise (26) recalled her dad being the “fun parent” who she would go to if her mom said no to certain things.

While there is a clear gender divide in terms of the roles that mothers and fathers tend to inhabit within the home, as illustrated by real-life examples and the expectations that people perceive as accompanying motherhood, several participants described the motherhood/fatherhood dynamic as one of (mostly equal) partnership. When describing her parents’ dynamic, Rosie (23) stated,

My dad was completely involved in everything and really really helped out. I don't think that she ever felt like she was doing on her own. And I think that in choosing a partner, she made sure that she was going to marry someone, have children with someone that would be there to help her and to be supportive.

For one participant, Mel (22), her mother was the sole parent of her first child, and by the time her second child was born, her current husband/Mel's father was in the picture. Mel described this transition from a single-parent to a two-parent household as "different to navigate" and "kind of weird" initially, but also it was a "big weight off her [mom's] shoulders." Margaret (25), who was given up for adoption at birth because her biological mother did not want to raise a child alone, described that in her adopted family,

everyone in my family had the skew of. It's really better to do it with two people. Which I feel like, I don't know kind of sounds rude to single mothers, but from my biological mother at least, the idea was that it was really hard for her because her biological mother, like, couldn't couldn't step up at times. And then she had no one.

Other participants, like Nicole D (22), said that in her family, motherhood, "has always kind of been like it takes a village," where her grandparents were very involved and very supportive.

As participants broke down their experiences and the stories they have been told, many recounted this partnership/community in motherhood as something very crucial. Jane (21) described how her mother's second pregnancy was easier because she had "more help this time around" in the form of her (Jane's) father and paternal grandmother, who moved in temporarily during the newborn months. Similar to Jane, Mel's (22) grandmother moved in to help care for her mother while she was experiencing preterm labor and was that primary support system while her mother was pregnant and recovering from her C-section. Louise (26), who gave birth last

year, recalled how thankful she is that she was not the first person in her friend group to give birth, because it created more understanding between her and her friends,

But no, I was not the first and I think that made it also easier for me to transition into being a mother when you have other people that can relate near you or obviously being a first-time mother like you're gonna have questions all the time...So I am grateful that I wasn't the first and I do have those resources to rely on.

All participants conceived of motherhood and mother expectations differently, but a major factor in understanding these expectations is understanding the divide of expectations among mothers and fathers, and mothers and their community more broadly. While participants described the parental/household responsibilities as being split among several people, and the importance of having a support system in motherhood, the locus of this responsibility still falls on the mother or maternal figure in many of these situations. This fact complicates the ability to define motherhood on individual terms.

Motherhood as Loss

In tandem with the idea that motherhood is a locus of household/parental responsibilities and expectations, many participants understood motherhood as a loss of some sort. Overall, participants conceptualized this loss as sacrifice or loss of identity in some way.

Sacrifice. One main theme that participants discussed as they discussed motherhood was an element of sacrifice and “giving your all to your kid,” as Marie (21) put it. Elaborating on this point more, Marie said that her perception of motherhood was that “you're not yourself anymore, you're more like there to support your child, like your job in life is now to support your kid.” Mel (22) said that she feels like there is “sacrifice required” of mothers, especially with the cultural

idea that women should take a step back from their careers to be the best mother they can be. On this note, Jane Doe (22) said that,

If I think of anything, I would add a component of sacrifice to motherhood. And I I feel like a lot of it is very sacrificial of one's own interests and I feel like I, I do have like a lot of I don't know. I feel like it's really admirable work and I do have a lot of respect. Like I said, I feel like there's some air of uncertainty and like, anxiety surrounding it.

Jane Doe, Mel, and Marie all shared this view that sacrifice is inherently a part of becoming a mother. Understanding sacrifice as a part of the motherhood experience contributes to “uncertainty” and “anxiety” around motherhood perceptions and decisions.

Identity Loss. Building off the idea that sacrifice is a crucial part of motherhood, many participants expressed this idea that motherhood is not just a sacrifice of one’s interests or of one’s career, but it is a sacrifice and loss of one’s complete identity beyond their mother identity. Robin (21) felt that this understanding of motherhood as identity loss is something that is of the moment with “current like political uncertainty and almost like regressiveness in terms of reproductive care.” Robin feels that women are being sent message that when you’re a mother “that’s all you are.” Jane (21) shared this idea that a motherhood identity is an overpowering identity, stating,

I think that there's other ways to connect with people on a human level, but again, I think that ties into the loss of identity. You kind of forget who you are, what your interests are, and then the next thing you know. You're you're all consumed by the idea of just being a mother, which don't get me wrong, is a huge part of that identity and and very important one at that but I think it kind of can make people forget how to connect with other people. Outside of the fact that they're a mom.

Outside of this understanding of motherhood being an overpowering identity factor, Jane Doe (22) discussed how the mother's identity still gets overpowered by the father's identity. Jane Doe, who is Russian American, discussed how in her culture and in their naming traditions, "you're named after your father. Like my, my first name is essentially my father's name is just a feminized version of it. And then obviously then my last name is my father's too." Jane Doe's mother is a Russian immigrant, who was a stay-at-home mom, so Jane was primarily raised by her mother and in her mother's culture. Despite this cultural connection she has to her mother and to her mother's identity, she is still named after her father. She explained her thoughts on this, saying,

So everything I feel like even with all the sacrifice some mothers give to raise their children, I feel like identity isn't even passed down, and I feel like a lot of respect is even held more towards their fathers just because, like you carry their name and their culture. Like even the last name...it's not from a country that my mother is from, and so even though I speak like a different language than my last name, that would indicate. There's kind of like, I guess you're just automatically assumed to be everything that your father is, even though your mother was the one that was around to teach you everything that you know.

While Jane Doe acknowledges the sacrifice of personal interests and identity as something that her mother had to give, she also sees this loss of her mother's identity as something that is happening across generations. The loss involved with motherhood doesn't begin or end with mothering acts; it is intrinsic to culture.

While several participants conceived of loss of identity in motherhood as something negative that happens when you begin your mothering role, one participant (Erica, 24) described

loss of identity as something that would happen if she wasn't able to become a mother.

According to Erica, her and her husband becoming parents was

a big part of our lives and a big part of our identities. So I think that that makes this like kind of in between part of where like actually becoming a parent or becoming a mom and the situation is scary because it's like this is something that everyone's always expected me to do. And I want to do it, like I so genuinely want to do it. But it's scary 'cause. It's like, what if that doesn't happen?... And even though I want it so much for myself, it's like...if it didn't happen, like, what does that mean?

Motherhood is not simply an act; it is an identity. As participants described it, this identity could mean a loss of other identities, but also not having this identity is a loss for some.

Motherhood as Choice

While motherhood was understood by participants as something with complicated ties to many things like identity and partnership, it had a relatively uncomplicated relationship to choice. Many participants acknowledged choice as something essential to being a mother, with Jane (21) even defining motherhood as a “choice and commitment.” In Jane’s perception of motherhood, the mother must make an active choice to take on that role to be a good mother. She sees this as a timely conversation given recent political discourse about reproductive rights, and says,

But I just want to make my stance incredibly clear, I don't think that anybody who is forced to be a mother will be a good one, and I stand on that and it's not the woman's fault. She should not be villainized for not being a good mother because she was forced in that position.

Other participants, like Rosie (23), who discussed the importance of, “the right to choose to be a mother,” and Nichole M (23) who described herself as “pro-choice,” added to this conversation by asserting the choice of motherhood as something important to them. Brook (21) discussed how in her personal experience as a trip-leader, when she is with a male co-lead, they are often called “mom and dad.” While Brook asserted her love for being a compassionate leader, she described being thrust into this mother role as “really confusing” and something that “conflicts me because it's being you know, given to me rather than chosen.”

Beyond the initial choice to become a mother, other participants, like Marie (21) emphasized the importance of choice in all other mothering decisions,

I think that there's a lot of interesting media coming out now about, you know the option of motherhood. And there's a lot of more, a lot of choices for women now that there wasn't in the past, and so seeing people express those in the media like the, the nuclear family not being like the main system of child rearing I think is is pretty big, and different family structures.

While Marie conceives of choice in motherhood differently than Nichole M, Rosie, and Jane did, all these understandings of choice position it as something integral to motherhood, which bolsters the ability to be a good mother.

RQ1b

In the below section, I aim to answer RQ1b by presenting the key themes related to decision making in motherhood, as informed by interviews with female-identified members of Generation Z. Overall, findings related to this research question highlighted four main themes influencing decision making in motherhood: (a) desire; (b) timing; (c) health and identity factors; and (d) unsafe world.

Desire

One major theme regarding people's choices in motherhood was the desire to have children. For participants who planned to have children, they discussed this desire as something they have held for a very long time. Rosie (23) said, "I think I've thought about my kids for my entire life. Like I've always known that I'm, that I want to be a mom." Sharing this idea, Jane (21) said, "I mean, for me personally, I've kind of always had that intuitive feeling that I wanted to be a mom." Beyond discussing it as a personal want, Erica (24) shared that motherhood is "something that everyone's always expected me to do." Despite some of the desire for have children coming from outside sources, she said, "I want to do it, like I so genuinely want to do it."

For those who were not planning to have children, many discussed it as something that they simply do not want for themselves. Nicole (21) shared that, "ever since I kind of hit puberty, I've never wanted children. I just never had that desire." Kay (19) discussed it as something that she's "never really been comfortable with" because raising kids is "a lot of pressure that I I don't want necessarily." Nicole D (22) said that her decision to not have children has been informed by "personal wants," saying that she doesn't think she has the right personality for motherhood and that she doesn't think she would enjoy it. Echoing the ideas of Nicole, Kay, and Nicole D, Grace (23) discussed her plan to not have children as a personal preference, saying, "I have no desire to settle down, like have kids with anybody."

Timing

As participants discussed the decisions they plan to make regarding motherhood, one of the primary topics they emphasized was having children at the "right time." For some

participants, like Brook (21), the right time is after she gets to have other life experiences and when she will no longer feel limited by children,

But as I got older and started you know, becoming an individual and having personality and becoming who I am, I kind of realized that being a mother so young takes away a lot of your choices and what you get to do so? I, you know, want to put off being like a biological mother for a while. I I don't think that is something you know, I love being a caretaker, but I, you know I can't be a mother and take care of a whole child right now.

That's something that I have to put off further in my life because it limits my freedom and it limits where I can travel to and what I can do.

Other participants, like Nichole M (23), agreed with this general idea, stating, “I don't even want to get married until I'm 30. I am kind of like very Gen Z in the way of I want to appreciate my 20s.” While Nichole says that she plans to wait to better appreciate her 20s, her plan to wait is also linked with a desire to be more prepared and financially able to support a child.

Many participants, like Nichole, plan to wait for financial reasons. For Nichole, she hopes to avoid children being a huge financial burden, because in her family both her parents had to drop out to afford and care for her. She says that she has

done a lot of things to avoid that because I I see how if you don't move up financially, you're only going to continue to go backwards like the cycle of poverty is just very real if you don't break it.

Louise (26), who had her first child last year, said that it was not her exact plan to have a child at that point in her life, “but life throws you curveballs, and babies are always a blessing.” While Louise is happy to have her daughter, she asserts that if things had gone according to her plan, “I totally would have waited a few more years until I felt financially stable and like ready.” Beyond

wanting to wait to be financial stable, some participants, like Jane Doe (22), shared the desire to prepare for things like healthcare providers and school districts. Jane calls having children a “big responsibility” and something she has a lot of anxiety about, stating,

So I feel like I'd be really conscientious about having all of my ducks in a row and having, like a healthcare provider selected a home, I would want to move to an area with a credible school district. And I feel like a lot of I would personally put in a lot of planning into one and making sure that everything's kind of set up in that regard.

While many participants agreed upon their plan to wait so they can enjoy their twenties and prepare for the next chapter of their life, Erica (24), who was interviewed while she was six-weeks pregnant, said that her and her husband are “just ready for this.” Erica described the feeling that, “when we were, you know, when my husband and I were talking about having kids at first, it was like my mom and even my grandma was like, oh, you're so young, though.” She felt that this pushback came from the idea that her life would become so limited when she became a mother. Similarly, Margaret (25), plans to have children in the next year or two. This decision was informed by her diagnosis with a thyroid condition, which will reduce her fertility over time, but she stated that overall her and her husband feel like “this is like the time to strike now.” Another participant, Light (23), shared her desire to be a young parent, because she really valued being close in age to her parents,

I'm not sure if that would be possible or is in the stars, but I would really really like to have my kids kind of younger just for the connection that I felt like it created between me, mom and Dad.

When discussing timing, each participant had their own view of what the “right time” was for them, informed by life experiences and other social and communicated ideas of motherhood. For

many participants, like Light and Nichole M, their idea of the right time is influenced by their parents' experience, Light who wanted to replicate her parents' timing and Nichole M who wants to avoid it. One participant, Brook (21), discussed how motherhood discourses (e.g., ideas of motherhood as loss) informed her decision to wait, so she is not so limited by her choice to take on a mothering role.

