
THE DIGITAL GENERATION: VALUES AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT PLANNING AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

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Abstract. With the changes arising from the dynamic advancement of artificial intelligence, it is natural to observe emerging trends in the transformation of career paths, career development, and the values of young people. Although they are often referred to as the digital generation and have grown up with technology, even within Generation Z certain distinct features can be observed in relation to the rapidly developing artificial intelligence landscape. In this context, understanding the values and the specific characteristics of career development among young people becomes particularly important. For the purposes of the study, Shalom Schwartz's model of values was used, which differentiates seven value groups. The leading values among representatives of the digital generation are benevolence, self-direction, and hedonism. The results also indicate gender and age differences.

Keywords: values, career planning, generation Z

The topic of generational characteristics is not new, given the hundreds of studies that describe and examine Generation X, Generation Y, and the so-called Baby Boomers. Recently, however, scholarly interest has shifted toward the most recent cohort to enter the labor market—namely, the digital generation, also known as Generation Z. Although generational boundaries are often imprecise, it is generally accepted that the digital generation comprises individuals born between 1995 and 2012.

What most distinctly differentiates this generation from its predecessors is the fact that its members have grown up in an environment where technology is universally accessible. As is well known, the majority of contemporary changes in the world of work are linked to advances in digital technologies, which in turn influence the career development, preferences, and career-related characteristics of young people.

Generation Z is increasingly entering the labor market and shares certain similarities with the preceding generation. It is argued, however, that Generation Z is the most success-oriented cohort to date, which is likely related to globalization, accessibility, and the correspondingly wide range of opportunities. They grow up in a more economically stable environment, are more highly educated, and are more ethnically and racially diverse (Fry & Parker, 2018). At the same time, however, they are also the most anxious and depressed (American Psychological Association, 2018).

Other distinctive characteristics include the constant use of smartphones, engagement with social media, involvement in social justice movements, and a heightened focus on security. It is important to note that they frequently use online learning platforms (e.g., Duolingo, Khan Academy), which contributes to skills development but also underscores technology as an integral part of their everyday lives.

Generation Z functions competently in both the real and the virtual world and can rapidly adapt to new virtual realities, as it is the first generation born into the era of the internet rather than one that encountered it after its emergence. This generation is further characterized by a strive for an exciting career, a preference for independence, and an emphasis not on stability but on mobility, which distinguishes it from previous generations (Dolot, 2018). Other studies describe members of this generation as technologically literate, inclined toward informal and direct communication, entrepreneurial, reliable, tolerant, and less motivated by money (Gaidhani et al., 2019).

Values are of considerable research interest both to organizations and employers, and to the broader endeavor of understanding generational differences. They are inherently subjective and reflect the ways in which individuals think and act. Nevertheless, values can also shape and, to a large extent, predict behavior, attitudes, or preferences toward particular things or situations (Sagiv et al., 2017). Thus, one may assert with confidence that understanding personal values is fundamental to explaining human behavior. As a construct, values can be examined at three levels, which makes them particularly suitable for explaining work-related behavior. These levels are the individual, organizational, and national levels (Ilieva, 2009).

One of the best-known models for understanding values—validated across numerous studies conducted over several decades and in diverse sociocultural contexts—is the model developed by Shalom Schwartz (Schwartz, 1992; 1994; 2012). The model distinguishes ten value types, each defined by the underlying motivational goals that drive it (Schwartz, 2012).

Self-direction is characterized by an orientation toward independent thought and action—choice, creativity, and exploration—and derives from the need for control. *Stimulation* reflects the pursuit of excitement and the search for challenge in life; values associated with stimulation stem from the need for novelty and variety. *Hedonism* is defined by the pursuit of pleasure. *Achievement* concerns the pursuit and attainment of personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards. The defining goal of *power* is social status and prestige, as well as control and dominance over people and resources. Notably, both power and achievement are grounded in social appraisal. *Security* refers to the pursuit of safety, harmony, and stability in society, in relationships, and within the self. For some individuals, the value of security is directed toward personal protection, whereas for others it

concerns broader collective interests—for example, national or cyber security. *Conformity* pertains to the restraint of actions and impulses that might harm others or violate social norms and expectations. *Tradition* emphasizes respect for, commitment to, and acceptance of the customs and ideas upheld by one's culture. From a motivational standpoint, tradition and conformity are closely related, as both reflect adherence to socially prescribed expectations. The value of *benevolence* aims at preserving and/or enhancing the well-being of one's group and, similar to conformity, arises from the desire for effective group functioning. The final value, *universalism*, concerns understanding, tolerance, appreciation, and the protection of the welfare of all people and of nature.

