Article

The Perceptions of Generation Z University Students about Their Futures: A Qualitative Study

Gül Dikeç * , **Simge Öztürk, Neslihan Taşbaşı, Damla Figenergül and Bilal Buğrahan Güler**

Department of Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, Fenerbahce University, 34758 Istanbul, Türkiye;
simge.ozturk@stu.fbu.edu.tr (S.Ö.); neslihan.tasbasi@stu.fbu.edu.tr (N.T.); damla.figenergul@gmail.com (D.F.);
bilal.guler@stu.edu.tr (B.B.G.)
* Correspondence: guloban@hotmail.com or gul.dikec@fbu.edu.tr; Tel.: +90-216-910-1907

Abstract: This study explored the future-oriented perceptions of Generation Z students in a foundation university. This study was conducted using qualitative research and a phenomenological design. The study sample consisted of 11 university students over the age of 18 who agreed to participate in the study. Data were collected online through individual interviews in Türkiye. Colaizzi's phenomenological analysis method was used in the data analysis. The content analysis determined three main themes and eleven sub-themes. The first theme was the students' knowledge acquisition about the "current situation of the country." Under this theme were four sub-themes: economic problems, the immigrant situation, the education and justice system, and the country's agenda. In the second theme, students shared their opinions about "being a student in the country." This theme included economic impossibilities, their participation in limited social activities, and housing problems. In the last theme, "future anxiety," the sub-themes of the students were found to include experiences hopelessness versus hope. Uncertainty caused anxiety, as did going abroad, finding a job, and improving themselves. It was determined that the participants were worried about the current situation in the countries they lived in during this period due to economic problems; while some were hopeful about the future, some were hopeless and would go abroad. This study might contribute to the literature on determining the future-oriented perceptions, possible stressors and hope levels of Generation Z university students in Türkiye. Additionally, intervention programs can be developed for the management these stressors to protect the mental health of Generation Z university students. On the other hand, it is necessary to protect the mental health of young people, who are the adults of the future, and to create policies for the youth of this country where social opportunities are maintained.

Keywords: future; generation; qualitative study; universities; youth

1. Introduction

With the changing and transforming world, generations and the expectations of generations are changing [1]. A generation is defined as a group of people born in the same date range and affected positively or negatively by the factors experienced within this date range, as well as having common characteristics with each other [2]. When defining generations, four generations are mentioned. The traditional generation was born between 1927 and 1945; the baby boom generation was born between 1946 and 1964; Generation X was born between 1965 and 1980; and Generation Y was born between 1981 and 1999. The generation born in 2000 and after is called Generation Z, and this generation is also called different names such as "internet kids", "digital generation", and "crystal generation". The essential characteristics of this generation are trust, speed, and dependence on technology [3–6]. Generation Z is the future generation trying to understand the world in a changing world. Although they are a socially empowered generation, sociability is often seen as social media activity and diversity of connections.

They are a group that spends more time online and likes and tolerates more variety than previous generations [7,8].

Generation Z is defined as the newest generation and is expected to lead the world in the next decade. This generation, which follows Generation Y, has similar characteristics to Generation Y but also significant differences. This group is more socially inclusive, with different beliefs and values than previous generations. They are thought to be more open-minded and have different perspectives as they have grown up in a world that challenges them. However, it is believed that they will have social difficulties when they start their professional lives and will be unable to adapt to taking responsibility due to being together with older generations [7,8]. On the other hand, it is stated that with the increase in the presence of Generation Z individuals in business life, there will be more screens, fewer rules and paper waste, and many new tasks within a flexible-working-hour system. It is suggested that a working environment where men and women are equal will be on the agenda [2].

Undoubtedly, each generation is influenced by the global, economic, social, and cultural characteristics of the group it belongs to [6]. Generation Z spends time with older mothers, were born into smaller families, started school earlier and spent longer in education. Generation Z has grown up in times of digital and technological opportunities, economic instability, COVID-19, uncertainty, and change. Declining birth and reproductive rates, physical inactivity and time spent online are essential factors in this community. Due to their preferences, ideas, behaviors and differences in social issues compared to previous generations, it is crucial to understand the characteristic ideas of Generation Z and to determine their future-oriented thoughts [8,9].

Türkiye has experienced significant economic, social, and cultural crises, especially in the last two decades. As a result of these crises, inflation and unemployment rates have increased, the purchasing power of individuals in the country has decreased, and their quality of life has been negatively affected. The economic crisis that started in 2001 and the addition of another problem in 2008 created severe uncertainties in the country. While the economy was more stable between 2012 and 2018 [10], during this time, due to the war in Syria, which started in 2011, many refugees migrated to the country, causing a change in both economic and social life. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Türkiye hosts the most significant number of migrants. It has 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees under temporary protection, and the country hosts nearly 4 million refugees. With this number, Türkiye ranks first among the countries hosting the most refugees globally [11]. Rapid and unplanned migration can lead to inequality in income distribution, not only for all populations, but also for Generation Z students [12].

The 2013 Gezi Events, the attempted coup in 2016 and the arrest of Pastor Brunson in the same year have added new domestic and external political crises. After 2018, exchange rates increased in the country, and the situation became even more severe. After March 2020, with the pandemic, Türkiye, like many countries worldwide, experienced economic and social difficulties due to quarantining. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK) [13] June data, the twelve-month consumer price index was 59.95%. This rate is relatively high, with annual changes of 14.76% for housing, 43.04% for entertainment and culture, 50.71% for education and 53.92% for food. In 2022, the Russia–Ukraine war started, which caused the country to share in an energy and food crisis. In addition, there have been terrorist attacks and bomb explosions in many parts of the country and forest fires in recent years due to global warming. In 2023, Türkiye experienced a devastating Kahramanmaraş Earthquake on February 6 that affected eleven cities and killed nearly 60,000 people. All universities in the country have started distanced education to meet the shelter needs of earthquake victims in student dormitories. All these events have caused changes in the country's economic, social and cultural fabric. This situation has undoubtedly affected everyone in the country, especially the young population [10].