Health and Identity Factors

Aside from ideas about timing which inform decision making in Generation Z, many participants discussed different health/identity factors as a part of their decision making.

Queer Identity. For two of my participants, Mel (22) and Kay (19), their queer identities are a major factor when it comes to their future decisions of motherhood. Kay, who does not currently plan to have children, talked about the negative stereotypes that she has received about two women raising a child together, stating, "my parents aren't very on board with the idea of, like two moms raising a kid. So, it's that idea of, like, disappointment if that's what happens." Mel, who plans to adopt, said her decision was informed by her queer identity and the health history of her family, both of which contribute to her desire not to have biological children. While she hopes to one day adopt, she expressed uncertainty about what the future looks like, stating, "current administration changes does make me a little bit worried about like the ability of like two women to adopt children."

Health Risks. Throughout interviews, several participants discussed the health concerns they have regarding having and raising children. For some participants, like Jane (21), this informed her decision to adopt because when she was a teenager, she was diagnosed with a condition that makes fertility "nearly impossible." As of now, Jane plans to adopt or potentially have a child by IVF, but says that, "getting pregnant naturally is kind of out of the books for me"

due to her condition. Brook (21) echoed Jane's sentiments, stating that she is "open to the options of like maybe adopting kids or figuring out how to have kids in other ways" because she is scared of her physical ability to have children due to issues with hormones and polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS).

For other participants, the health risks associated with having a child were enough to turn people off from having children entirely. Grace (23), who does not currently plan on having children, says,

And another thing with motherhood is again the underlying health issues. As I've recently discovered, some health issues that I've had myself, you know, discovering it as such a late age just made it a little harder to cope with it, I think. But I think it's also something I don't want to risk or put myself at risk just to bring somebody else into this world because it could end badly for the both of us.

Another participant, Nicole (21), discussed their decision to not have children partially because of their endometriosis. During the interview, Nicole described her chronic pain in depth and said that she "wouldn't be able to keep up with a child" due to it. While the ability to raise a child with chronic pain was one part of the story, Nicole was also very determined to not pass on the endometriosis gene, saying,

So, first off the bat, that's one reason why I don't wanna get pregnant and have children is even if I do survive and the child survives, there is a chance I could pass on that gene to them and that's, I feel that that own hate like hatred towards my mother for the fact that she knowingly passed that down to me.

Beyond their determination not to pass along this gene, Nicole also very simply stated that because of her condition there is "a good chance that I won't be able to have kids."

Pregnancy. For nine out of my 16 participants, the plan is to have biological children. These participants were clearly not against having biological children, however, several described specific birth plans they see themselves following or expressed fears they have regarding pregnancy and childbirth. Jane Doe (22) recalls the “horror stories of like something going wrong” that she has been exposed to and called pregnancy “absolutely horrifying.” Rosie (23) and Brook (21) shared this same sentiment by calling pregnancy “really freaky” and sharing that they have fear going into birthing situations. When Louise (26) recounted her birth story, she shared that even though she has always planned to have multiple children, she initially, “changed my thought of like maybe I don’t want more kids because when you’re going through that, it’s like traumatizing a little bit not knowing, you know, what the outcome was going to be.” Louise’s first child was delivered healthy, but Louise was induced early and, for the 26 hours of labor, her daughter’s heart rate was dropping concerningly.

To mitigate fears about pregnancy, several participants shared how they plan to prepare for birth. For some, like Light (23) and Brook (21), this alternative plan involves a doula. Brook, whose aunt had a doula at her first birth, shared that she believes that experience to be more empowering than a traditional hospital experience where there is a lack of control. While she sees the doula as a figure who would help her have more control, she also understands the importance of traditional medical professionals, stating,

You know, I don't wanna have a baby or give birth on my own, you know? But it would be interesting to, like, have help that's more than just medical help. Like, I don't know, doula or midwife, because I think traditionally, like the hospital experience, is a very medical experience and it just leaves you without a lot of control, you know?

Light also wants the traditional hospital setting for the safety and peace of mind of herself and her baby. Light expressed that she is “not very open to the idea of doing something natural labor,” so she wants access to an epidural and even a C-section. However, she also said she, “would kind of want a doula or or something like that to kind of walk me through it mentally.”

While other participants, like Erica (24) and Rosie (23), expressed some fears regarding pregnancy or specific birth situations, they both plan on a typical hospital birth. Erica shared that her mother had very ideal pregnancies and births which were never traumatic, so she hopes to be able to recreate that. She also added that she, “doesn’t plan to go natural for any of them,” her mom had an epidural during all four births, and she plans to utilize an epidural as well. Rosie shared that she is aware of other options outside of typical hospital procedures, like “information about, like laying down, not being the best method,” but says she still “envision[s] a pretty normal plan.”

Unsafe World

For many participants, another major thing that informs their decision making around motherhood is the idea that the world may not be as safe as it once was, especially regarding things like climate change and political uncertainty. Nicole D (22), who works in environmental policy and international relations, shared that she does not plan to have children because

I feel that if I were to like, personally, physically bring a child into this world that I that, I would live with guilt...the guilt that I attribute to that comes from like feeling like I would bring a child into an unsafe world in the current direction that we're going. Like environmentally policy wise, all of those different things that would be not just difficult to raise a child through. But difficult to explain to a child in a way that I think would just break my heart a lot.

Robin (21) shared Nicole's sentiments, saying that she "take[s] no issue with people who look at the state of the world right now and say, like they can't fathom having kids right now." Robin, who does hope to one day have children, says that current and anticipated conditions in the world will be a challenge for her when she finds herself in a position of wanting children soon. She shares that she hopes that "there is a world that I think is worth giving someone to, as opposed to, like sacrificing a person, if that makes sense."

Several participants shared that their decision of whether and/or how to have children has been directly informed by the feeling that the world is unsafe. Marie (21) shared,

And I'm honestly not too sure if I want to have like my own kids or if I would rather like foster, I think that that's a great path to go down and I know this is kind of cliché for people in my generation, but like I don't know if I like the idea of bringing another person into the world with how it is right now. So I'd rather create like a safe and supportive environment for someone who needs it.

Similarly, Grace (23), who does not plan to have biological children, said, "respectfully, the state that our world is in right now, I'm not bringing any other people into it when there are people out there who deserve so much better." Nichole M (23) stated that she would rather adopt due to her feeling that there is a lot of hypocritical messaging surrounding adoption and abortion, and she shared that to her, "the most, like, defiant way to be a mom is to love somebody who society necessarily isn't and to kind of take on that responsibility, even though the people who claim they will do that aren't doing that."

There wasn't much divide between people who plan to have children and those who do not when it came to acknowledging that the world feels unsafe. Grace (23) expressed her fears regarding the state of reproductive healthcare, stating, "if something does go wrong, who's to say

that I'm going to have the resources?" Beyond her fears for her health and safety, she shared her fears surrounding if she were to have a trans child, how would she be able to, "guarantee that my child is going to get the care and just the care that they need without having to cross state and county lines or even having to go to another country just to do that." Nicole (21) expressed this same sentiment, stating, "I would not want to bring a child into this world because they might be queer and I know how queer people are treated, especially in this country, especially trans people in this country." While Grace and Nicole both do not plan to have biological children, Rosie (23) does, and echoed both of their sentiments. Rosie stated that criticism of people who don't want children is "insane" because of where the world is currently and where it is headed, especially in terms of social treatment of women and access to healthcare. She shared:

That's really significant to me and I completely understand why someone would be like I'm not having children. I, when I vote, I think about like the rights that my daughter will have or like. If I have a queer child, how would how would the world they live and influence them and hurt them and protect them in different ways?

Beyond fears about an unsafe world informing people's decisions regarding whether they want children or not, those who plan to have children shared their fears about raising a child in an unsafe world. Brook (21) shared her concerns about how social media impacts children, "especially with emerging influencers like, you know, Andrew Tate or Elon Musk." She says that she is worried about these "hyper misogynistic men, being widely available in the public eye" and the influence that they seem to be having on young people. Erica (24), who is currently pregnant, expressed her fears about navigating the digital world, saying, "I just feel like there's so much like, that you'll be worried about, like, exposing them to." While people with different plans for their lives all interpreted "unsafe world" as meaning different things, there was a lot of

agreement across participants that safety is something to be concerned about when it comes to having a child. For some this was manifested on a smaller scale and related to media influences; for others it was on a larger scale and related to political realities.

Research Question 2

In the following section, I offer an answer to RQ2, which asked:

RQ2: What are the memorable messages that Generation Z women have received in those stories of motherhood?

Findings related to this research question reveal two main types of memorable messages of motherhood: (a) messages about mother/daughter relationship and (b) messages about having children. Messages about the mother/daughter relationship can be categorized under friend relationship or fraught relationship, and key messages about having children are: (a) “you’ll change your mind”; (b) “your life is for your kids”; and (c) “children are expensive.”

Messages About Mother/Daughter Relationship

“I’m your mom, not your friend”/Friend Relationship

Across participants, many described memorable messages they have received about having a friendship relationship with their mom. Nicole D (22) described her relationship with her mom as one that has “always been extremely close, so she’s not just my mother, but she’s also my best friend.” Jane (21) also discussed her relationship with her mom as more of a friend relationship, but she described this friend role as something that her mother has come to embody more over time, as her children grow up and become more independent. Light (23), whose parents were younger when they had her, said:

I always thought having mom and dad so close to me and age was kind of kind of great. I thought that really connected us to be able to be, not that they were more like my friend, but they were, like, relatable.

While some participants expressed their appreciation for this friend relationship, others shared that it was not something they had. One participant, Erica (24), shared that the phrase “I’m your mom not your friend,” was the defining phrase of her relationship with her mom. She shared a story from her college years, where at a mom’s weekend sorority brunch things were “so awkward” because,

we just didn't have, like, the friendship relationship that so many other of the other girls did, even to the point like where like some girls were giving, like, a speech at a brunch and talking about, like, how her mom was like, her best friend, my mom literally leaned over and was like, well, I know you don't feel that way about me. So that's definitely been like something that I feel like I've missed in that motherhood experience and I want to.

Like I miss out from other people's one like that when they talk about their mom.

While Erica described the lack of a friendship as a loss with her mom, Mel (22) described feeling very content that her parents did not take on that friend role, because it is, “not like actually, the role that you're supposed to take on as a parent.” Mel shared that in some of her interactions with her friends and her friends’ parents she notices interactions where she, “wish[es] that their parents were kind of stepping into that role in the same way” as opposed to just taking on a friend role.

“A girl’s first hater is her mother”/Fraught Relationship

Opposite from the idea of a friend relationship, many participants described receiving memorable messages from media about mothers and daughters fighting. Kay (19) shared that

there are a lot of media portrayals of mother/daughter relationships where they, “just fight and fight and fight.” For Kay, these portrayals don’t feel realistic and put a lot of pressure on a relationship that at its core, “It’s just two people who didn’t get along really well.” Jane (21) shared the phrase, “A girl’s first hater is her mother,” and discussed that even though her mom was nothing but kind to her, she experienced “a lot of projections placed on me based on her own life experiences,” which made the phrase and idea of a more fraught relationship resonate with her. Nicole D (22) discussed how media portrayals of “the monstrous mother, the demanding mother, the matriarch” all resonated with her when she was younger because her mother can be more emotionally reserved. She described that,

It took me a while to understand her personality and to appreciate it. So I think that when I got to those hard ages of like 12/13/14/15. The kind of media narrative of the cruel mother, the stepmother, the mother that find, that’s jealous of her daughter and things like that kind of sunk in and made our relationship more fraught than it would have been.

While Jane, Nicole, and Kay all discussed having a good relationship with their moms, they described these messages about mother/daughter relationships as things that have stuck with them over time and even had an influence on their relationship with their mother.

Messages About Having Children

“You’ll change your mind”/“When you know, you know”

Several participants discussed messages they have received about changing their mind when it comes to wanting to have children. For some, like Jane (21), this message is one that came directly from her mom and her story about motherhood. Jane noted:

So growing up, my mom did not want to have children at all... So when it came to having kids of her own, she was just like, I really don’t want to do that. It just didn’t interest her

in any way. And then after meeting my dad in her late teens. She kind of had a change of heart and it wasn't because he persuaded her to or anything like that. It just was a decision she came to on her own after being with him.

For others, this message is one that has been aimed at them when they have expressed their desire to not have children. Nicole (21) describes being told:

And I would bring this up and I would make off hand comments of like, oh, I don't kids and my mom would always be like, I didn't want kids. You'll change your mind.

That was, that's a big message pushed on me, is you may not want kids now, but you will one day. Even though when I know in my heart and soul that I will not want kids in the future, at least children of my own... And that's like the main impression I've gotten of motherhood is, oh, you may not want children now, but you will in the future. Like everyone wants to be a mom.

Grace (23) shared that her mother, “always tells me how you know, she, her meeting my dad and like them, like having kids, getting married. All of that wasn't planned. Again, like you know, it happens when you least expect it.” While a separate message from “you’ll change your mind,” this emphasis on kids being something that happens naturally, especially when you aren’t planning on it, helps contribute to the memorable message that people change their minds regarding motherhood. Building off this, Kay (19) shared how when she told her family in the past that she doesn’t want kids, they got very sad, creating confusion and doubt for her over this desire, and insinuating that she may change her mind.

