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Motivations and influences in the educational orientation of Generation Z Youth

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Abstract: *The present study investigates the constellation of personal and social determinants that shape the educational orientation of Generation Z students, with particular emphasis on the interplay between self-awareness, familial and institutional support, and the pressures exerted by broader socio-cultural contexts. The research was conducted on a sample of 81 twelfth-grade students from Prahova County (in school year 2024-2025) and employed both questionnaire-based inquiry and focus-group discussions as methodological tools, in order to examine the dynamic relationship among vocation, external influences, and career trajectories. The findings indicate that 39.9% of participants articulated a well-grounded and intentional choice, reflective of a robust level of self-knowledge, while a smaller proportion (7.4%) report acute uncertainty, predominantly attributable to diminished motivation, insufficient familial encouragement, and limited access to educational and professional guidance. Situated between these polarities, the majority of students occupy intermediary stages of the decision-making process, where hesitations are shaped by external opinions, anxieties regarding the future, and the pursuit of social validation. Data analysis substantiates the view that consistent emotional and pedagogical support from both family and school fosters autonomous and responsible decision-making, whereas deficits in self-understanding render students more susceptible to external pressures. Accordingly, in order to construct authentic educational pathways congruent with their aspirations, young people require specialized counseling, access to pertinent informational resources, and a learning environment designed to sustain their holistic development.*

Keywords: *decision-making factors; educational orientation; Generation Z*

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Introduction

As the mother of a 12th-grade student, one of the authors of this article is personally familiar with the boundless imagination, the fears, but also the freedom to create, to lose, and then to rediscover that are all embedded in the process of choosing a future educational and professional pathway. Both authors, as university teachers involved in presenting the educational offer of the institution where they work, have also come to realize that the educational guidance of high school students we meet on such occasions deserves a more consistent, courageous, and encouraging trajectory -one that is better adapted to the future students of Generation Z.

Under what conditions can young people make responsible educational decisions that allow them both to explore and to respect their own identity and potential? How can we -as teachers and parents- support their choices, alleviate the pressure they experience in such situations, and improve the cooperation between universities and pre-university education in order to facilitate the transition from school to professional life? These are just some of the questions that motivated our exploratory study on the motivations and influences that shape the educational orientation of Generation Z students. In this article, after outlining the general context of the topic, we present the main findings of a survey

conducted through questionnaires and focus groups during the second semester of the 2024–2025 academic year, involving 81 high school students from Prahova County. For us, the results represented both a moment of reflection and a recognition of a fundamental truth: students need an ecosystem of support that helps them discover their identity, explore alternatives, and make realistic decisions aligned with their potential -an ecosystem that teachers and parents are called to build together.

Context

The educational orientation of young people remains a consistently relevant issue in pedagogy and in current educational policy, both globally and nationally. This is demonstrated, at the very least, by Pathways to School Success (2022), the Recommendation of the Council of Europe, which proposes a systematic framework for reducing early school leaving and improving student well-being, including through counseling and guidance measures throughout schooling. Likewise, the Law on Pre-University Education no. 198/2023 in Romania stipulates as one of the school's missions the support of students' personal development and provides the foundation for counseling and guidance services.

This growing interest is also supported by the specific traits of Generation Z, whose members are currently attending high school or entering universities. According to the Dictionary of Sociology (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1993), a generation is defined as "all those individuals born in approximately the same period of time, regardless of whether or not they are connected by kinship ties," while also denoting "the behavior of that generation shaped by the specific conditions of their lifetime period" (p. 264). Although classifications of generations differ, Generation Z is generally identified as those born between approximately 1995 and 2010. Since each generation is considered to have distinct characteristics compared to others, it is necessary in our case to outline, even briefly, the identity, core values, and preferences of Generation Z (as opposed to Millennials or Generation X), in order to better understand how its representatives relate to education and careers. Drawing on the excellent portrait of Generation Z outlined in the volume coordinated by Bonchiș (2021), we retain only the elements that differentiate these young people from earlier generations, namely: dependence on technology, multitasking ability, the desire for constant feedback, and the value placed on flexibility. With different perceptions of life fulfillment, their expectations regarding education and professional training lean toward independence, e-learning, multimodal approaches, application- and context-centered curricula, visual learning, interactive activities, project-based learning, and the use of multimedia.