The education system in Türkiye is unstable. The exam system that was put into practice changed in a short period. Both the name and the content of the changing system

differ. For example, the name of the Examination for Transition to Anatolian and Science High Schools was changed in 2000, and the High School Entrance Examination (HSEE) was introduced. In 2004, the scope of the (HSEE) exam was expanded, and private schools and police colleges were included in this centralized system. The Secondary Education Institutions Selection (SEIS) and Placement Examination were renamed. The SEIS was administered until 2007 and was replaced by the Placement Examination (PE), which was introduced in grades 6–7 and 8 in 2008. The PE exam was abolished in 2014. In 2012, at the same time as the Decree Law No. 6287, the 4+4+4 system was introduced, compulsory education was increased to twelve years, and secondary education was included within the scope of mandatory education. In 2014, the TEOG system was introduced. In 2017, the TEOG system was abolished and replaced by the Education Region-Address-Based Secondary Education Transition System [14]. Likewise, there have been many changes in the university entrance exam in a short period, just like the high school entrance exam. Millions of Generation Z students in Türkiye take university exams every year and strive to have a profession. However, university education does not eliminate the problem of unemployment [15]. Increasing unemployment rates in our country [13] further increase young people's anxiety and hopelessness about the future. Therefore, the mental health of Generation Z students who experience anxiety and hopelessness can be negatively affected [16]. Furthermore, university life is generally seen as being when people travel, see, and have fun the most. The quality of life of Generation Z students is related to the welfare level of their country. Naturally, the country's prosperity level affects the social lives and health of Generation Z students in our country [15].

The perspectives of this generation, which develops and grows with technology, and their attitudes and behaviors towards the future, differ from those of other generations. Based on these differences, professional organizations and public health bodies need to measure the career- and future expectations and perceptions of individuals in this generation with the start of Generation Z students participating in business life [1,17]. Generation Z students' thoughts about their future and the stress and anxieties they experience inevitably affect both the physical and mental health of this generation. For this reason, public health and community mental health nurses working in this field should know the views and expectations of Generation Z students well. Accordingly, this study aimed to determine Generation Z students' perceptions about the future at a foundation university in Türkiye. This study might contribute to the literature on determining the future-oriented perceptions, possible stressors, and hope levels of Generation Z university students in Türkiye. Additionally, intervention programs can be developed for these stressors to protect the mental health of Generation Z university students.

2. Materials and Methods

In the reporting of this study, the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies (COREQ), which are frequently used in reporting qualitative studies, were followed [18].

2.1. Aim and Study Design

Phenomenological research aims to understand how people evaluate the events they encounter daily. It investigates the phenomena that are not foreign to participants but cannot be fully grasped, and expresses the feelings that develop against these phenomena [19]. Since this study aimed to determine the thoughts of a group of Generation Z students, studying at a university, about the future, it was conducted using qualitative research and a phenomenological design. In this study, the following fundamental question was sought to be answered: "What are the perceptions of Generation Z university students about the future?"

2.2. Setting

The study's data were collected through online in-depth individual interviews with a group of university students studying at a foundation university in Istanbul between 16 February 2022 and 19 June 2023 in the spring semester of the 2022–2023 academic year via the online Zoom platform. The reason for conducting the study at a foundation university was related to the experiences of the authors involved in the study and the collaboration with the data that could be collected at the university. The data collection was planned to be face-to-face. However, due to the devastating earthquake on 6 February 2023 in Türkiye, the study data had to be collected online as universities switched to distanced education.

2.3. Participants

The population of the study consisted of all students studying at a foundation university in the specified period. The study sample consisted of students who accepted to participate, and enrolled students over 18 and born after 2000. The students born before 2000 and graduate students were excluded from this study. In this qualitative research design, individual in-depth interviews were conducted with the students who agreed to participate in the study. In phenomenological research, small sample groups are selected in sample selection, and the sample is terminated when the data starts to repeat; in other words, when the data reaches saturation [20]. Therefore, there was no set rule for sample size. Accordingly, when it was thought that data saturation had been achieved after the individual in-depth interviews, the interviews were terminated, and the study was completed with 11 students.

The mean age of the students participating in the study was 22.45 years. Most were male and students of the faculty of health sciences. They were frequently seniors who lived with their families. The students often defined their financial situation as medium, and more than half were employed in a job that generated an income (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of participants.

Characteristics	(Min–Max) Mean
Age	(21–24) 22.45
Gender	n (%)
Female	4 (36.36%)
Male	7 (63.63%)
Faculty	
Faculty of Health Sciences	6 (54.54%)
Faculty of Economics, Administrative and Social Sciences	2 (18.18%)
Faculty of Engineering and Architect	1 (9.09%)
Faculty of Sport Sciences	2 (18.18%)
Grade	
Sophomore	1 (9.09%)
Junior	3 (27.27%)
Senior	7 (63.63%)
Living Place	
Family Home	11 (100%)
Economic Status	
Poor	1 (9.09%)
Good	4 (36.36%)
Middle	6 (54.54%)

Table 1. *Cont.*

Characteristics	(Min–Max) Mean
Employment Status	
Yes	6 (54.55%)
No	5 (45.45%)

2.4. Data Collection

The most frequently used data collection method in qualitative research is in-depth interviews. In interviews, individuals can express their opinions, understandings and feelings about experiences that they have not been aware of or thought about before, and about issues that they frequently encounter daily, which are not unfamiliar but which they cannot comprehend [19]. In this study, individual in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants.