“Your life is for your kids”

Another significant message that people received about having children is the idea that once you become a mother, your life is for your kids. Jane Doe (22) describes hearing verbatim

from her mother, “once you have a child, your life isn't yours anymore. And you live for your children.” Similarly, other participants, like Nichole M (23), shared, “I can remember being told that, like, once you become a mom, like your entire life does become your kids.” Erica (24), who is pregnant with her first child, described how she received push back from her family members when she told them she was trying to get pregnant at her age because of the idea that when you have kids, “your life is gonna become so limited.” Both Brook (21) and Mel (22) also discussed messages of “giving up everything for [your] children” and “you’ll do anything to, like, do what’s right for your kids.”

On the other hand, Robin (21) described hearing the opposite message. Robin reflected on messages that she has heard from her mom and other family members who are mothers and said that what has stuck with her is the idea that, “motherhood is part of your life, but it really isn't all of it. That's not all of who you are.” For Robin, this message has been encouraging because it

makes me feel as though that [motherhood] can be as much part of my my goals and my life plan as things that things like academics and career, which usually are associated as being obstacles and barriers to being a mother.

For Jane, Nichole, Erica, Brook, and Mel, this message that your life will be only for your kids once you become a mother has been seen as limiting, and something that has turned them away from motherhood, at least at this time in their lives. With Robin, the opposite message is seen as having the opposite effect, as it makes motherhood seem more attainable. Jane Doe shared how influential figures in her life, like professors and older colleagues who balance motherhood with their career, have helped to combat the messages she’s received from her mother about life being only for your children. Jane Doe is one participant who shared how she tried to reconceptualize

motherhood to be more in line with Robin's framing, but Robin is the only participant who shared this message as something she has explicitly received.

“Children are expensive”/“It’s not something to be taken lightly”

The final significant message that people recall hearing about having children is the idea that children are expensive. Margaret (24) discussed how, with older parents, there was a lot of financial support and stability within her family. Given this dynamic, and events like the Great Recession, she recalls hearing the message that “children are expensive.” Similarly, Light (23) recalls being told that while having children and being a parent is fun, it is “not something to be taken lightly.” As participants described it, messages like these were used to emphasize considerations of partnership, timing, and finances for having children. Building off the original message about expenses, Margaret described more specific messages like, “don’t be a teen mom, because what if there’s another Great Recession?”

Beyond participants sharing explicit messages they received about children being expensive or a big responsibility, several other participants discussed the influence money has on their mothering decisions. Rosie (23) shared that “I definitely worry about money a lot,” and Jane Doe (22) and Marie (21) shared how childcare and medical costs respectively shape how they think about motherhood and challenges they may face as a mother. All of these concerns shared went hand-in-hand with the messages about money that other participants described and influenced how participants thought of timing and partnership in motherhood. Even though Light (23) and Margaret (24) were the only participants to share this message as something they have outright received, several participants echoed the same effects of this messaging, making the idea that “Children are expensive” stand out throughout the coding process.

All the messages and narratives shared in this chapter explore the communicated factors that are influencing my participants’ perceptions and decision-making regarding motherhood. My

findings revealed narratives about choice, loss, understanding, and embodying motherhood as major influences on *perceptions* of motherhood. *Decisions* of motherhood were conversely impacted by narratives of desire, timing, health and identity factors, and unsafe world. Memorable messages about motherhood included messages about the mother/daughter relationship (e.g., “I’m your mom not your friend” and “A girl’s first hater is her mother”) and messages about having children (e.g., “You’ll change your mind,” “Your life is for your kids,” and “Children are expensive”). In the following chapter, I will explore the implications of these narratives and messages and provide my insight into what we can learn from this research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In the previous section, I presented the findings from my interviews with female-identified members of Generation Z about their perceptions of motherhood, their motherhood related decision-making, and the stories and messages they have heard regarding motherhood. Throughout my findings, I overwhelmingly saw a desire for my participants to embody motherhood in some way, but their accounts suggest that this embodiment is not limited to historically dominant approaches to motherhood. For some, this desire to embody motherhood meant a desire to embody it in a traditional sense, and follow the general timeline of marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, etc. For others, this desire was through adoption. Many who planned to adopt chose that option because it is the most viable way for them to have children, for health reasons or due to their queer identity. Outside of adoption and childbirth, others expressed a desire to take on a mothering role through being a “fun aunt,” “dog mom,” or to just take care of the young and vulnerable people in their lives. These findings show that Generation Z’s desired relationship to motherhood often falls outside of the traditional boundaries of what motherhood looks like, but the narratives and messages received were sometimes at odds with this desired relationship and intended decision-making. Below I outline this idea in more detail, through the themes of choice and desire, loss and expectations, and safety and resources.

Choice and Desire

The first main theme for understanding motherhood within Generation Z is the importance of choice and desire. In my findings for RQ1a, I illustrated how Generation Z conceives of motherhood as a choice and sees choice as something that bolsters one’s ability to be a good mother. Often, this perspective was influenced by messaging about abortion and was participants’ way of pushing back against the lack of control they see in motherhood stories. One

participant, Jane (21), specifically discussed how she believes that people forced into motherhood will not be good mothers. Despite *Griswold v. Connecticut* and *Roe v. Wade*, which emphasize women's right to privacy regarding their personal health decisions, recent political decisions about motherhood have been regressive in this regard ("Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Center"). While Generation Z is coming of age in a political landscape that is currently rolling back protections and access regarding choice in motherhood, the generation's mindset does not buy into the recent regressive shift.

In my findings for RQ1b, I illustrated how desire/want is one of the main factors driving people's motherhood decisions. These findings show a clear link between narratives and messages that people receive, their perceptions of motherhood, and their decision-making related to motherhood—when motherhood is seen as a choice having children is seen as a decision rather than an inevitable part of life. However, outside of this messaging, in RQ2 I found that the memorable message, "You'll change your mind," was prevalent in Generation Z. While my participants overall believe that choice is an essential part of motherhood, this belief is despite this message and not because of it. Practically, these findings also reveal that while cultural narratives may shift generationally, messages may be less flexible to political and cultural influence. While certain messages like, "Children are expensive," were influenced by recent events (the Great Recession), messages like, "You'll change your mind," and "Everyone wants to be a mom," reinforce centuries old ideas about motherhood being the ideal way to perform womanhood (de Beauvoir, 1949; Lenz, 2020). Even though significant cultural and political action has been taken to challenge those ideas, and it shows in the motherhood perceptions and decision-making in Generation Z, those ideas are still reinforced, at least interpersonally.

Loss and Expectations

The second main theme for understanding motherhood within Generation Z is the loss and expectations associated with motherhood. Throughout interviews, many people repeated the narratives they have received about sacrifice in motherhood, identity loss in motherhood, and the expectations for mothers. For people who expressed no desire to have children, these narratives were pointed to as a major reason why people did not want children. Some participants described not having the “right personality” or not wanting to compromise their career and life goals for children. Even for people who did express the desire to have children, these narratives heavily informed that decision, specifically ideas about when the “right time” to have children is. Several participants said they plan to wait to have children until they are more established in their career and in their personal lives because they are not ready to give their whole life to their children, and memorable messages have defined motherhood in this way.

Ideas about motherhood as loss are heavily tied to the idea that once you become a mother, that is all that you are. I started this thesis with the words of Simone de Beauvoir, “she is a womb, an ovary; she is female: this word is enough to define her” (1949, p. 21). Scholarship about motherhood has reiterated de Beauvoir’s idea that a woman is seen as only for her reproductive purpose: “it says to women that this, *this* is the greatest thing you can be: a martyr, a mother” (Lenz, 2020, p. xi). While contemporary women are less tied to the domestic sphere, Generation Z is receiving narratives and messages that once they become a mother, their life is no longer for themselves, it is for their kids. This messaging, while seeming outdated, has permeated Generation Z and positioned motherhood at odds with other personal and professional goals.

For several of my participants, their decision to not have children entirely or to put off having children was due in part to their career ambitions. While being a working mother is much

more common today, working mothers have a “second shift” after they come home from work and begin to take care of their family (Turner & Norwood, 2013). In my literature review, I discussed how working mothers are often placed at odds with “good” mothers because the job they have requires them to care about things beyond their family (Turner & Norwood, 2013; Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010). Representations of stay-at-home moms and trad wives have reinforced these ideas, even though living solely for one's children and domestic life has also been occasionally equated to horror in the media for at least the past 50 years (e.g. *The Stepford Wives*). The narratives and messages from family members and other interpersonal relationships combined with the media representations of motherhood that my participants recounted reinforce ideas of “intensive mothering” being the ideal way to perform motherhood. For many of my participants, this ideal motherhood did not seem attainable to them.. One participant, Kay (19), who hopes to be an elementary school teacher, remarked that she can’t imagine taking care of kids all day at work and then coming home and giving her own children the care they deserve. While she clearly cares deeply for children, Kay is not able to see herself as being a “good mother” because her job would get in the way of this possibility.

Once again, as I discussed above, centuries old ideas about motherhood as an institution are still very prevalent and are being passed down to Generation Z through narratives and messages. Even though the women’s rights movement has taken great strides to challenge ideas about motherhood being the most significant role a woman can take on, motherhood is still being discussed as an all-consuming role. Realistically, with narratives and messages about both choice and loss being relevant to Generation Z’s perceptions of motherhood, it is the socially constructed (institutional) aspects of motherhood that so heavily emphasize a perfect domestic performance creating the most limitations for people wanting to become mothers.

Safety and Resources

The last main theme to understand Generation Z's relationship to motherhood is safety and resources. As outlined in my findings for RQ1b, the idea that the world feels unsafe is a major factor impacting people's motherhood related decision-making. A few participants expressed that they do not choose to have children because of climate change and the sociopolitical state of the world, with one participant even saying that they would live with guilt if they chose to bring a child into the world right now. Other participants pointed to this idea as the reason they will choose to adopt; they want to create a safe space for someone who needs it rather than bring someone into a world that is unsafe. For those who want to have children, many expressed fears for their children and what they would be exposed to, with several participants discussing their potential to have queer children and how they would try to navigate that.

Beyond fears about this world being unsafe for children, many participants expressed how they feel the world is unsafe for potential mothers as well. Several participants discussed their desire to have a doula as part of their birth plan as an extra safety precaution since the medical world has a history of being dismissive towards pregnant women and women in labor. The medical fears expressed by participants were exacerbated by recent political actions, like the decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Center* which rolled back federal protections for abortion. While anti-abortion policies and sentiments are often framed as "pro-life," the messages those sentiments and restrictions realistically send serve to create a more hostile environment towards motherhood. Rollbacks on protections for reproductive health created fear within my participants that if something were to go wrong medically, they wouldn't have the resources they need to address those issues. Given recent attacks on IVF (Walsh, 2024;

Ducharme, 2024), concerns about the possibility of using IVF to conceive also pushed some people towards adoption rather than biological parenthood.

All of the three themes outlined above point to some major factors influencing members of Generation Z in their decisions of whether or not to be mothers. Within my participants there is a greater understanding of alternative and discourse-based ways of embodying motherhood, and I found an expressed desire to embody motherhood in some way from almost all participants. However, the prevailing institutional aspects of motherhood, like ideas about motherhood being all you are once you take on that role, are limiting people's desire to step into motherhood or are at least delaying mothering plans. The prevailing narratives and messages about motherhood as an institution, when combined with the current sociopolitical state regarding motherhood and women's rights, create an environment that appears hostile towards potential mothers, a feeling affirmed by the Generation Z participants in this study.

Theoretically, this thesis illuminates an interesting part of the dynamic between narratives and memorable messages, specifically when the two are at odds with each other. Throughout interviews, messages and narratives were intertwined as participants used narratives to provide context for messages or used messages to help summarize narratives. While both narratives and messages have the capacity to influence perceptions and decision-making regarding motherhood, what does it mean when these narratives and messages are at odds with each other? For some cases, narratives and messages aligned, like how narratives of motherhood as loss go hand in hand with the memorable message that "Your life is for your kids." However, specifically with the idea of choice, the memorable messages people recalled perpetuated ideas that motherhood is inevitable for women, inherently disregarding the choice aspect of motherhood. These messages that my participants recalled about "You'll change your mind" or "Everyone wants to be a

mother” all came from interpersonal relationships, mostly family members, while narratives about choice in motherhood came from different interpersonal relationships, like friendships, and from media narratives. This difference of content in messages and narratives reveals an interesting dichotomy between the two, especially when you consider the channel that messages and narratives are being sent from.

Chapter 6: Limitations & Future Directions

This study was grounded in the exploration of the communicated factors that influence Generation Z's perceptions of motherhood, specifically through the lens of narrative and memorable messages theory. To do this, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 female-identified members of Generation Z. Analysis of this data illuminated that while dominant narratives of motherhood have changed in many ways, understandings of motherhood experiences are still very rooted in institutional aspects, like ideas about gender performance. This study engaged the perspectives of 16 members of Generation Z who all have different experiences with motherhood through their own motherhood experiences and family narratives. Alongside this study's many strengths, its limitations provide insight into future directions for research.