Secondary education, particularly through *educational and vocational guidance and counseling*, may constitute the period in which these young people encounter events and processes that allow them to experiment with diverse situations, anticipate individual life trajectories, and construct their own identities. Emphasizing the importance of this stage, Vlăsceanu (2020) warned that "without correcting the shortcomings and risks accumulated in middle school and high school, educational institutions will increasingly hinder the personal development of children and young people, as well as the social development of communities and of the country" (p. 116). Therefore, school and career guidance is tasked with providing support and direction in choosing educational pathways and professions that align both with adolescents' personality structures and with labor

market demands. Its mission is to prepare young people to select, from a career perspective, that trajectory in professional and social life which may offer them a sense of fulfillment (Dumitru, 2008). In Romania, school guidance services (psychopedagogical and career counseling) are provided through CJRAE/CMBRAE, based on Order no. 5701/2024 and the new Regulament-cadru de organizare și funcționare a unităților de învățământ preuniversitar (ROFUIP), effective from the 2024–2025 school year (see OM no. 5726/2024 and no. 4498/2025). This regulation sets out the organization and functioning of schools, including responsibilities regarding student counseling, partnerships with CJRAE/CMBRAE, and orientation activities. Educational and formative activities with Generation Z students within this process can be effective to the extent that they succeed in addressing challenges such as the need for personalized, digitally adapted counseling, the constructive management of the tension they perceive between traditional education and non-formal/informal learning, the impact of globalization and increased educational mobility, or the risk of demotivation. A promising solution seems to lie in recommending teaching practices aligned with the profile of Generation Z, such as metacognition, AI integration, and collaborative learning (Chardonnens, 2025). Anchoring the discussion in national realities, we may refer to a recent Romanian study on access to career counseling, which found that although young people explicitly express the need for support in making educational decisions, access to career counseling services remains uneven (Hrițac & Iacob, 2025).

But what are *the motivations* and influences shaping the educational orientation of Generation Z youth? Mih (2018) defined motivation as "the totality of internal processes that activate, guide, and sustain our behaviors" (p. 356), a definition that is both classical and contemporary. To better understand the concept, we must also consider his caveat that the object of motivation is "specific," and therefore this process must be related to particular tasks, such as motivation directed toward solving the problem of choosing a future profession. Several explanatory models of motivation are known, among which we may recall Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory. The latter has shown that satisfying the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness enhances intrinsic motivation and learning engagement (Wang, Wang, Wang, Wind & Gill, 2024), with important implications for educators. An extension of Self-Determination Theory in the context of Generation Z motivation is proposed by Salvadorinho and colleagues, who add to the traditional needs three further factors: purpose, flow state, and achievement (Salvadorinho, Hines, Kumar, Ferreira & Teixeira, 2024), thereby offering a more comprehensive perspective on the needs and motivations of Generation Z in organizational settings. Similarly, a recent study found that teaching interventions designed to support psychological needs have a consistent impact on student engagement and performance (Vedder-Weiss, Roth, & Mishaeli, 2024), demonstrating that need-supportive teaching styles matter for Generation Z. So, individuals are authentically motivated not only when they can choose an activity but also when they feel competent and accepted, and when they benefit from an inclusive and diverse learning environment.

The repertoire of Generation Z's motivations is broad and diverse, encompassing both intrinsic and extrinsic forms. This is also evident in the Romanian study conducted in 2021 within the project "Practică inteligent dezvoltarea ta! (PRIDE-U), POCU 626/6/13/133138", at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE), in partnership with United Media Corporation, involving 171 Generation Z students (aged 18–30). The study revealed that 85% aspire to entrepreneurship, with the main

motivational factors identified being flexible schedules, the opportunity to be one's own boss, and the possibility of bringing their ideas to life.

Are there other mechanisms and mediators impacting this process? These include *general or specific contextual influences* (e.g., family, education, peer groups, constraints and opportunities, broader cultural and social contexts), whose effects on young people's choices are mediated by "the subjective interpretations we make of reality" (Mih, 2018, p. 357). This highlights both the complexity of motivational mechanisms -"unexpected reorientations in the dynamics of motivational and behavioral phenomenology" (*ibidem*), and their facilitative or inhibitive role in decision-making.