First, a post was prepared about the purpose and scope of the study. Announcements about the study were made on the researchers' social media accounts with the study post. The students who gave feedback that they wanted to participate in the study were contacted, and the days and times of the interviews were planned. Interviews were conducted via the online Zoom platform and lasted an average of 30 min. The fact that the researchers conducting the study experienced similar phenomena and wanted to investigate the phenomenon, and were students at the institution where the study was conducted, facilitated the collection of study data. The interviews were conducted by three females (S.Ö. DF N.T.) and one male (B.B.G.) senior nursing student. Before the interview, training on interviews was given by senior faculty experienced in qualitative research, and supervision continued during the process. Interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. Three participants were then asked to read the themes and sub-themes, and changes were made.

Individual in-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview form. This form consisted of two parts. In the first part, seven questions were about the students' socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, economic status, employment status, faculty of study, class, and place of residence). The second part had two questions to determine the Generation Z students' thoughts about their futures [21–26]. These questions were (1) what do you think and feel about your future? (2) What are the perceptions of Generation Z university students about the future?

2.5. Ethical Consideration

The ethics committee's permission was obtained from the Fenerbahce University Non-Interventional Clinical Research Ethics Committee, dated 3 November 2022, and numbered E-88813803-204.01.07-14256. Institutional permission was obtained from the university rectorate, numbered E-62751 845-100-14638 and dated 14 November 2022. In addition, verbal and written informed consent was obtained from the students participating in the study. The study complied with the Declaration of Helsinki and the Personal Data Protection Law. Using the participants' statements, their anonymity was preserved without giving their names or genders.

2.6. Data Analysis

In this study, descriptive data were analyzed in Excel. The primary descriptive data analysis used mean, minimum, maximum, number, and percentage. Qualitative data analysis aims to explain, describe, and explore. The study of qualitative data starts with the data collection process and continues until the report is written after the analysis [27]. In phenomenological research, the researcher is expected to be more than a simple recorder. The study begins with the researcher's encounter with the phenomenon and the formation of their first awareness, interest and expectations regarding the phenomenon. The

researchers listened to and read the participants' experiences of the phenomenon, thus accessing the embedded data.

The authors did not utilize any structured themes or sub-themes from the literature. The themes were created according to the interviews. In this study, Colaizzi's phenomenological interpretation method was used to analyze the data and followed the following steps [28]. Important statements directly related to the phenomenon were selected. These crucial statements were interpreted, and their meanings were coded. The coded definitions were grouped into sub-themes, themes and categories. The results obtained were combined with rich and comprehensive life experiences. The basic conceptual structure of the phenomenon was defined. Three participants were asked to read the themes and sub-themes obtained and to validate the findings by comparing the participants' own experiences. GD, who is experienced in qualitative research and is a psychiatric and mental health nursing academician, analyzed the data with the other researchers. In addition, another researcher who was not involved in the study provided feedback on the process.

3. Results

The content analysis revealed three main themes and eleven sub-themes. The first theme was the students' thoughts on the "current situation of the country". Under this theme, there were findings about economic problems, immigrants, the education and justice systems, and the rapidly changing agenda of the country. In the second theme, students shared their thoughts on "being a student in the country". This theme included the economic impossibilities experienced by students, their inability or limited participation in social activities, and the housing problem they face. In the last theme, "future anxiety", it was determined that students experienced hopelessness versus hope. This uncertainty caused anxiety, and a belief that they had to in future go abroad, find a job or improve themselves (Table 2).

Table 2. Themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Current Situation of the Country	Being a Student in the Country	Future Anxiety
	Economy	Economic	Hopelessness versus hope
	Immigrants	Inability to Participate in Social Activities	Uncertainty and Anxiety
Sub-themes	Education and Justice System	Housing Problem	Brain Drain
	Country Agenda		Finding a Job and Self Development

3.1. The Current Situation of the Country

During the interview, the participants first provided information about the current situation of the country. They mentioned that the economy is not good, the number of migrants is high, and that migrants are a problem for the country's security. Some of the participants talked about the negative aspects of the education and justice systems. In contrast, some participants talked about the positive aspects of the justice system in particular. Finally, under this theme, participants stated that the country's agenda can change rapidly, and that they cannot follow it.

3.1.1. Economy

Most participants expressed that the economic situation in the country is not good. Participants mentioned that purchasing power is decreasing, basic needs can be considered luxuries, and that people must work more due to inflation and price hikes. One participant summarized his views on this issue as follows:

"Let me start with the economy. I would not say I like it; conditions are awful, and purchasing power is deficient. Even the smallest thing has become a luxury for people. I can say that this place [Türkiye] has turned into hell. A wonderful country has turned into hell economically. I do not want to say other bad things. This is enough." (P1)

While one participant stated that the situation in the country is related to the recent Kahramanmaraş Earthquake on 6 February 2023 and that the problem is not going well, another participant commented on how the economy affects their daily needs and their opinion on the past and current economy as follows.

"Like everyone else, I find the current conditions of our country bad right now. It is more difficult to make a living compared to the past. For example, it used to be possible to live in a house with one person working. But now, this is impossible. Everyone is having a tough time. Because the money earned is not logical enough, whether it is kitchen expenses or rent, it is costly compared to the past. It used to be easier to make a living in the past." (P7)

3.1.2. Immigrants

Most participants discussed the rapid increase in the migrant population and the resulting security problems. Some, however, argued that the rising population could become a problem due to overcrowding and that migrants should be sent back to their countries.

"The migrant problem started years ago; it is not something new. I think the borders should be closed, and migrants should be sent to their own countries. We have a very crowded population, and we see migrants coming to our country every day on the news; they cause a lot of trouble. Our people started to feel very uncomfortable. So, I think they should be sent back to their own countries for the country's security." (P1)

Some of the participants stated that there are cultural conflicts due to migrants and that there was more love and tolerance in the past, which has now deteriorated. They also mentioned that there is a lack of a policy on immigration, which leads to other problems. One participant stated that immigrants in our country are given more privileges than citizens and that this situation is harrowing.