First, even though preliminary work on this thesis began in spring of 2024, data collection and analysis elements of the project occurred on a tight timeline. IRB approval of this project was received on January 21, 2025, giving me slightly over three months to recruit participants, conduct interviews, analyze data, and finalize writing on this project. Within Braun & Clarke's (2022) framework, analysis and theme generation are ongoing processes that are developed through reading data from different perspectives. In this perspective, data saturation as it relates to sample size is irrelevant, since data can always be reviewed and reanalyzed through a new perspective. Having limited time to analyze data does decrease the saturation and rigor of my findings, and even though this project is ultimately a comprehensive study, it would have benefitted from more time. Below I will discuss limitations within my data collection and participant pool.

Second, while my participant pool was large enough to generate relevant themes, it fell short of my initial participant goal and was ultimately a homogenous sample in many ways. Initially, I was aiming for 20-30 interview participants, and while I got more than enough participant interest, given timeline limitations and participants not contacting me back, I was only able to conduct 16 total interviews. Within the framework of analysis and data rigor I utilized, this sample size does not inherently decrease the saturation of my findings; however, more interviews could have revealed more themes. Specifically, as it stands, my participant pool was all white, there were no gay/lesbian participants, and only one participant who did not identify as a cisgender woman. If I had a larger participant pool that was more diverse in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, more perspectives would have been represented within my findings. As Generation Z is statistically the most diverse generation so far (Parker & Igielnik, 2020), while my findings were representative of my participant pool, they fall short in representing the generation as a whole.

Given limitations in my timeline and participant pool, I recommend two areas of future research. One, future studies should focus on recruiting more marginalized populations and engage the voices of people who are typically underrepresented in motherhood narratives. As explained above, my participant pool lacked many of those voices, so there is an obvious perspective gap in my findings. Two, I noticed in my findings a difference in perspectives across the seven-year age range of my participants. Naturally, my youngest participant was less sure of her desires towards motherhood than my older participants, some of which were actively taking steps towards making motherhood a reality in their life. While I interviewed across a large age group, Generation Z spans 15 years, and the younger members of Generation Z are not represented in my findings at all. This is due in part to the fact that several members of

Generation Z are not yet over the age of 18, but aside from one 19-year-old, my participants were 21 and up, representing age-wise only the first half of Generation Z. As time passes and Generation Z ages, future studies should investigate the younger half of Generation Z and their perspectives on motherhood, because this study is not representative of the generation as a whole for several reasons.

Third, this project officially kicked off at the start of a new presidential administration within the U.S. On day one in office, President Donald Trump issued an Executive Order (EO) titled, "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government" (Executive Order No. 14168, 2025). Section 3 of this EO is titled "Recognizing Women Are Biologically Distinct From Men," and while this EO is first and foremost an attack on the rights of transgender individuals, its focus on biologically distinguishing men and women reinforces dangerous ideas about female anatomy and casts uncertainty onto how women and mothers are going to be treated under this administration (Executive Order No. 14168, 2025). This EO is just one example of how the future of women's rights are very uncertain, and how the political and cultural landscape in the U.S. is in flux. Given that one major theme from my findings is the idea that this is an "unsafe world" to bring children into, the changes the new administration is ushering in likely means changes for peoples' perceptions of and decisions about motherhood. The changing political and cultural climate offers insights about future directions for research in this subject area.

Given the evolving cultural and political landscape, specifically regarding women's rights, if this same project were to be conducted one year later, the results may look different. One primary theme that emerged from my analysis was the idea that this is an unsafe world to bring children into, which limited participants' desire to have children or informed their decision

to adopt rather than have biological children. Throughout the interviews, I also saw people referencing how social media has changed their perspectives on motherhood, from messaging about trad wives to birth horror stories. While my research scratches the surface of this messaging, my broader focus on stories and messages provides less depth to these specific areas of messaging than they offer. Due to how complex the current sociopolitical landscape is regarding motherhood, I suggest that future research focus more specifically on (a) political messaging and (b) social media messaging and how these messages impact people's perspectives of motherhood to fully explore the rich contemporary landscape.

Conclusion

This project sought to understand Generation Z's relationship to motherhood through the lens of narrative and memorable messages theory. Despite a relatively homogenous interview population, throughout interviews I found that while my participants expressed a common desire to embody motherhood in some way, several participants understood differently the best way for them to enact motherhood. Normative forms of motherhood, like having children through biological or adoptive lanes, were what most participants expressed a desire for, but some expressed their desire to embody motherhood in different, more discourse dependent ways. The decentralization of traditional biological motherhood as the "best" way to experience motherhood within Generation Z is due to several factors, namely concerns about health risks during or after pregnancy and birth, sociopolitical factors creating a sense of the world being unsafe, and enduring ideas about motherhood being a sacrifice or loss of independence and identity. I would argue that this set of beliefs points to the downward trend in the birth rate enduring throughout Generation Z and suggests a continuing trend in this direction unless real

progress is made to ensure the rights of mothers and build a more welcoming landscape for children and families within the United States.

Further study of Generation Z and its members' perceptions of and decisions related to motherhood is a promising area of research that is only going to evolve and become more relevant over the next decade. In this research, intention should be taken to understand trends in motherhood as something represented beyond just the birth rate, given that this study shows motherhood is not just about having biological children, especially in Generation Z. Special care should also be taken to center voices of marginalized populations which are missing from this study, especially given that Generation Z is statistically the most diverse generation so far. Approaching future research with care for these insights allows for the production of future motherhood research which understands the nuances of contemporary mothering.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Thesis Interview Protocol

First, thank you for agreeing to this interview. I am very grateful that you were willing to share your time and your stories with me. If you have any questions or if something I ask is not clear, please feel free to stop me at any time. Your participation is entirely voluntary, if you wish to end this interview we can do so at any time. Do you have any questions for me before we begin? I sent you the consent form when we were scheduling this interview.

Do you have any questions about the language of anything on that consent form?

Would you like me to go over anything on that form with you?

Do you consent to this interview, and it being recorded?

Research Question 1: How do the stories of motherhood that Generation Z women have received influenced (a) their perceptions of and (b) their choices regarding motherhood?

Research Question 2: What are the memorable messages that Generation Z women have received in those stories of motherhood?

Interview Questions

Conceptualizing Motherhood

The first set of questions will ask you about your conceptualizations and experiences with motherhood.

How do you define or describe motherhood?

Example follow-up:

What does it mean to be a mother?

What was motherhood like for someone in your family? This could be your own mother or another maternal figure (for example, an aunt, a grandmother, cousin, etc.)

Example follow-ups:

How did partnership or family dynamics impact or shape their experience?

How did health and medical factors impact or shape their experience?

How did age impact or shape their experience?

What are memorable messages you have received about motherhood? A memorable message is any message (could be a phrase or a story) that has a long-lasting impact on its recipient.

Example follow-ups:

What messages have you received from family?

What messages have you received from friends?

What messages have you received from media/society?

Thinking about these stories that you just shared, what other stories about motherhood have you been exposed to?

Example follow-ups:

How have non-parental family members and friends talked about experiencing motherhood?

What stories from media do you think of when you think about motherhood?

Why have these stories & messages been memorable?

How do you feel these have impacted your perceptions of motherhood?

Conceptualizing Mothering Plans

The second set of questions will ask you about your conceptualizations of your mothering/parenting plans.

What do you envision being your parenting story? Do you plan to have children, and why or why not?

Example follow-up:

If yes, what do you want your pregnancy/birthing experience to be?

Are there any challenges or advantages you foresee in your parenting journey that were not present for your parents?

Example follow-up:

How do you imagine your different identities will impact your experience with motherhood?

Thinking about the stories you shared, how have they shaped the ideas you have for your future?

Example follow-up:

How have these stories resonated with you over time?

Do you feel they are applicable to your life and experiences? Why or why not?

Thinking about the memorable messages you shared, how have they shaped the ideas you have for your future?

Example follow-up:

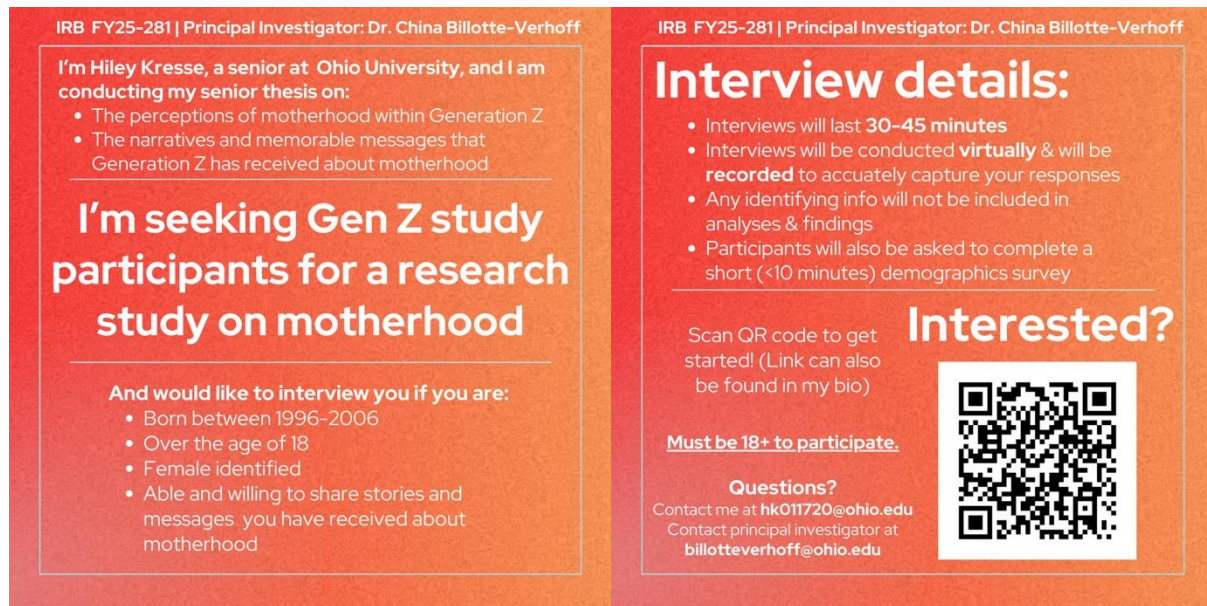
How have these messages resonated with you over time?

Do you feel they are applicable to your life and experiences? Why or why not?

At the beginning of this interview, I asked you about your definition of motherhood. Would you change anything about this definition after our discussion?

Appendix B: Recruitment Materials

Preview Instagram Post



Caption:

Female Identified Members of Gen-Z: I'd like to interview you for my senior thesis.

You must be 18+ and fit all of the criteria on the first slide. Scan the QR code or fill out the link in my bio and I will get in touch with you to schedule an interview. If you have any questions, please reach out to the email on the slides. Please share with anyone who may be interested.

I've been studying motherhood for a year and a half, with my research culminating in this senior thesis, the product of which will be an academic paper. With this research I hope to provide better understanding of the communicated factors that lead to perceptions of and decisions related to motherhood within Generation Z.

Recruitment Email:

Hello!

Thank you for expressing your interest in the Narratives and Memorable Messages of Motherhood study; my name is Hiley Kresse, and I am the student researcher conducting this study. The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of the communicated factors that lead to perceptions of, and decisions related to motherhood within Generation Z. Should you choose to participate, your total participation will include 1) taking a demographics survey, completion of which should take no longer than 10 minutes, and 2) a 30–45-minute virtual interview. This interview will consist of questions about memorable messages of motherhood, narratives of motherhood, choices related to motherhood, and perceptions of motherhood.

I have attached the consent form, which goes more into depth about the participation process and your rights throughout the process. I have also attached the link to a Qualtrics survey, which you will need to fill out before doing your interview. This survey includes the consent form at the beginning and the brief demographics survey once you have indicated your consent. If you have any questions about this study, don't hesitate to reach out! Once you have filled out this survey, please fill out the bookings form to schedule your interview. If none of the interview times work, or if you would like to be interviewed by an alternate researcher, just reach out to this email.

Consent + Demographics Form

Bookings Form

Thank you again for expressing your interest!

Hiley

Appendix C: Codebook

Research Question 1: How do the stories of motherhood that Generation Z women have received influence (a) their perceptions of and (b) their choices regarding motherhood?

RQ1A – Perceptions of Motherhood

Section 1: Embodying/enacting motherhood – Embodying/enacting motherhood refers to all the different ways that participants conceptualized motherhood throughout interviews, this includes more normative ways of embodying motherhood, like biological and adoptive motherhood, and more discourse dependent ways of being a mother, through one’s career, other family relationships, friendships, etc.