Methods and Sample

The main questionnaire used in the study is based on Schwartz's theory of values, with the original instrument comprising 17 items measuring 10 value types (Lechner, Beierlein, Davidov, & Schwartz, 2022). Three additional items related to hedonism were included, as this value is underrepresented in the original questionnaire. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree"). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the full 20-item scale is $\alpha = 0.714$, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

The second questionnaire used was the Career Planning Scale developed by Gould (1979), which consists of six items (e.g., "I have a plan for my career") that together form a single dimension. Three of the items are reverse-scored (Items 1, 5, and 6). The items were again rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree"). The scale demonstrated high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = 0.89$.

The study was administered via Google Forms and included 112 participants from the digital generation. Of these, 47.3% were male and 52.7% female, resulting in a sample that is relatively balanced with respect to gender. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 27 years. For the purposes of the study, they were divided into three age groups in accordance with Super's (1973) theory of stages and substages in career development.

According to Super, within the Exploration stage—during which the self-concept is being implemented—the second substage, termed *crystallization*, occurs between ages 18 and 21 (in this study, 19–21), and is characterized by the development of a realistic self-concept among young people. By his classification, the third substage of this same stage corresponds to ages 22–24 and involves the specification of vocational choices and decisions. The third stage, *Establishment*, was also considered, specifically its first substage (ages 25–30; here, 25–27), which Super describes as a phase of *trial*, during which individuals experiment with different activities and may

change jobs in pursuit of a more satisfying work role. In the present study, 20.5% of participants fell into the first age category, 59% into the second, and 20.5% into the third.

Results

Mean scores and Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each of the seven factors. Although the alpha coefficients for the individual subscales are generally low, it should be noted that most subscales contain only two or three items. Such a limited number of items allows for the interpretation of each factor but naturally results in lower internal consistency. Overall, the values questionnaire demonstrates acceptable psychometric properties, as the overall Cronbach's alpha exceeds 0.70.

The mean scores for the individual values make it possible to establish their hierarchy and identify the predominant values among the Generation Z participants. The results indicate the highest levels for benevolence ($M = 4.661$), followed by self-direction ($M = 4.645$), and hedonism ($M = 4.565$). These findings suggest that Generation Z, in fact, exhibits strongly articulated values—contrary to the assumptions of many researchers that values within this generation are “blurred” (Table 1).

Table 1. Hierarchy of Values (Mean Scores)

Value	Mean Score	Cronbach's Alpha
Benevolence	4.661	0.625
Self-Direction	4.645	0.539
Hedonism	4.565	0.757
Universalism	4.254	0.567
Achievement	4.239	0.626
Security	3.737	0.376
Power	3.112	0.382

These values are clearly delineated and provide insight into the value priorities of the generation, as well as indicate what they are likely to seek in their work and careers. The individuals studied demonstrate a strong inclination to help and care for those close to them, as well as to treat others with kindness. In addition, they are strongly oriented toward solving their own problems independently, having time and opportunities for enjoyment, and engaging in activities that bring them pleasure. These three values—benevolence, self-direction, and hedonism—fit well with existing assumptions about this generation and represent distinguishing characteristics that may set it apart from previous generations.

Although not as strongly pronounced as the three leading values, the values of universalism ($M = 4.254$) and achievement ($M = 4.239$) are also of substantial importance. The elevated scores in these domains may, in part, be influenced by digitalization. In the case of universalism, media exposure may contribute to the internalization of messages promoting tolerance, global awareness, and care for others. Regarding achievement, the diverse opportunities made possible by globalization and digitalization may foster ambition and drive toward goal attainment.

These results challenge widespread stereotypes and expectations that Generation Z, compared with previous generations, is not oriented toward high achievement. In practice, this is not the case. Members of this generation do strive for achievement, but not at any cost; the emphasis on self-directedness, concern for others and society as a whole, and the pursuit of pleasure appears to be more central. Achievement is valued insofar as it aligns with these already identified priorities—particularly hedonism and self-direction, with which it is theoretically adjacent in Schwartz's value model.

At the bottom of the value hierarchy are security ($M = 3.737$) and power ($M = 3.112$), indicating that these values hold relatively low importance and are unlikely to drive the pursuit of authoritative positions or long-term retention within an organization for the sake of stability and security. According to Schwartz's circular model, self-direction and security possess opposing motivational orientations; thus, these values tend to conflict and mutually inhibit one another—an observation that is confirmed in the present findings.