"For example, when there was respect, love, tolerance, when people were trying to understand each other, trying to taste each other's cultures, now, on the contrary, everyone is at war. This may cause the refugees to have a bad situation. A solution should have been found for them. The citizens of that country should not have come to this country. If they are coming, there should have been a strategic plan. Do the current conditions of the country fit this? What problems will arise as a result? At the simplest level, the people from there coming here as refugees have affected many of our people here. Both numerically and culturally. Everyone is in a conflict of interest. At the simplest level, our citizens here cannot find a house. It is excruciating that they should prioritize their citizens, give priority to them when they should come first, and that this is negative." (P3)

3.1.3. The Education and Justice Systems

Most participants were dissatisfied with the country's education system and said it changes frequently. One participant argued that the foundations of primary school education should be laid firmly, and that change should start in this direction.

"Our education system is horrible. I think primary school is the most important. There is only teaching and no education in this system. The foundation needs to be laid solid. Primary school education is the most important step for a country." (P1)

Some of the participants stated that the overall situation of the country depends on the level of education of the people in the country and that low levels of education can pose a problem in managing the crisis:

"Unfortunately, since the population of uneducated people in society is very high, I think the current situation of our country is automatically affected by education. So, I do

not know; it must go through a solid education and be shaken up. Solutions need to be produced. Most of the time, something negative happens in the country, such as a disaster, and people support each other. This should not happen; what do other countries do? They all need to have strategic planning. Unfortunately, I am sorry to say. I think we can say that [education] is very bad, terrible." (P3)

Furthermore, some participants mentioned that the education system and the current justice and legal systems have improved positively. One participant stated that the judiciary is fair and the country is more accessible, as follows:

"*In the current era, our country has positive and negative aspects. Generally speaking, Türkiye is a country where everyone is judged fairly and speaks freely. For these reasons, I like Türkiye's justice system very much.*" (P5)

3.1.4. The Country's Agenda

Participants stated that the country's agenda changes rapidly and needs help. In particular, they said that issues such as earthquakes and politics are at the forefront of the agenda and that they often follow the agenda on social media. Some of the participants said that the agenda often consists of adverse situations. One participant interpreted this situation as follows.

"*Our current agenda is the election. Our agenda before that was the earthquake. Since it was an election year, the earthquake somewhat suppressed the earthquake agenda. Since it was an election year, the earthquake normally remained in the background. I mostly follow the news. I use social media. I use Instagram on social media. I follow news channels. I check Twitter now and then. Our agenda changes very quickly in Türkiye. It is hard to follow Türkiye. There is different news on every platform. I mean, I go to Instagram, and there is different news. I go on Twitter, and there is different news. Since our agenda changes frequently, it is challenging to follow it. But we never see anything good. We always see negative news.*" (P1)

Again, a participant who thinks that the country's future is not positive stated that television channels present biased news; therefore, the participant follows the agenda on social media:

"*I usually follow the country's agenda on social media. Because I think television journalism is generally biased. It is either right-wing or left-wing. None of them, in my opinion, convey the right information honestly. That's why I usually follow them on Twitter or news sites I trust. I do not see a good trend; I am not hopeful.*" (P6)

Some participants said they often follow the country's agenda on social media because they find it more reliable; however, sometimes, social media is blocked. One participant summarized this situation and how she had become accustomed to receiving more and more negative news as follows.

"*I usually follow the country's agenda on Twitter unless, of course, it is blocked. Because sometimes it is unfortunately shut down. The agenda is bad right now; in fact, it is bad in general, but after a while, we get used to the events. Because every day, we encounter more bad news than the day before. I guess we are partially used to it now. Therefore, we are not very surprised.*" (P7)

One of the participants said that sometimes the same information is shared in the news, so she cannot obtain up-to-date information, and that she follows the country's agenda from international sources.

"*It is minimal to access this timeliness every passing day. Let me put it this way: the same things are repeated every day, or one day is such a day that it never matches a day in the past. I mean, it's like the state of the economy when there is an earthquake. There is a burst of inflation, and everything falls apart. I'm using LinkedIn right now. I follow The New York Times to see what's happening in the world rather than in Türkiye. Let me*

tell you that the world is shaping the country's situation on the one hand. On the one hand, I follow the European Union page. I think I looked yesterday. There were meetings about Türkiye, like an aid fund or something like that. I look at such things and wonder what is being done in our country." (P3)

3.2. Being a Student in the Country

Under this theme, participants defined being a student in this country as an economic impossibility, with an inability to participate sufficiently in social activities, and having to face housing problems.

3.2.1. Economic Impossibilities

Participants stated that being a student in this country is economically challenging, especially because studying in a city other than where the family is located brings economic difficulties. For this reason, it was determined that all participants lived in the same city with their families. One participant stated that this situation could be due to economic and security reasons.

"It is challenging, economically speaking, it is tough. It is challenging to leave your home and live in a student house because of the current economic conditions. Families do not want to send their children to university because of the security problems in other cities. I have seen this many times from my friends from my environment. It is difficult both financially and in terms of security." (P1)

Participants stated that even buying books constitutes an expenditure. One participant thought that being a student in our country is a bad thing, not good compared to the past or the present, and that the economic situation affects normal and social life as follows.

"Being a student in our country is a bad thing. Because students in our country seem to be good compared to the past, but they are not. Because everything in our country depends on the economy, since the economic situation is not very good, students need to be more efficient in their normal social lives and student life." (P4)

One of the participants stated that being a student in our country is related to one's financial situation; if one's financial situation is terrible, it is challenging, but if it is good, one can receive a quality education, and student life is fun.