Category/Theme	Definition/Explanation	Example(s)
Biological Motherhood	<p>Many participants discussed motherhood as a partially biological experience, where being pregnant and giving birth are essential to the experience.</p> <p>Biological Motherhood includes the following codes:</p> <p>“Physically gives birth”</p> <p>“Her actual kids”</p> <p>Biological thing</p> <p>Has her own kids</p> <p>Carries them</p> <p>Births them</p>	<p>“I think a lot of people like when they first think of the term motherhood. I think it automatically kind of diverts to it has to be like a biological thing. In terms of like a woman has her own kids, like she's the one that carries them, she births them, then works on that.”</p> <p>(Grace)</p> <p>“I would define or describe [motherhood] as being, kind of, just being the main caretaker</p>

	<p>Biological kid</p> <p>Biological mother</p> <p>Having a kid</p> <p>Physically gives birth</p>	<p>for a child. And identifying I think as a mother in that role. I see it as being both for, of course, like biological mothers...” (Robin)</p> <p>“I would absolutely like see motherhood not just as, like obviously like some person, like physically gives birth to another person, that's motherhood.” (Erica)</p>
Adoptive Motherhood	<p>Many participants discussed adoption as a way to experience motherhood and fulfill a mothering role without the biological experience.</p> <p>Adoptive Motherhood includes the following codes:</p> <p>Adopted families</p> <p>Adopt</p> <p>Adoptive</p> <p>Concept of adoption</p>	<p>“I guess if I were to define motherhood, I would say it is the choice and commitment to helping....I guess mold the, some sort of youth. So even if it's not a biological child, or even an adoptive one, it's just a way to foster the youth that. That you both choose and commit to do so.” (Jane)</p>

	Fostering	<p>“So I think one of the most like long lasting examples and like impressions [of motherhood] is my high school theater director, she was going through the process of adoption when she was my, she was fostering to adopt when she was my director.” (Nicole)</p> <p>“The mother that I was raised by is my adopted mother.” (Margaret)</p> <p>“I don't think it automatically has to relate to that (biology) because you know there are so many people who cannot have kids and then you know, they adopt and like they still go through like the ups and downs and the joys of motherhood.” (Grace)</p>
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<p>Discourse Dependent Motherhood</p>	<p>Beyond motherhood in the domestic sphere, several participants discussed motherhood as something they do, or plan to, embody in other ways. This was seen in how participants discussed taking on mother roles in their career, their familial relationships, other interpersonal relationships, and through caring for other living things like dogs and plants.</p> <p>Discourse dependent includes the following codes:</p> <p>School teacher</p> <p>Academic advisor</p> <p>Profession</p> <p>Trip leader</p> <p>Mother situation</p> <p>English education</p> <p>Through profession</p> <p>Oldest sibling</p> <p>Siblings as kids</p>	<p>“I think that you could be a maternal figure to so many children, whether it's through your profession..” (Jane)</p> <p>“I am a trip leader, so I lead lots of groups of people in very intimate situations in the back country and things like that, and I think, you know, it's one of the first situations that I am kind of put in that mother situation, I guess, or mother role.” (Brook)</p> <p>“I am, my major is English education, so I will be a teacher and right now my image is that those are kind of my kids.” (Kay)</p> <p>“She was also a school teacher, so I think there's a lot of like,</p>
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	<p>“Fun aunt”</p> <p>Younger brother</p> <p>Older siblings</p> <p>Guiding siblings</p> <p>Cousins</p> <p>Nieces</p> <p>Nephews</p> <p>Dog mom</p> <p>Plant mom</p> <p>Mom friend</p> <p>Mentors</p> <p>“Bonus mom”</p> <p>Babysitter</p>	<p>crossover of, like being a mother of, like, small children and then also being a fourth-grade teacher.” (Erica)</p> <p>“Something I left out too is like being an older sister, there's a lot of times where I really wanted to step up and guide my siblings, and I I took on a little bit of that parental role.” (Nichole M).</p> <p>“It doesn't stop me from, you know embodying motherhood in other ways. You know, I have a a younger brother that I love to take care, I love to take care of my friends. I love to take care of, I take care of people and mother people in other ways” (Brook).</p>
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		<p>“Because I was, so I'm the oldest of the siblings. So motherhood to me was always something that I've considered like a natural part of my life because I felt like I was. I mean I would call my siblings my kids because I felt like they were that sometimes.” (Erica)</p> <p>“Cause I think a lot of people see motherhood in their mentors or people that care for them.” (Brook)</p> <p>“I say this all the time, I'm a dog mom. Because I do have a dog, the love of my life.” (Grace)</p> <p>“I think kin was a good word and people you consider to be your kin 'cause you can even</p>
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		<p>say, like people are plant moms and dog moms. And I think like again, even the even when we see women who are not wanting to be mothers, they still want to care for something and I feel like we see that come out through their friendships or, you know, caring for plants or caring for, you know, their animals or caring for their, like, really deeply involved in you know, social organizations, and they care deeply about other people.”(Erica)</p> <p>“Now I’m starting to think that motherhood comes up in a lot of different ways. Like being a babysitter I love. And those kids that I watch are, you know, I I practice everything that I you know, everything that I</p>
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		<p>talked about here. I try to put that into practice when I am watching the kiddos that I babysit for and like seeing you know what this would be like and having some practice at it.”</p> <p>(Light).</p> <p>“...she's taken on the role of stepmom. But it's also, they've also coined like the term like bonus mom, because that family dynamic...it's very much they do everything together.”</p> <p>(Grace)</p>
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Section 2: Understanding motherhood - Going hand-in-hand with embodying motherhood, understanding motherhood relates to how participants understand motherhood as both something they can define for themselves and as something that is defined for them by cultural expectations.

Category/Theme	Definition/Explanation	Example(s)
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Understanding by Mothers/Motherhood as Social Feeling	<p>Motherhood as social feeling refers to the diversity of motherhood situations and the overarching social feeling that connects motherhood situations. This social feeling is fluid and allows for mothers to define motherhood for themselves based on what they understand as being best for them.</p> <p>Motherhood as Social Feeling includes the following codes:</p> <p>“more of a feeling”</p> <p>“all sorts of mothers”</p> <p>Encompasses everybody</p> <p>Different ways</p> <p>Expanded</p> <p>Expressed differently</p> <p>Complex</p> <p>Plethora</p> <p>Isn’t an exact definition</p>	<p>“I would see motherhood as more of like, a a social feeling of community.” (Brook)</p> <p>“I define it as a parent taking an active role in their child's life. Not necessarily, meaning that that's the person who gave birth to them, but someone who takes a nurturing, caring role in their child's life. And makes an impact on that child in a positive light.” (Nicole)</p> <p>“I think a lot of women out there aren't able to have children of their own, whether that's by choice or you know, a medical thing or whatever, and that's a journey that they're on, but that absolutely does not mean make them less of a maternal figure to people out</p>
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		<p>there. And so I just think that my definition kind of encompasses everybody and includes all the women out there who want to be a mother figure, whether that's through, you know, laboring and taking care of their own children or others.” (Jane)</p> <p>“With what I've heard and how I understand it, and obviously it involves a lot of care and compassion towards children of your own, whether that be biological or adoptive. But I feel like it can also be expanded to include, like taking care of children as a whole. Like for instance, if you're like a daycare teacher, or you're involved in like, let's say maybe like charity. And if that</p>
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		<p>involves taking care of either children or also maybe vulnerable populations, maybe even the elderly, I feel like that could be included.” (Jane Doe)</p> <p>“Kind of, again, going back to like my my hometown was, you know, different in that way, but like there were a lot of people who were active in my life and took on maternal rules at times who definitely were not related to me, and there were a lot of people who, like again, lived with grandparents. But like they're only related to one grandparent.” (Nichole M)</p> <p>“I think just seeing how everybody has kind of crafted their own sense of what motherhood is in their life, and</p>
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		<p>finding individuals that aren't just, you know, their biological parents, I think is a really beautiful thing...It can come in so many different forms. In different people and how it's expressed by different people, through different people is not going to be the same.” (Grace)</p> <p>“I mean looking back and thinking after we've talked about it, I I would say you know, I definitely have like a you know, strength in motherhood is more on my mind now and just all of the strong parts about it and you know how tough mothers are, that comes to mind more now. But I I still would agree with I think I said this earlier, but that motherhood is complex and</p>
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		there isn't maybe an exact definition that we can all follow... But you know, I would still agree that motherhood is, you know, can be a plethora of things.” (Brook)
Understanding for Mothers/Social Expectations	<p>Social expectations refers to the expectations and pressure that are put on the mothering role, which includes participant accounts of motherhood versus fatherhood expectations.</p> <p>Social Expectations includes the following codes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social expectations Fatherhood expectations Mother expectations “What you should do” “Big thing in society” “Way more expectations for mother” Different expectations 	<p>“My first thought of motherhood is just the identity and the amount of social expectations that are placed upon that label.” (Nicole D)</p> <p>“I think that a lot of motherhood is influenced by fatherhood in a way, and I think that's just really telling of again, like society and how we live in like a patriarchy. Like, I'm not trying to, like, get all again like political in a sense, but I think that that is something that really plays a role because even when it's times where I think that</p>

	<p>“People expect them to”</p> <p>Pressure to be perfect</p> <p>Traditional</p>	<p>fathers are absent, I think that there's still way more expectation for that mother to, to have it together than it is for that father to even show up for, like a visitation.” (Nichole M)</p> <p>“Yeah. And like what you should do with your baby. Like, this is a big thing in society, is breastfeeding right? And I personally did not breastfeed, but my whole pregnancy, I, that's something I did go back and forth on.</p> <p>And the only reason I went back and forth on is because social media, is because society makes you feel like if you're not breastfeeding your baby, then you're not giving them the best nutrients they can get.</p> <p>You're not, you're not doing</p>
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		<p>what's best for your baby.”</p> <p>(Louise)</p> <p>“First off, just because I, like moms can have a lot of pressure to constantly be perfect...” (Mel)</p> <p>“Well, something else I find interesting about motherhood is the way that it's not talked about in the same way that fatherhood is. Motherhood comes with a different slew of expectations that fatherhood does not. Fatherhood doesn't necessarily always include the mental and emotional aspects or maturity that motherhood does.</p> <p>It's more so like the financial, the grounding. And motherhood that's is something</p>
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		<p>so often talked about is like being something of strength, but it's not recognized in a substantive way.” (Nicole D)</p> <p>“So I think that a lot of people see mothers as pulling a lot of the emotional weight, and fathers as pulling a lot of the physical weight.” (Brook)</p> <p>“So he was he was out of the home quite a bit of the time. And I do remember that, especially when I was younger, as I got a little older, he was around more because he retired from farming, but he was still kind of out and about and he did, I guess in terms of housework, like the traditional male things that you would do if that makes sense. So he</p>
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		<p>would like, mow mow the lawn. He would fix like, like I guess fix any like vehicle malfunctions. Anything that had to be done like outside he would do and my mother would stay inside the home. And so she would do things like the cooking, cleaning, laundry. He never did any of that. I've never seen him do that once actually, if he had to eat, he would go out to eat. I don't. I don't even think he knows how. So in that sense, there was kind of that expectation of like you know, I guess men and women have their role in the home and it just is more fluid if people abide by those expectations.” (Jane Doe)</p>
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Motherhood/Fatherhood	Motherhood/fatherhood	“My dad was absent a lot of the
Partnership	<p>partnership refers to the ways that participants conceptualized the partnership between parents. For some participants, this was viewed as a partnership where each parent pulled weight in their own way, but for some participants this was viewed as a lack of partnership. This theme contributes to understandings of motherhood created for and not by mothers.</p>	<p>time, so my brain really separated motherhood and fatherhood into like two very gendered camps which I'm trying to separate, but like my mom, was a stay-at-home mom. She taught me crafting, she taught me all these things and my dad was he only, like, did sports with me.” (Nicole)</p> <p>“So my dad was in the picture. It was a little different for me because I had a learning</p>
	Motherhood/Fatherhood	disability that affected majority
	Partnership includes the following codes:	of my life. My mom really handled all of that. She was the
	Motherhood vs. Fatherhood	one who always went to me and
	Gender roles	my brother’s school meetings.
	Mother roles	She was there when we were
	Father roles	filling out paperwork about
	Absent father	what to do with my disability,

	Supportive	and my dad really wasn't. He
	Present	just kind of let her handle my
	"Take some of the reins"	brother and I in the educational
	Worked from home	system like he handled like
	Stay-at-home mom	extracurriculars and work. My
	"Dad's the fun parent"	mom is a stay-at-home mom if
	"Better with the chaos"	that clears things up." (Kay)
	Family dynamics	
	Lack of partnership	"My dad was completely
		involved in everything and
		really really helped out. I don't
		think that she ever felt like she
		was doing on her own. And I
		think that in choosing a partner,
		she made sure that she was
		going to marry someone, have
		children with someone that
		would be there to help her and
		to be supportive." (Rosie)
		"But then when my dad came
		in, and it kind of became more,
		it just it became a little bit