The value of power also exhibits a motivational orientation that contrasts with benevolence and universalism, and to some extent with self-direction. This provides grounds to conclude that the results, to varying degrees, support Schwartz's conceptualizations regarding motivational orientations and the interrelationships among values.

An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to examine the assumption that there would be gender differences in values (Table 2).

The only statistically significant gender difference ($p < .05$) was found for the value of universalism. The results indicate that women, on average, are more tolerant toward other individuals and groups and exhibit a greater concern for the world around them and for the preservation of the natural environment. This finding may be influenced by stereotypical beliefs that women are more empathetic, or by traditional gender roles, which often imply that women are expected to be the more nurturing gender.

Table 2. Gender Differences in Values

Value	t	p	Mean (Men)	Mean (Women)
Hedonism	-1.334	0.185	13.4906	13.8814
Benevolence	0.970	0.334	14.1132	13.8644
Achievement	-0.979	0.330	16.7358	17.1525
Self-Direction	0.298	0.766	18.6226	18.5424
Universalism	-2.871	0.005	8.1132	8.8644
Security	1.031	0.305	7.6415	7.3220
Power	-1.711	0.090	5.9811	6.4407

Some studies suggest that the digital generation exhibits the greatest differences in indicators related to universalism compared to all preceding generations. For example, this generation shows pronounced ideological polarization, with women tending to hold more progressive values and men tending to be strongly conservative (Ansbacher, 2025). Another explanation is that women are generally more prosocially oriented. Although the differences are not statistically significant, it is worthwhile to consider the results for the values of power and security, for which women again show higher scores. In Schwartz's circular value model, these two values stand in opposition to universalism.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine age-related differences. The results indicate statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) across age groups only for the value of security. It can be observed that differences between the first two age categories are small but increase in the 25–27 age group. This outcome aligns with Super's theory, which posits that during this period individuals begin seeking establishment within the professional domain as well as greater security and stability (Table 3).

Table 3. ANOVA: Age Differences in Values

Value	F	p	Mean (19–21)	Mean (22–24)	Mean (25–27)
Hedonism	1.830	0.165	14.13	13.69	13.26
Benevolence	0.030	0.971	14.04	13.96	13.95
Achievement	0.417	0.660	16.65	16.95	17.26
Self-Direction	0.799	0.452	18.91	18.48	18.52
Universalism	1.243	0.293	8.91	8.43	8.30
Security	3.535	0.033	7.34	7.24	8.26
Power	0.376	0.687	6.26	6.13	6.43

Correlation analysis shows a weak correlation between security and career planning (Table 4). In Schwartz’s model, the value *security* includes seeking safety, stability, and predictability in life, avoidance of uncertainty. It expresses a motivational goal to reduce anxiety and prevent threat, often through structured, future-oriented behavior. At the same time the central function of career planning is to create structure regarding one’s future, thereby reducing ambiguity about work and life trajectories. When we combine the motivational meaning of *security* with the behavioral expression of *career planning*, the correlation becomes theoretically coherent. People who value security are motivated to reduce uncertainty. Career planning is one of the most effective ways to do that, especially in a dynamic labor market. Security-oriented individuals prefer clear expectations and stable paths.

Table 4. Correlations between Values and Career Goals

Value	Statistic	Career Goals
Hedonism	Pearson correlation	-0.101
	Significance (Sig.)	0.287
Benevolence	Pearson correlation	0.072
	Significance (Sig.)	0.450
Achievement	Pearson correlation	-0.026
	Significance (Sig.)	0.789
Self-Direction	Pearson correlation	0.065
	Significance (Sig.)	0.495
Universalism	Pearson correlation	0.016
	Significance (Sig.)	0.868
Security	Pearson correlation	0.225*
	Significance (Sig.)	0.017
Power	Pearson correlation	0.129
	Significance (Sig.)	0.176

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence and digital technologies has reshaped career trajectories, labor market expectations, and the value orientations of younger generations. This study examines the value system and career development characteristics of Generation Z—individuals born between 1995 and 2012—who constitute the first fully digital-native cohort. Drawing on Schwartz’s theory of basic human values, the research identifies the predominant values within this group and explores gender, age, and career-related variations.

Overall, the findings counter the stereotype that Generation Z holds “blurred” or inconsistent values. Instead, their value system appears coherent

and distinct, shaped by digital immersion, global interconnectedness, and shifting societal norms. These insights have implications for employers, educators, and policymakers seeking to understand and support the emerging workforce.

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