"If your financial situation is bad, being a student in our country is complicated. Unfortunately, we must pay a certain fee to get a quality education from quality dormitories. In this case, receiving an education is complicated for students with poor financial situations. If your financial situation is good, I think being a student in our country is quite high quality and fun." (P5)

Another participant stated that being a student is a period that excites, entertains and makes people feel happy. Still, it is necessary to think about the economy in every moment of being a student.

"Being a student, not only for our country but in general, is a period that excites and makes people feel happy, and they even describe it as the best period of their lives. But for our country, yes, it is fun; we spend time with our friends, we have fun, but at the end of the day, we always have to think about material things." (P6)

Some of the participants stated that they may have nutritional problems as a student and that they calculate whether to drink a coffee or eat a dessert. One of the participants stated that it was difficult for a student to commute to and from school, even to eat.

"Where do I start? This answer is very long and broad. Honestly, it is not very good. I do not think it is economically good. I mean, for young people like us who are studying at university, even when we go to and from school without doing anything, even when we go to and from school, the cost of transportation and food is too much. We are paid more than we should be. I think this is also the case with inflation." (P2)

Most participants stated that they felt the need to work while studying due to economic conditions, that their desired life was not possible under these conditions, that they had to work to earn money, and that they were stressed because of working and studying simultaneously. One participant summarized this situation as follows:

> *"We feel the need to work while studying at the same time. As I said, we are struggling. Otherwise, life cannot be earned in any other way. We would also like to get an education. Everything is good at the time, but unfortunately, this is impossible within these opportunities."* (P3)

3.2.2. The Inability to Participate in Social Activities

Most participants mentioned that they could not participate in social activities due to economic impossibilities and future-related concerns. They stated that being a student constitutes the best years of one's life, but that some peers cannot participate in ethical activities and spend these years at home. One participant emphasized that they did not want to do anything due to future-related anxiety.

> *"The best years of my life should be student life. I think so both socially and in terms of age. When people are freer, have not yet started a family, have not taken responsibility, and are most comfortable, they continue by not living a university life this way. I think the economic situation is the most problematic. People cannot do what they want. We have students who cannot even participate in activities. Some students spend their student life only at home. This is only because of economic problems. I think there is also the sociability side. Because nowadays students are worried about the future. Honestly, people do not feel like doing anything because of future anxiety. The energy of the students has been exploited. That's why the student years are not good for students. It is the same for me."* (P1)

Some of the participants expressed that they are in a more disadvantaged situation compared to university students in other countries. One of the participants stated that although there are discounts for university students, art or cultural activities are a luxury and that these activities should be free of charge for students instead of discounted.

> *"When we look at our peers in other countries, while they can travel comfortably and get their visas easily, we cannot even go from this city to city A. Having such a disadvantage is the simplest. I am a student but must visit museums for free, not at a discount. Whenever there is an activity for art in this country, it has become a luxury. Doing these things is a luxury, and being a student does not solve anything."* (P3)

3.2.3. Housing Problems

All participants stated that they live in the same city with their families and have economic difficulties despite staying in the family house. They stated that rent prices have increased a lot in the country recently. One of the participants stated that if there is no family home, finding a dormitory or moving to a separate house is a financial burden for students and is impossible in these circumstances. She stated that living in the family home allows her not to think about expenses, but it is still difficult for a student to commute to school and eat;

> *"I live with my family. I do not have to worry about rent. This is also a huge factor. You even buy toilet paper when you are in a student's house. Even though I don't have such a problem, I still have economic difficulties, even if I want to study in another city. I want to travel and see those places a lot. Again, I don't do anything like that here. I worry about making a living. It is difficult to make a living even though I pay for food, drink, transportation to and from school."* (P2)

3.3. Future-Related Anxiety

Under this theme, participants expressed their concerns about their futures. Some participants said they were hopeful, while others said they had no hope. Participants expressed anxiety due to uncertainties about going abroad, finding a job, and improving themselves.

3.3.1. Hopelessness versus Hope

Most participants said they tried to have hope in their different situations, but some expressed hopelessness. One participant stated that people in this country have no hope and can commit suicide.

> *"I honestly do not think that any young person, even the elderly, I mean any person trying to live in Türkiye, has any hope left. People commit suicide out of hunger. That's why I do not find it beautiful."* (P6)

Some participants said that they hope to practice their professions in this country and to achieve anything if they make the right moves.

> *"My plans for the future are that I am working, I am in my third year, and my school will end this year. I'm considering working in a place like this for another year or two and opening my own [sports] gym. I mean, if I work in the right way and if the conditions of that time are suitable, I think I have a capacity that I can do according to the current situation. Of course, I don't know what time will show or do, but I say there is hope. What do I feel? I have hope. Nothing is impossible. If I proceed in the right way, with the right logic, if I take the right step at the right time, I think anything can happen. That's why my plans for the future include opening a studio of my own, and I am hopeful about that."* (P10)

3.3.2. Uncertainty and Anxiety

Most participants reported experiencing anxiety due to uncertainty. Some participants said that the uncertainty in their lives affected their sleep patterns. As the country had recently experienced an earthquake, a participant commented that thoughts about the earthquake made her feel bad; that she was anxious and wanted to isolate herself from everything, that her mental health was negatively affected, and that she could not direct her life, with the following words:

> *"Psychologically, sometimes I can not sleep at night because of these thoughts. I am with these ideas and thoughts every day, every day. There is such a thing as looking at the ceiling and sleeping. There is no such thing as looking at the ceiling and sleeping. There is such a thing as continuing to stare at the ceiling. So, for me now, the nights and mornings are mixed up. I do not know what to do. We are in a constant state of uncertainty. Maybe a natural disaster is affecting us today, but on the other hand, I'm thinking about what we can do if there is an earthquake right now. My psychology has deteriorated so much now that I'm thinking about the future and now I'm thinking about what I can do if I experience a bad situation. I can't escape it anymore; my soul is shrinking like this. I can not come to my senses; I have been isolated from everything for a long time. These thoughts spoil my psychology like every young person, and I can't direct my life anymore. Constant uncertainty..."* (P3)

Some participants stated that this uncertainty is more pronounced in our country than in other countries and is felt less in other countries. One participant expressed this situation and the fact that he only wants to receive an education at the moment, as follows:

> *"I want to get rid of it as soon as possible. I am still determining how it will be. The worst part is that while a person in another country can say I will do this, I will go there, I will do these things, we cannot say that either. The only thing is our own need, what we want right now. Yes, I only need to go, but I am still determining where or what I will do in the future. I want to educate myself. At least I want to touch someone with my education. I want to educate myself well."* (P3)

3.3.3. Brain Drain

Some participants stated they wanted to go abroad due to the country's economic situation. Participants stated that they dreamed of going abroad because they thought that both job opportunities and living conditions were better elsewhere and that they made plans for this. One participant expressed their views on this as follows:

"I wish we all did not have to worry about leaving the country. Let me put it this way: my current problem is leaving the country. Maybe it is the effect of my department, I do not know, but I do not want to live in Türkiye right now; I do not want to live in Istanbul either. I'm sorry to say that I wish I were satisfied with where I was born; I wish things would settle down." (P3)

On the other hand, one participant said he was getting less hopeful and would only stay in the country for a short time.

"I don't see an excellent trend; I am not hopeful. If my plans for the future continue this way, unfortunately, as much as I would like to stay here because of the love and debt I feel for Atatürk, I have lost hope for the rest of my life. I will not stay for long." (P6)

3.3.4. Finding a Job and Self-Development

Most participants expressed that they wanted to graduate, find a job, and improve in their professions as part of their plans. One participant stated that he aimed to be successful in his profession and expressed his positive thoughts in this direction as follows:

"In the future, I plan to make valuable works and structures that will be important and remembered in architecture. Of course, I want to do these works in a way that will not harm my ethical values. As I said at the beginning, I believe my future will be bright and beautiful. Therefore, I always look at my future with positive feelings." (P5)

Some participants expressed that they were very stressed and anxious about finding a job, and that even if they were successful in the exams for the civil service in this country, they could be eliminated in the interviews and were insecure.

"Honestly, I am in a great anxiety. I am burdened with stress. I can never cope with stress. I constantly think: "Should I do this or that? If I do this, it will be like this; if I do that, it will be like this." If I take the KPSS, I will be eliminated in the interview, not the exam." (P8)

4. Discussion

This study aimed to determine the thoughts of a group of Generation Z students, studying at a foundation university, about the future, and the data obtained were discussed in line with the main themes of the current situation of this country, being a student in this country, future anxiety, and the literature. Students frequently expressed negative thoughts about the general condition of the country. They stated that the country's economy is not good, inflation is high, everything is constantly getting more expensive, and, as students, they are negatively affected by these economic impossibilities. Especially under the theme of being a student, participants stated that they stay in the same city and live in the same house with their families due to economic constraints. At the same time, their friends have difficulties finding dormitories and homes. In addition to housing, participants stated that nutrition, transportation and social activities are almost luxuries. More than half of the participants reported having a job to be able to do or buy what they want. According to a study by Özkan et al. in Türkiye, students' housing and nutrition expenditures accounted for 50% of their total spending [29]. However, the increasing inflation rates after climate change and the pandemic worldwide have enveloped the countries' economies. In this case, these expenditures are thought to be more than 50%.

Participants frequently referred to economic hardship. They stated that their university years were good; however, they had social, housing and economic difficulties due to a lack of opportunities. The inflation rates confirmed the difficulties felt by the participants in

meeting their housing, nutrition, and social needs. Therefore, the participants mentioned that they have worked at the same time. In addition, in the current study, the participants stated that they were considering migrating abroad due to financial problems. Migration is an experience that negatively affects mental health as it entails adapting to a new country, culture, and language [30]. In this respect, improving the country's conditions for young people is essential in ensuring that Generation Z students remain in the country, and thus would protect mental health.

In this study, the participants mentioned that the agenda in Türkiye changes rapidly, that they cannot follow the agenda, that they often cannot obtain reliable news from the media, and that they follow social media. Due to its geographical location, Türkiye is adversely affected by many situations, such as earthquakes, fires, wars and terrorism [10]. Therefore, the country's agenda changes rapidly. The recent earthquake and elections have quickly changed the agenda. In addition to the changing agenda, participants stated that social media is sometimes blocked in the country. This situation affects the trust of individuals living in the country in the government and hinders their right to receive news.

One of the sub-themes identified in this study was related to migrants. Participants made negative statements about refugees and the refugee crisis. With its number of refugees, Türkiye ranks first among the countries hosting the most refugees globally [11]. In the study conducted by Yılmaz and Günel, it was determined that Generation Z, who participated in the study, thought that the refugees in our country restricted their job opportunities and that their participation in the labor market would bring unemployment [24]. It is believed that there may be negative attitudes towards refugees, especially among individuals in countries like Türkiye that are crowded and experiencing an economic crisis. Therefore, the government must create and comply with a migration policy.

On the other hand, it is crucial to change young people's negative attitudes towards refugees in Generation Z students. Workshops and courses on multiculturalism and cultural sensitivity can be conducted at universities to reduce the negative attitudes of young people who will come into contact with refugees in their professional or daily lives. In addition, some of the participants in this study stated that they were thinking of going abroad in the future. Participants thinking of migrating to another country due to the problems experienced will be of immigrant status. At this point, it should be ensured that Generation Z university students empathize with immigrants.