		<p>different to navigate because now she had like let him kind of like step into fatherhood and like, let him take some of the reins, but then at the same time, they still hadn't known each other for that long...So I I think that it it definitely it was kind of weird because on one hand it was a big weight off of her shoulders. Just again, [we] had really intense health needs and so it, it was better when we were younger to have like one parent working and then one parent at home and it was really hard for her when she was a single mom because she like, if [we] got sick, she would have to take days off work, but then she would be struggling to pay bills. And so I it, I think it definitely like, took it like it</p>
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		<p>was able to, like help her kind of relax a little bit and take some of that pressure off, but then at the same time I I just, I don't think that she. I I think that she had just been through so much that it was kind of hard to let that happen at the same time too. So I think that while my dad was able to take some pressure off, she still kept a lot of it.” (Mel)</p> <p>“She did have my father. My father was, they were married in my life, still currently. She worked a full time job on top of being a mother who struggled between taking all of her kids to sporting events and she kind of did it all. Yeah, my dad was there.</p> <p>But when it came to all like the</p>
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		<p>doctor's appointments and the sports and practices like Mom was on it.” (Louise)</p> <p>“What I remember is, you know, dad's the fun parent, you know? So if you want money or you want to go do something fun or something that you know that your mom would probably be more nervous about you doing, or more likely to say no. Like you go to Dad and when it comes to being comforted and have needing someone to talk to, it's it's mom.” (Louise)</p> <p>“He has always been, like, super caring, so if anything, it was like mom. And this is actually how they like self-describe it as well too, like Mom is really good with like</p>
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		<p>newborns and like babies. And</p> <p>Dad is really good at like</p> <p>toddler and kind of beyond.</p> <p>Mom likes to like control things</p> <p>and stuff like that. So, like with</p> <p>a newborn, you know you can</p> <p>pretty much, you know, they</p> <p>don't do anything besides sleep.</p> <p>And you can control every part</p> <p>of their day. I think Dad was</p> <p>better with the chaos of kids</p> <p>where they want random things</p> <p>and they, you know, they get</p> <p>mad for random reasons. So</p> <p>yes, Dad was always a very</p> <p>much a strong part of our lives.</p> <p>He actually worked from home</p> <p>so if we were ever sick or</p> <p>things like that, he would be the</p> <p>one taking care of us. 'Cause it</p> <p>was way easier for him to come</p> <p>pick us up instead of mom.</p> <p>Who was, you know, a teacher</p>
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		<p>like you can't just, like, get up and leave your class. If your kid's sick." (Erica)</p> <p>"And I think that everyone, everyone in my family had the skew of. It's really better to do it with two people. Which I feel like, I don't know kind of sounds rude to single mothers, but from my biological mother at least, the idea was that it was really hard for her because her biological mother, like, couldn't couldn't step up at times. And then she had no one."</p> <p>(Margaret)</p>
Support System	Support system refers to the way participants described the larger support networks for mothers that they have observed. The expectations placed upon the support system	<p>"So she was very supported. By not just my dad, her husband, but by other figures in our lives, like her parents were always very, very supportive with me, and motherhood has always</p>

	<p>help to create expectations for mothers, and understanding and experiencing motherhood was different based on how present and involved one's support system is.</p> <p>Support System includes the following codes:</p> <p>Grandma</p> <p>"It takes a village"</p> <p>Resources</p> <p>Supportive</p> <p>"Had more help"</p>	<p>kind of been like it takes a village in our family. So that was just kind of what motherhood was for her. It was very supportive, it was very connected..." (Nicole D)</p> <p>"She definitely also had more help this time around. My paternal grandmother decided to move in temporarily just to help her get kind of back into routine." (Jane)</p> <p>"And then I know afterwards she had to get a C section and recovery was not the easiest there and then I know that for me, my grandma had to like move in for a period of time and like full time, take care of my mom because I think that she had 14 weeks of preterm</p>
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		<p>labor...She was the one who, like, stepped in and was taking care of my mom when she was pregnant.” (Mel)</p> <p>“And then I have a friend group where I was the second one to have children and the rest of our friends don't. And that was kind of my friend group that we always hung out with every weekend, and we went on vacations even and they, most of my friends, I'm gonna say they've understood. They come to me. They have no problem coming over and my understanding my baby is here, you know, or I might have to tend to my baby and not be able to hang out, plans might change last minute. But no, I was not the first and I think that made it</p>
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		<p>also easier for me to transition into being a mother when you have other people that can relate near you or obviously being a first-time mother like you're gonna have questions all the time...So I am grateful that I wasn't the first and I do have those resources to rely on.”</p> <p>(Louise)</p>
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Section 4: Motherhood as Identity Loss – Motherhood as identity loss refers to all the different ways participants viewed motherhood as a sacrifice and loss of personal wants/needs.

Category/Theme	Definition/Explanation	Example(s)
Sacrifice	Sacrifice refers to the way that participants discussed motherhood and sacrifice as being intertwined. Many participants discussed how maternal figures have displayed sacrifice to them, whether it be in media or in interpersonal relationships.	<p>“Yeah. So my perception of motherhood is like giving your all to your kid. And that was definitely, I think the perception that my my own mother was going into motherhood with, which was like, you're not yourself anymore, you're more like there</p>

	<p>Sacrifice includes all the following codes:</p> <p>Limiting</p> <p>“Life becomes limited”</p> <p>“No win situation”</p> <p>Inevitable sacrifice</p> <p>“Limits freedom”</p> <p>“Sacrifice of your own needs”</p> <p>“Never saw her enjoy things for herself”</p> <p>“Sacrifice of mother’s happiness”</p> <p>“Sacrifice required”</p> <p>“Giving your all to your kids”</p> <p>Life revolved around us</p> <p>Very taxing</p>	<p>to support your child, like your job in life is now to support your kid.” (Marie)</p> <p>“If I think of anything, I would add a component of sacrifice to motherhood.</p> <p>And I I feel like a lot of it is very sacrificial of one's own interests and I feel like I, I do have like a lot of I don't know. I feel like it's really admirable work and I do have a lot of respect. Like I said, I feel like there's some air of uncertainty and like, anxiety surrounding it.” (Jane Doe)</p> <p>“But largely I feel like her life did revolve around me and others that she was taking care of, or my father. And so. I feel like I never really saw her</p>
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		<p>enjoy things for herself.</p> <p>She really was almost out of beck and call for people who she loved...” (Jane Doe)</p> <p>“And so she really just, her entire lives revolved around, her entire life revolved around us in a way.</p> <p>And so that's what I mean when I say I think we took advantage of that at a lot of times.”</p> <p>(Nichole M)</p> <p>“I feel like mothers they have to, it, like they, I think there is a lot of like sacrifice required of them, just especially like sometimes women like have to like step away from their careers to be mothers and stuff like that. And also just like pregnancy and that like it's</p>
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		very taxing, so I definitely think sacrifice too.” (Mel)
Identity	<p>Identity refers to the way participants viewed motherhood as an identity factor. Many participants discussed the idea that once you are a mother, that’s all that you are, and conceptualized motherhood identity as being limiting. Other participants, however, discussed this identity as something that is important for them to inhabit.</p> <p>Identity includes all the following codes:</p> <p>“Big part of our identities”</p> <p>Naming traditions</p> <p>“Mother’s identity is lost”</p> <p>“Life revolves around them”</p> <p>“Only seen as a mom”</p> <p>“Big part of our identities”</p>	<p>“And so also with what I’ve, with what I’ve experienced with with kind of navigating the dating scene here is a lot of men really want to have that like. What they want their, their their name passed down, so to speak and so a lot of the times I feel like a mother's identity is even lost because children resume their fathers, especially like your last name is kept and there's some naming traditions and that involves my culture and faith in other countries that are also Eastern Orthodox is that like you're you're named after your father. Like my, my first name is essentially my father's name is just a feminized version of it. And then</p>

		<p>obviously when my last name is my father's too. So everything I feel like even with all the sacrifice some mothers give to raise their children, I feel like identity.</p> <p>Isn't even passed down, and I feel like a lot of respect is even held more towards their fathers just because, like you carry their name and their culture. Like even the last name...it's not from a country that my mother is from, and so even though I speak like a different language than my last name, that would indicate. There's kind of like, I guess you're just automatically assumed to be everything that your father is, even though your mother was the one that was around to</p>
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		<p>teach you everything that you know.” (Jane Doe)</p> <p>“Cause, I think both of us know, this is like a big part of our lives and a big part of our identities. So I think that that makes this like kind of in between part of where like actually becoming a parent or becoming a mom and the situation is scary because it's like this is something that everyone's always expected me to do. And I want to do it, like I so genuinely want to do it. But it's scary 'cause. It's like, what if that doesn't happen?... And even though I want it so much for myself, it's like...if it didn't happen, like, what does that mean?” (Erica)</p>
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		<p>“I think that there's other ways to connect with people on a human level, but again, I think that ties into the loss of identity. You kind of forget who you are, what your interests are, and then the next thing you know. You're you're all consumed by the idea of just being a mother, which don't get me wrong, is a huge part of that identity and and very important one at that but I think it kind of can make people forget how to connect with other people. Outside of the fact that they're a mom.”</p> <p>(Jane)</p> <p>“One last thing to jot down that I'm sure you've heard and are going to hear and know is just the idea of like with all the current like political uncertainty</p>
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		<p>and almost like regressiveness</p> <p>in terms of reproductive</p> <p>care...But I I think that's</p> <p>another thing that is sending</p> <p>messages to women about</p> <p>whether being a mother is an, is</p> <p>something that that's all you</p> <p>are, you know, or if you still get</p> <p>to be a whole person and have a</p> <p>child.” (Robin)</p>
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Section 5: Motherhood as Choice – Motherhood as choice refers to the way that participants discussed choice as something integral to motherhood.

Category/Theme	Definition/Explanation	Examples
Choice	<p>This theme refers to the way</p> <p>that participants conceptualized</p> <p>choice as something integral</p> <p>and essential to the motherhood</p> <p>experience. Some participants</p> <p>described motherhood</p> <p>specifically as a choice, and</p> <p>some participants discussed a</p> <p>lack of choice they have</p>	<p>“Which I'm really conflicted</p> <p>about because a lot of times</p> <p>when we're on trips and I'm</p> <p>with a male co-lead, I, they</p> <p>often refer to us as like mom</p> <p>and Dad, which is really</p> <p>confusing sometimes because,</p> <p>you know, we are doing the</p> <p>same things and we're in the</p>

	<p>observed in personal experience</p> <p>and in media narratives,</p> <p>specifically narratives around abortion. Lack of choice was something that many participants tied to feelings of conflict and expressed that a lack of choice impedes the ability to be a good mother. Other participants also discussed more choice as something that bolsters the ability to be a good mother.</p> <p>Choice includes the following codes:</p> <p>Lack of choice</p> <p>“Given rather than chosen:</p> <p>Choice of motherhood</p> <p>Pro-choice</p> <p>Forced</p> <p>Reproductive rights</p> <p>More choices</p>	<p>same role yet you know if I am being more empathetic or compassionate or feminine, I am always dubbed in the mother role.... I love to be a compassionate leader and I love being a leader, but it conflicts me because it's being you know, given to me rather than chosen.” (Brook)</p> <p>“I think that it this is just an extra emphasis on why it's so important to be able to have the choice of motherhood, I know in recent political events there's been a lot of a discourse about reproductive rights and what that looks like.</p> <p>But I just want to make my stance incredibly clear, I don't think that anybody who is forced to be a mother will be a</p>
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		<p>good one, and I stand on that and it's not the woman's fault. She should not be villainized for not being a good mother because she was forced in that position.” (Jane)</p> <p>“I don't know if there's any specific stories, I think right now just because of what's going on in the world, abortion comes to mind a lot, of how much I take in about abortion rights and how much I support abortion rights. So I feel like motherhood and media that is, the right to choose to be a mother is the main thing.” (Rosie)</p> <p>“I think that there's a lot of interesting media coming out now about, you know the</p>
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		<p>option of motherhood. And there's a lot of more, a lot of choices for women now that there wasn't in the past, and so seeing people express those in the media like the, the nuclear family not being like the main system of child rearing I think is is pretty big, and different family structures.” (Marie)</p> <p>“If I were to define motherhood, I would say it is the choice and commitment to helping... I guess mold the, some sort of youth.” (Jane)</p>
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RQ1B – Choices Regarding Motherhood