In this study, students mentioned that they were not satisfied with the education system, that it changes frequently, that primary education is critical, and that getting a good education is related to the economic status of individuals. Kahya found that when the difficulties faced by young people were examined in his study, it was found that they could not receive the education they wanted [26]. In this study, the participants emphasized similar points. In the scoping review of Shorey et al. [9], they found that technological and innovative educational strategies should integrate with the education schedules of Generation Z. Therefore, it may be recommended that technology integrations [31] have free, permanent, and effective systems in education. Educational institutions need to change their teaching–learning strategies, which have to become more technology-based, such as being visual and interactive, with the information available instantaneously and, most importantly, incorporating technology and social media/networking [6].

In this study, some participants expressed hope about the future, while others said they were hopeless. Hopelessness is a significant risk factor for future-related anxiety. With increased fear, the individual may become desperate about their future and not know what to do. Increasing unemployment rates in our country [13] further improve young people's anxiety and hopelessness about the future. In Turkey, 13 million Generation Z individuals are expected to participate in business life soon. The anxiety of university-educated Generation Z individuals about finding a job is increasing since current employment opportunities are not sufficient, and there are widespread opinions that the knowledge and experiences of Generation Z are not suitable for traditional professions. An inability

to stay with family or start a life due to possible unemployment can cause despair in this generation [32].

Furthermore, it is stated in the literature that Generation Z's use of technology, together with competition or exposure to social media, creates a standard-of-living difficulty and increases anxiety about the future [5,33]. Vultaggio found that the anxiety of Generation Z students was simply, 'what is next?' The fear of the unknown was heightened by the existence of and reliance on social media. The author addressed that social media highlighted stressors that these students already had, such as school, finding a job, financial burdens, maintaining a perfect image, and an overall fear of the future [34]. In this study, the participants mentioned that they used social media to be aware of news about the country that might contribute to their hope, hopelessness and anxiety.

The participants in this study emphasized that they wanted to improve themselves in professional fields. A systematic review that evaluated the career aspirations of Generation Z by Barhate and Dirani emphasized that Gen Z would instead fully develop their potential and grow professionally by learning new competencies and aspiring to become functionally competent and technically strong in their chosen careers [17]. Still, some stressed that even if they were successful, they could be eliminated due to the current system. The number of young people who have completed their education but cannot find a job or have unemployment anxiety is increasing. In a study, unemployment anxiety and hopelessness levels of pre-service teachers were examined, and it was found that pre-service teachers with severe hopelessness had high anxiety levels [16]. Therefore, to protect young people's mental health, increasing their employment opportunities and counselling them on their professional careers is vital [5]. Thus, the rate and desire of young people to go abroad can be reduced.

5. Conclusions

In the data obtained from the participants in this study, under the main themes of the current situation of the country, being a student in the country, and future-related anxiety, the sub-themes formed included economic crisis and impossibilities, the variability of the agenda, the education system, the immigration problem, the inability to participate in social activities, uncertainties, the desire to go abroad, and hope and hopelessness. All these factors may negatively affect the life and mental health of Generation Z university students. Therefore, defining Generation Z's possible futures or career plans is essential for professional organizations and public health [1]. Providing counselling and career planning supervision to young people in universities can make it easier for them to cope with these situations. In addition, providing mental health services in universities and changing curriculum according to this generation's characteristics is also crucial. This could recommend the evaluation of the mental statuses, quality of life, and education satisfaction of Generation Z students in future studies.

This study has some limitations. First of all, the results of this study were limited to the perceptions of a group of Generation Z university students who participated in this study at a single foundation university in Istanbul. Because of the nature of the qualitative research, it could not generalize. The other limitation of the current study was that the participants were students in Istanbul, which is the most crowded, expensive, and has the most migration, which might affect their perspectives on their futures. Determining the future perceptions of Generation Z in different geographies of Turkey and government universities is fundamental. Furthermore, the students who lived in dormitories or owned or shared houses did not participate in the study. For future studies, it could be recommended to investigate the perceptions of Generation Z students who did not live with their families.

References

1. Mücevher, M. Swot Analysis as a Tool of Self Recognition in Individual Career Planning: A Research on Generation Z. *SDU Vision. J.* **2021**, *12*, 856–869.
2. Çiçek, H.; Ünlü, G. Career Expectations of Generation Z: An Application on High School Students. *J. Selçuk Univ. Soc. Sci. Vocat. Sch.* **2019**, *22*, 447–458.
3. Çetin, C.; Karalar, A. Research on Generation X, Y and Z Students' Perceptions of Protean and Boundaryless Career. *J. Adm. Sci.* **2016**, *14*, 157–197.
4. Kırık, A.M.; Köyüksü, S. The Investigation of Dissertations on Z Generation with Content Analysis Method. *e-Gifder* **2018**, *6*, 1497–1518. [CrossRef]
5. Maloni, M.; Hiatt, M.S.; Campbell, S. Understanding the work values of Gen Z business students. *Int. J. Manag. Educ.* **2019**, *17*, 100320. [CrossRef]
6. Hernandez-de-Menendez, M.; Escobar Díaz, C.A.; Morales-Menendez, R. Educational experiences with Generation Z. *Int. J. Interact. Des.* **2020**, *14*, 847–859. [CrossRef]
7. Andrea, B.; Gabriella, H.; Timea, J. Y and Z Generations at Workplaces. *J. Compet.* **2016**, *8*, 90–106.
8. Karadoğan, A. Generation Z and Teaching Profession. *J. Ağrı İbrahim Çeçen Univ. Soc. Sci. Institue Sos. Bilim. Enstitüsü Derg.* **2019**, *5*, 9–41.
9. Shorey, S.; Chan, V.; Rajendran, P.; Ang, E. Learning styles, preferences and needs of generation Z healthcare students: Scoping review. *Nurse Educ. Pract.* **2021**, *57*, 103247. [CrossRef]
10. Alpdoğan, F.F. Is the Economic Policy of the Republic of Turkey in a Cycle? The Crises of the Fragile Turkish Economy in The Last Thirty Years. *Sociol. Thought.* **2023**, *8*, 35–64.
11. The UN Refugee Agency. Available online: https://www.unhcr.org/ (accessed on 4 August 2023).
12. Koçak, H.S.; Serin, E.K. Are Nurses Ready for a Disaster in Türkiye? A Hospital Case. *Disaster Med. Public Health Prep.* **2023**, *17*, 436. [CrossRef]
13. Turkiye Statistical Institute. Consumer Price Index. 2023. Available online: https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Tuketici-Fiyat-Endeksi-Temmuz-2023-49649 (accessed on 3 August 2023).
14. Demirbilek, M.; Levent, F. School Administrators' Opinions Regarding the Changes in the Transition between Grades and Examination System in Turkey. *Marmara Univ. Atatürk Educ. Fac. J. Educ. Sci.* **2019**, *50*, 57–79.
15. Bozkur, B.; Kıran, B.; Cengiz, Ö. The Examination of College Students' Hopelessness, Intolerance of Uncertainity, Perception towards Finding a Job and Self-Eficacy. *Kastamonu Educ. J.* **2020**, *28*, 2401–2409.
16. Süner, Ş. The Anxiety of Pre-Service Teachers' Not to Be Appointed to Teachership in Terms of Level of Hopelessness, Gender, School Type. *J. Manisa Celal Bayar Univ. Soc. Sci.* **2020**, *18*, 357–372.
17. Barhate, B.; Dirani, K.M. Career aspirations of generation Z: A systematic literature review. *Eur. J. Train. Dev.* **2022**, *46*, 139–157. [CrossRef]
18. Tong, A.; Sainsbury, P.; Craig, J. Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): A 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *Int. J. Qual. Health Care* **2007**, *19*, 349–357. [CrossRef]
19. Tekindal, M.; Arsu, Ş.U. A Review on the Scope and Process of Phenomenological Approach as a Qualitative Research Method. *J. Turk. Fed. Blind. Pers.* **2020**, *20*, 153–182.
20. Özdemir, M. Qualitative Data Analysis: A Study on Methodology Problem in Social Sciences. *ESOGUIFD* **2010**, *11*, 323–343.
21. Çetiner, S.; Günay, E. Assessment Of Socio-Cultural Impacts of International Migration: He Case Of Turkey. *Mustafa Kemal Univ. J. Soc. Sci. Inst.* **2021**, *18*, 1–21.
22. Hafızoğlu, Y. Generation Z Voter Behavior. *J. Educ. New Approaches* **2021**, *4*, 141–164.
23. Küçük, H.Ö.; Toklu, İ.T. What Factors Affect Voting Behavior in Elections? A Research on Generation Z. *Int. J. Bus. Manag.* **2020**, *8*, 4546–4574.

24. Yılmaz, B.; Güler, Ç.U. A View of Generation Y and Z on The Employment of Syrian Immigrants in Turkey: A Field Research. *IIBF-EJ.* **2020**, *9*, 21–42.

25. Durmas, D.Ö.; Okumuş, D.B. Generation Differences In Business Life and Generation Z. *Pearson J. Soc. Sci. Humanit.* **2021**, *6*, 47–68. [CrossRef]

26. Kahya, Y. The Changing New Face Of Migration: From Physical Labor To Brain Drain. *J. Motif Acad. Folk.* **2022**, *15*, 819–833.

27. Yıldırım, A.; Şimşek, H. *Qualitative Research Methods in Social Sciences*, 10th ed.; Seçkin Publishing: Ankara, Turkey, 2016.

28. Colaizzi, P.F. The Descriptive Methods and The Types of Subject-Matter of a Phenomenologically Based Psychology Exemplified by the Phenomenon of Learning. *Diss. Abstr. Int.* **1969**, *30*, 2889.

29. Özkan, M.; Tekbaş, M.; Oğuz, İ.H. Analysis of Gaziantep University's Economic Contributions to the City and Student Spending in Terms of Different Variables. *Gaziantep Univ. J. Soc. Sci.* **2018**, *17*, 633–647. [CrossRef]

30. Acartürk, C.; McGrafth, M.; Roberts, B.; Ilkkursun, Z.; Cuijpers, P.; Sijbrandij, M.; Sondorp, E.; Ventevogel, P.; McKee, M.; Fuhr, D.C.; et al. Prevalence and Predictors of Common Mental Disorders Among Syrian Refugees In Istanbul, Türkiye: A Cross-Sectional Study. *Soc. Psychiatry Psychiatr. Epidemiol.* **2021**, *56*, 475–484. [CrossRef]

31. Mohr, K.A.J.; Mohr, E.S. Understanding Generation Z Students to Promote a Contemporary Learning Environment. *J. Empower. Teach. Excell.* **2017**, *1*, 84–94.

32. Ateş, S.; Kaya, M. Future Expectations of Generation Z: Pressure on Unemployment Anxiety. *Int. J. Entrep. Manag. Inq.* **2021**, *5*, 255–270.

33. Runcan, R.; Nadolu, D.; David, G. Predictors of Anxiety in Romanian Generation Z Teenagers. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* **2023**, *20*, 4857. [CrossRef]

34. Vultaggio, G. "The Most Anxious Generation": The Relationship between Gen Z Students, Social Media, and Anxiety. State University of New York at Platz. Honor Project. Available online: https://soar.suny.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.12648/1916/Vultaggio_Honors.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (accessed on 22 November 2023).