Desire	<p>The theme "desire" refers to the way participants described wanting children as a choice based partially on if they want/desire children at all. For those who don't want children, some described this as something due to their personality, while others described motherhood as something that limits their career/life opportunities. For those who do want children, they describe it as something they have wanted/desired for a very long time</p> <p>Desire includes all the following codes:</p> <p>"Not something I long for"</p> <p>"Never really been comfortable with"</p> <p>Personality</p>	<p>"I do not currently I do not plan to have children... It's also just not something I long for, I've never really been comfortable with, I guess. I think raising kids is a lot of pressure that I I don't want necessarily, but me as a teacher I would, I would love to look out for kids, but I don't think having those is on the table for me." (Kay)</p> <p>"Well, my decision for my future has been informed not just by like personal wants of me knowing that I'm just like I don't think I have the right personality for motherhood, that I don't think I would enjoy it..." (Nicole D)</p> <p>"I think it's just like the personal preference that I've</p>
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	<p>Personal preference</p> <p>Known my entire life</p> <p>Intuitive feeling</p> <p>Want to be a mom</p>	<p>developed, just like again being almost in my mid 20s. I have no desire to settle down like have kids with anybody, do any of that.” (Grace)</p> <p>“But ever since I kind of hit puberty, I’ve never wanted children. I just never had that desire.” (Nicole)</p> <p>“I think I’ve thought about my kids for my entire life. Like I’ve always known that I’m, that I want to be a mom.” (Rosie)</p> <p>“I mean, for me personally, I’ve kind of always had that intuitive feeling that I wanted to be a mom.” (Jane)</p>
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Health/Identity Factors	<p>The sub-theme health/identity factors refers to the way participants described their choice to have children as being impacted by personal ideas about their health risks, pregnancy, or identity factors (queerness).</p> <p>Health Risks includes the following codes:</p> <p>Health issues</p> <p>Genetics</p> <p>Endometriosis</p> <p>Chronic pain</p> <p>“Not be able to give the nurturing love and attention that a child deserves”</p> <p>Don’t want to risk</p> <p>“Could end badly for the both of us”</p> <p>Queer</p> <p>High risk pregnancies</p>	<p>“This is again like this is something I'm like very upfront about is that I personally don't want to have kids. I don't think that stems from like I like the ideals I have of motherhood, I think that stems more from like health issues and just like personal preference, so to speak.” (Grace)</p> <p>“My chronic pain also like I know I wouldn't be able to keep up with a child.... I like kids and I think they are very nice, but they just drain me and I know I would not be able to give the nurturing love and attention that a child deserves.” (Nicole)</p> <p>“So, first off the bat, that's one reason why I don't wanna get</p>
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	Postpartum depression	pregnant and have children is
	IVF	even if I do survive and the
	“Wrench in the plan”	child survives, there is a chance
	“Physical ability to have kids”	I could pass on that gene to
	Scares me	them and that's.
	PCOS	I feel that that own hate like
	Ideal pregnancy	hatred towards my mother for
	High risk pregnancy	the fact that she knowingly
	Birthing situations	passed that down to me.”
	Natural birth	(Nicole)
	Doula	
	Home birth	“And another thing with
	Hospital birth	motherhood is again the
	Very routine	underlying health issues. As
	Lack of control	I've recently discovered, some
	Fear	health issues that I've had
	Older pregnancy	myself, you know, discovering
	Horror stories	it as such a late age just made it
	Something going wrong	a little harder to cope with it, I
	IVF	think. But I think it's also
	Preeclampsia	something I don't want to risk
	Health history	or put myself at risk just to
	Bed rest	bring somebody else into this

	Wasn't dreamy	world because it could end
	"Pregnancy is awesome"	badly for the both of us."
	"Coolest thing ever"	(Grace)
	C-section	
	Epidural	"I will say just with the whole
	Medical professionals	queer thing, it does kind of
	Birth complications	throw a bit of a wrench in that
	Traumatizing	plan. Just I never. I'm not super
	Nervous	fond of the idea of having
		biological kids at all. Just like
		my mom had really high risk
		pregnancies, a lot of the women
		my family tend to, and I also
		think that I, I feel like I'd
		probably get postpartum pretty
		bad, just like knowing myself
		and how I react to things, and I
		know that's it's not as simple as
		just that, but I I just I I feel like
		I've always, like gotten that
		feeling. So I I don't know that I
		want to have biological kids. I
		always thought that I wanted to

		<p>adopt, but at the same time with LGBT stuff, it is just kind of like not really knowing always what that future looks like, and it like, I don't know current administration changes does make me a little bit worried about like the ability of like two women to adopt children.”</p> <p>(Mel)</p> <p>“And then when I was 16 I was diagnosed with a condition that will make fertility nearly impossible for me without any sort of treatment. So in the future, theoretically I could have a child by IVF or something, but getting pregnant naturally is kind of out of the books for me. So my partner and I have talked pretty in depth about what we plan to do</p>
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		<p>when the time comes that we want to have children and neither of us plan on having a child anytime soon, Soon, but in our late 20s, early 30s, we would absolutely love to adopt.” (Jane)</p> <p>“I think like a lot of other young women nowadays, I I do have like issues with, you know, PCOS and hormones and, you know, period stuff. So that's something that, you know, scares me about, like, my physical ability to have kids myself. But I also really you know, open to the options of like maybe adopting kids or figuring out how to have kids in other ways.” (Brook)</p>
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		<p>“I think when it comes to, like motherhood and a biological sense and giving birth and things like that, a lot of women don't feel control of that.</p> <p>Specifically, my aunt is pregnant right now with her second pregnancy and she has a lot of fear going into, you know, birthing situations because she feels like, you know, being in a hospital takes away power from her and, you know, doing things that she doesn't want to do and to very scary journey. So she had one daughter the first time, and she's pregnant with twins now.</p> <p>So the first time she did a natural at home birth and now she has to go to the hospital because of medical reasons. So I think she just feels a loss of</p>
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		<p>control for her body, you know, it's like giving up everything for her children now because they're the most important thing for her now.” (Brook)</p> <p>“So I think that would be three things, so definitely food, therapy, and exercise. In terms of Labor, I'm not very open to the idea of doing something natural labor. I don't think I could handle it. So I do believe that I want to be in the hospital and have an epidural, and I'd be open to even the idea of a C-section. I just don't think that labor will be my strong suit and in order to keep me healthy and keep my baby delivered healthy, I'm I'm wanting to, you know, be surrounded by medical professionals and I do</p>
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		<p>think, however, I would kind of want a doula or or something like that to kind of walk me through it mentally. But other than that, like the physical idea of labor, I think I would definitely want to have the hospital birth.” (Light)</p> <p>“So I I had a very unexpected birth because, well, you're never ready to give birth. You know when you're pregnant, like you know it's going to happen, but you're never actually ready, and you're you're ready, even in the moment. But I think when I had that log last ultrasound and I knew that meant I was going to be induced it kind of like changed everything. It just like clicked like it's really</p>
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		<p>happening and when we went to be induced we had the issue where her heart rate was dropping.</p> <p>Every time I would, you know, get up and walk or any time I would do any type of activity basically. If I would turn over in the bed. If I'd get up, her heart rate was dropping in. We weren't really sure why, so that really put a hold on things and I they actually gave me something to stop the induction.</p> <p>For 26 hours.... And then I had her, and it turns out she was just she was very healthy. She was just a tiny baby... Now I will say that for for a couple months that changed my thought of like maybe I don't want more kids because when</p>
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		<p>you're going through that, it's like traumatizing a little bit not knowing, you know, what the outcome was going to be.”</p> <p>(Louise)</p> <p>“Like she gave birth vaginally every single time, she never had a C- section. I mean, I think everything was pretty much on time. None of us were in the NICU, so like she really had, like, really ideal pregnancies like she was. She was never high risk, even when she had my youngest brother, the one that was Sunnyside up. She was 38, and even then it was. She had a really or 36 one of those. And she had she again all of her pregnancies were just super easy. Never high risk, never traumatic deliveries. Yeah. So</p>
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		<p>she always she just really loved the experience of, like, being pregnant... So yeah, definitely have multiple working like ideas about pregnancy. I'm really just hoping for like a very healthy. Like I said, hopefully, like my momma pregnancies like low key, very like, easy, gentle as far as birth, I really I'm fine with an epidural.</p> <p>My mom got an epidural all four times..... I don't think I'm going to try to go natural for any of them. I'm really tiny, so I'm like 5 foot one and my mom is definitely taller and like bigger than me, so I'm a little nervous that I'll eventually need a C-section.” (Erica)</p>
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		<p>“Pregnancy scares me a lot. It's really freaky, but, I think as far as a pregnancy plan, I would hope that I could be set up to be as healthy as I can be. Have access to medical care as much as I need and financially not have that be a major stressor. And as far as like a birthing plan, I envision just a pretty normal hospital plan. I know there's a lot of information about, like laying down, not being the best method, even though that's how we've always done it like in the US and like home births and everything, but I kind of envision a pretty normal plan.” (Rosie)</p> <p>“There I guess I do have like some fears about pregnancy itself too. So you know, I guess</p>
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		<p>the horror stories of like something going wrong or I don't know. I just feel like pregnancy just seems almost horrifying and I I guess it's commendable to women who can do it several times, but it's I guess it's an anxiety of mine.”</p> <p>(Jane Doe)</p>
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Unsafe World	<p>The theme “unsafe world” refers to the way participants described their choice of motherhood as being informed by the social/political state of the world.</p> <p>Unsafe World includes the following codes:</p> <p>Environmental policy</p> <p>Unsafe world</p> <p>Difficult to explain</p> <p>Queer</p> <p>Trans</p> <p>Very scary</p> <p>“Don’t feel comfortable bringing a child into this world”</p> <p>Climate change</p> <p>“State our world is in right now”</p> <p>Reproductive healthcare</p> <p>Resources</p>	<p>“Also a part of it is just the career field I'm going into. I'm planning on going into international relations and security and part of that is environmental security and climate change. And I think that recognizing that I am not entirely happy with the direction in which our world is going, and I feel that if I were to like, personally, physically bring a child into this world that I that, I would live with guilt...the guilt that I attribute to that comes from like feeling like I would bring a child into an unsafe world in the current direction that we're going. Like environmentally policy wise, all of those different things that would be not just difficult to raise a child through. But</p>
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	<p>Defiant</p> <p>“State that our world is in right now”</p> <p>Create safe + supportive environment</p> <p>“Nation as it currently stands”</p> <p>Guilt</p> <p>Deserve better</p> <p>Roe v. Wade</p> <p>Sense of doom</p> <p>Healthcare</p> <p>Voting</p>	<p>difficult to explain to a child in a way that I think would just break my heart a lot.” (Nicole D)</p> <p>“And also just the world is very scary and I personally don't feel comfortable bringing a child into this world...I would not want to bring a child into this world because they might be queer and I know how queer people are treated, especially in this country, especially trans people in this country.” (Nicole)</p> <p>“In terms of, you know how we've seen things as of recent go with like transgender equality, just LGBTQ the community, how it's being treated, how women are being</p>
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		<p>treated right now. Having most of our like reproductive healthcare kind of taken away from us and stripped from us is definitely something I think that is steering me away a little bit just cause like I mentioned earlier, if something does go wrong, who's to say that I'm going to have the resources? To get the care that I need and to make sure that me as a person I am staying healthy, I am staying safe. And then even then, having a child if you know one day they decide that you know the body that they were born into does not fit them. And all of that, how can I guarantee that my child is going to get the care and just the care that they need without having to cross state and county lines</p>
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		<p>or even having to go to another country just to do that.”</p> <p>(Grace)</p> <p>“But I, I don't plan to have biological children because I think that I would rather adopt because all that messaging that was getting spewed out by Republicans and by people who were against Roe V Wade, I'm somebody who very much is for like abortion. Like I'm very much pro-choice and so if we're going to have these people in this world who are going to be hypocrites to me, that's like the most, like, defiant way to be a mom is to love somebody who society necessarily isn't and to kind of take on that responsibility, even though the people who claim they will do</p>
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		<p>that aren't doing that.” (Nichole M)</p> <p>“And respectfully, the state that our world is in right now, I'm not bringing any other people into it when there are people out there who deserve so much better.” (Grace)</p> <p>“And I'm honestly not too sure if I want to have like my own kids or if I would rather like foster, I think that that's a great path to go down and I know this is kind of cliché for people in my generation, but like I don't know if I like the idea of bringing another person into the world with how it is right now. So I'd rather create like a safe and supportive environment for</p>
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		<p>someone who needs it.”</p> <p>(Marie)</p> <p>“And there's a lot of queer children in the foster industry as well. And I know I could be a good parent to a younger queer child. And give them the support that I didn't have. And I would love to do that, but I don't think I could bring a child who had the potential to be queer into the nation as it currently stands.”(Nicole)</p> <p>“I take no issue with people who look at the state of the world right now and say, like they can't fathom having kids right now...There's a much larger and much more recognized like kind of impending sense of doom, where it's this feeling of, that</p>
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		<p>feeling of failure and of fear.</p> <p>And I I think for me that is probably going to be a challenge in terms of when I do find myself in a position where I would like to have children like the idea of having them and then trying to, hoping that there is a world that I think is worth giving someone to as opposed to, like sacrificing a person, if that makes sense.”</p> <p>(Robin)</p> <p>“I think just something that I'm seeing a lot lately is like women being criticized for not wanting to have children, and I think that's insane. And I think that because of where the world is and feels like it's heading as far as healthcare and women, which is super important for</p>
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		<p>pregnant women and people who want to be mothers. That's really significant to me and I completely understand why someone would be like I'm not having children. I, when I vote, I think about like the rights that my daughter will have or like. If I have a queer child, how would how would the world they live and influence them and hurt them and protect them in different ways?" (Rosie)</p>
Timing	<p>Timing refers to the shared desire to wait to have children to ensure financial and job security, or to preserve and enjoy their 20s more.</p> <p>Timing includes all the following codes:</p> <p>"You're so young"</p>	<p>"...when my husband and I were talking about having kids at first, it was like my mom and even my grandma was like, oh, you're so young, though. Like, you have so much time, and like, we're just ready for this. Like, this is what I want. Like you know, feeling like your life</p>

	<p>Young mother</p> <p>Life becomes limited</p> <p>Limits your choices</p> <p>Preparedness</p> <p>Planning</p>	<p>is going to like, I guess the the</p> <p>image I sometimes got was</p> <p>like, well, if you're a mom like</p> <p>you're. As much as my mom</p> <p>was like you don't, you don't</p> <p>have to be just a mom.</p> <p>But like, if you have kids, then</p> <p>like your life is gonna become</p> <p>so limited, I guess.” (Erica)</p> <p>“But as I got older and started</p> <p>you know, becoming an</p> <p>individual and having</p> <p>personality and becoming who</p> <p>I am, I kind of realized that</p> <p>being a mother so young takes</p> <p>away a lot of your choices and</p> <p>what you get to do so? I, you</p> <p>know, want to put off being like</p> <p>a biological mother for a while.</p> <p>I I don't think that is something</p> <p>you know, I love being a</p> <p>caretaker, but I, you know I</p>
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		<p>can't be a mother and take care of a whole child right now.</p> <p>That's something that I have to put off further in my life because it limits my freedom and it limits where I can travel to and what I can do. I love being in the outdoors and I love working and things like that. So that's something I have to put off for now, but it doesn't stop me from, you know embodying motherhood in other ways. You know, I have a a younger brother that I love to take care, I love to take care of my friends. I love to take care of, I take care of people and mother people in other ways now but you know I. Yeah, yeah, I think, that's that's kind of how I see it now.” (Brook)</p>
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		<p>“Well, I'm like, you know, I'm. I'm in my early 20s, so I don't have to, I don't plan on having them anytime soon. I feel like when I do plan to have them, I do want to be very deliberate about it. I feel like I would have a lot of anxiety surrounding it and I would want to make sure that everything goes as smoothly as possible because I feel like it's just a really big responsibility to bring in a person into this world.</p> <p>So I feel like I'd be really conscientious about having all of my ducks in a row and having, like a healthcare provider selected a home, I would want to move to an area with a credible school district.</p> <p>And I feel like a lot of I would personally put in a lot of</p>
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		planning into one and making sure that everything's kind of set up in that regard.” (Jane Doe)
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Research Question 2: What are the memorable messages that Generation Z women have received in those stories of motherhood?

Section 1: Messages About Mother/Daughter Relationship

Category/Theme	Definition/Explanation	Examples
“I’m Your Mom Not Your Friend” OR Friend Relationship	This message was one that several participants described as significant in their childhood. Messages about having a friend relationship with their mom for some informed what they viewed as the ideal type of relationship to have with their mom. For others, this messaging helped create division of parental responsibilities from being a friend, which they liked. While interpreted differently across	“A memorable phrase that just pops up in my mind is I’m your mom, not your friend. And that was definitely how she approached motherhood... As a more authoritarian and this is like kind of how both my parents were... So I was in a sorority in college, and you know, they have, like, those cute little like moms weekends. And I remember we didn't do too many of them since my college experience got

	<p>participants, this message speaks to a more robust set of expectations for mothers.</p> <p>Friend relationship includes the following codes:</p> <p>Friendship relationship</p> <p>Awkward</p> <p>Authoritarian approach to motherhood</p> <p>Missed out</p> <p>Not the role you're supposed to take on</p> <p>Doesn't act like a mom</p> <p>Connected</p> <p>Great</p>	<p>interrupted by by COVID... But she came to my senior year one and I remember feeling like it was so awkward. Because we just didn't have, like, the friendship relationship that so many other of the other girls did, even to the point like where like some girls were giving, like, a speech at a brunch and talking about, like, how her mom was like, her best friend, my mom literally leaned over and was like, well, I know you don't feel that way about me, so that's definitely been like something that I feel like I've missed in that motherhood experience and I want to. Like I miss out from other people's one like that when they talk about their mom. So yeah, like that was definitely like to me,</p>
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		<p>my mom wasn't my best friend who I tell everything to. It was like, more of the authoritarian figure." (Erica)</p> <p>"I I will say on like the whole topic of like kind of moms being like their kids, best friend. I I feel like just in my friendships, like I've noticed a lot of like different interactions like and relationships like people and their moms. And I know this is something that, like my parents personally, really don't like. So it also like, does kind of root from there, but... I I think just like that idea of like parents trying to be like their kids, best friend and then that's not like actually, the role that you're supposed to take on as a parent.</p>
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		<p>And how there is there is like a need for the different levels and for someone to like not be in charge, but like be in charge. I I think it's definitely something I noticed in some of my friends relationships. I like, one of my really close friends, she has a single mom and they, they're super close, but it's something that can come up sometimes for like her mom doesn't always act like the mom in the situation she sometimes acts like a sister.”</p> <p>“I would say as she becomes more or I guess sorry as as her children become more independent, she definitely has become more of a friend role rather than a mother role. But I mean that in the most</p>
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		<p>complementary way possible.</p> <p>Like she did her job, and now she can still stand firm on, like the commitments that she made and the, you know, she's still strict in her own ways, but she's able to let go a little bit because she's, she's like, OK, I set the foundation, like, the hard part's done. She set us up with a great moral compass. She set us up with amazing life skills.</p> <p>And now she's just kind of like, OK. I'm here if you need me, but you got the rest.” (Jane)</p> <p>“I always thought having mom and dad so close to me and age was kind of kind of great. I thought that really connected us to be able to be not that they were more like my friend, but I wore, like, relatable. I know, I</p>
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		<p>feel as though mom, my mom</p> <p>kind of approached motherhood</p> <p>in a way where of course, she</p> <p>was guiding us and helping us</p> <p>and protecting us. But she's</p> <p>been so good about having kind</p> <p>of the motherhood example that</p> <p>you sometimes kind of see on</p> <p>Instagram where you know</p> <p>moms and daughters go out and</p> <p>talk, they go to starbucks, they</p> <p>run errands at Target together.</p> <p>That's something that I've had</p> <p>ever since I was little.” (Light)</p>
<p>“Girl’s First Hater is Her</p> <p>Mother”</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Fraught Relationship</p>	<p>Fraught relationship</p> <p>encompasses different</p> <p>messages about mothers and</p> <p>daughters fighting. Usually this</p> <p>messaging was passed down</p> <p>through media and reinforced</p> <p>in the dynamics within the</p> <p>mother/daughter relationship.</p> <p>Participants described this</p>	<p>“I don't know how I would</p> <p>phrase this exactly, but I guess</p> <p>it would be the like. I think the</p> <p>phrase is like a girl's first hater</p> <p>is her mother. And again, I</p> <p>cannot emphasize enough, my</p> <p>mother was nothing but kind to</p> <p>me. But I absolutely can say, as</p> <p>the oldest daughter, there were</p>

	<p>messaging as something that made their relationship with their mother harder to navigate, especially when they were younger, pointing again towards a robust set of expectations for what mothers should and do act like.</p> <p>Fraught relationship includes the following codes:</p> <p>“A girl’s first hater is her mother”</p> <p>Projection</p> <p>Sense of control</p> <p>Falsehood</p> <p>Monstrous mother</p> <p>Demanding mother</p> <p>Matriarch</p> <p>Not realistic</p>	<p>a lot of projections placed on me based on her own life experiences.</p> <p>So whether it was comments about my body, my eating habits, It's my friends, my love life, whatever. She, even if it was well-intentioned in the grand scheme of things, it tended to kind of take a sense of control over wanting what was best for me.” (Jane)</p> <p>“Something that stuck with me growing up that I know is a falsehood. Now that I just know it's not true is something. It's the idea of not necessarily the monstrous mother, but the demanding mother, the matriarch, was something that really stuck with me when I was younger. Because my</p>
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		<p>mother comes across very cold and reserved at times. If you don't understand her and growing up, I didn't really understand her it took me awhile To understand her personality and to appreciate it. So I think that when I got to those hard ages of like 12/13/14/15. The kind of media narrative of the cruel mother, the stepmother, the mother that find that's jealous of her daughter and things like that kind of sunk in and made our relationship more fraught than it would have been.” (Nicole D)</p> <p>“I also think the media has a lot of wrong, betrayals, 'cause like there are just some instances where mothers and daughters</p>
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		just fight and fight and fight, and I don't think that's realistic.” (Kay)
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Section 2: Messages About Having Children

Category/Theme	Definition/Explanation	Examples
“You Will Change Your Mind”	<p>This theme encompasses messages that participants received that they will change their mind about having children. In some cases, these messages are pushback they got when expressing that they didn’t want kids. However, for some other cases it was a message just expressed as mothers recounted how they changed their mind.</p> <p>“You’ll change your mind” encompasses the following codes:</p> <p>“Everyone wants to be a mom”</p>	<p>“And I would bring this up and I would make off hand comments of like, oh, I don't kids and my mom would always be like, I didn't want kids. You'll change your mind. That was, that's a big message pushed on me, is you may not want kids now, but you will one day. Even though when I know in my heart and soul that I will not want kids in the future, at least children of my own... And that's like the main impression I've gotten of motherhood is, oh, you may not want children now, but you will in the future.</p>

	<p>Did not want children</p> <p>Change of heart</p> <p>Wasn't planned</p> <p>Happens when you least expect it</p> <p>When you know you'll know</p>	<p>Like everyone wants to be a mom." (Nicole)</p> <p>"So growing up, my mom did not want to have children at all. She had kind of a turbulent home life growing up in which she really struggled to, I guess feel well cared for by the adults in her life. So when it came to having kids of her own, she was just like, I really don't want to do that. It just didn't interest her in any way. And then after meeting my dad in her late teens. She kind of had a change of heart and it wasn't because he persuaded her to or anything like that. It just was a decision she came to on her own after being with him." (Jane)</p>
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<p>“Your Life is for Your Kids”</p>	<p>Going hand-in-hand with the identity loss that participants discussed in narratives, many expressed hearing messages that once they have children, their life is for the children rather than being for themselves. This message informed many ideas about when participants wanted to have children, and it steered many away from wanting children young. For one participant, the opposite message that motherhood is “not all that you are” has</p>	<p>“... it's like giving up everything for her children now because they're the most important thing for her now.” (Brook)</p> <p>“As much as my mom was like you don't, you don't have to be just a mom. But like, if you have kids, then like your life is gonna become so limited, I guess.” (Erica)</p> <p>“Something that comes to mind that I've heard from both my mother and I had a partner who</p>

	<p>empowered her to feel like having children is more of a possibility in recent years.</p> <p>“Your life is for your kids”</p> <p>includes the following themes:</p> <p>“Giving up everything for her children”</p> <p>Life becomes limited</p> <p>“Your life isn’t yours anymore”</p> <p>Traditional gender roles</p> <p>Not said about fatherhood</p> <p>“Entire life becomes your kids”</p> <p>Young parents</p> <p>“Do anything to do what’s right for your children”</p>	<p>I am no longer with, thankfully.</p> <p>That kind of stuck with me the most is I guess. Well, since my mother with with her having kind of a traditional set up with me in terms of gender roles and whatnot. She told me verbatim. I remember rather clearly that once you have a child, your life isn't yours anymore. And you live for your children. And and I had a similar message given to me by a partner that I had.”</p> <p>(Jane Doe)</p> <p>“So my parents also had kids pretty young, and I can remember being told that, like, once you become a mom, like your entire life does become your kids. And I don't know if the same necessarily always got</p>
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		<p>said about like fatherhood...”</p> <p>(Nichole Mitchell)</p> <p>“I think that I just got like this message from motherhood, that like you, like you'll do anything to, like, do what's right for your kids.” (Mel)</p> <p>“As long as you are doing everything you can. You know to, you know, clean and fed and generally happy, that child is. Mm hmm. Doing incredible, you know, like you as a mother cannot be failing if those conditions are mostly met, you know and the that, your life motherhood is part of your life, but it really isn't all of it. That's not all of who you are.”</p> <p>(Robin)</p>
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<p>“Children are Expensive”</p>	<p>Children are expensive encompasses messages about children being a big responsibility, financially and otherwise. Going hand-in-hand with the above message, this messaging again informed people’s decisions about when and how it is best to have children, and was even used by some families to create stigma about being a teen mom.</p> <p>“Children are expensive” includes the following themes:</p> <p>“Not something to be taken lightly”</p> <p>“Have a partner if you can”</p> <p>Financial support</p> <p>Great Recession</p>	<p>“Like having kids and getting to do things and activities and all those things that come with being a parent is fun, but it's maybe not something to be taken lightly. It's something. Say, you know, maybe have a partner in if you can.” (Light)</p> <p>“I don't know if it was said to me specifically or if I like, figured this out eventually, but because my parents were older like that offered a lot of financial support and that was like something that I I carried with me as like, it's not like my parents.</p> <p>Were like, don't be a Teen Mom because what if there's another Great Recession?</p> <p>But it was something like</p>
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