Thus, Generation Z has a distinct set of values compared to Millennials, with axiological orientations shaping their educational choices that emphasize individualism, the search for meaning, and critical attitudes toward authority (Dokoupilová, Cogiel & Fero, 2024). Authors such as Li, Shi & Feng (2025) argue that Generation Z has created a socio-emotional framework different from that of previous generations, with social media playing a significant role in their occupational and educational choices. Peer support and online communities such as Study with Me reduce test anxiety and mediate academic motivation (Hou, Jin, He & Wang, 2025). We must also not overlook the role of socio-economic factors in shaping young people's educational and professional choices. Suditu (2012) demonstrate that the family's socio-economic status is a strong determinant of educational aspirations and access to educational resources. Finally, parental involvement continues, as always, to have positive effects on academic performance, though these vary depending on the type of involvement and the student's age (Wang & Wei, 2024).

Methodology

The aim of this study is to identify and analyze the factors underlying the decisions of Generation Z youth in choosing a university, emphasizing how personal values, individual perceptions, and the specific social context of this generation influence their educational and professional trajectories. To achieve this aim, the following *objectives* were established: a) To determine the interaction between personal and social factors in the decision-making process regarding university choice among twelfth-grade students and b) To investigate the specific characteristics of Generation Z in relation to values and criteria guiding professional orientation.

The research sample consisted of 81 twelfth-grade students from both theoretical tracks (real and humanistic profiles) and technological tracks, attending different high schools across Prahova County (from the cities of Ploiești, Urlați and Mizil). Two *research methods* were employed, namely the questionnaire survey and the focus group. The questionnaire was applied through the Google Forms application, and all 81 students who responded to the questionnaire also took part in group interviews, organized within their high schools. Through a series of structured questions, the administered questionnaire had as its primary objective the identification of the factors influencing young people's choice of university, such as vocation, social pressure, and career opportunities. In addition, attention was given to understanding how these factors interact and how they shape students' final decision regarding their academic trajectory. The focus group was employed to deepen the understanding of young people's motivations and perceptions in the decision-making process; the discussions within these groups enabled

a more detailed exploration of the interaction between personal and social factors, as well as of the ways in which these are experienced across different social and educational contexts.

Results

We present below the main results of the study, by corroborating the responses received from students, both through the questionnaire and through their participation in focus groups.

Two months before graduating from high school, 39.9% of respondents stated that they had already chosen their university and specialization, being confident that they had made the right choice. This decision reflects an elevated level of self-knowledge, as they selected fields that valorize their interests, passions, and aptitudes, while also taking into account career prospects and realistic employment opportunities. Similarly, 37% of respondents affirmed that their choice of university was made entirely independently of external expectations, or was only minimally influenced by them. This attitude underscores students' decision-making autonomy and their capacity to make choices aligned with their own convictions and objectives, without yielding to external pressures. 18.5% of the surveyed students stated that they had chosen a university and specialization for their undergraduate studies, yet they face certain uncertainties regarding this decision. Among the reasons cited are doubts about the compatibility between the requirements of the chosen field and their own aptitudes, lack of clear information about the study program, fear that their choice may not provide sufficient employment opportunities, as well as uncertainty about their ability to cope with academic demands. Notably, the same respondents indicated that their decision was influenced by social pressures-parental expectations, the opinions of friends, and general societal trends-factors that have amplified their uncertainty. These hesitations suggest that the process of self-knowledge and vocational orientation is still in formation and emphasize the necessity of vocational counseling sessions. Their choice thus appears as the outcome of the interaction between personal aspirations and external influences, a dynamic that can affect both the clarity of their decision and their confidence in the educational pathway ahead. 30.9% of the surveyed students stated that, although they have not yet made a final decision regarding their undergraduate studies, they are considering several preferred options and intend to decide in the near future. Their hesitation is determined by the absence of a clear direction concerning their own interests and aptitudes, the fear of making a wrong choice that could affect their professional trajectory, as well as the difficulty of accurately evaluating information about study programs and related career opportunities. The same respondents also mentioned that the opinions of those around them-parents, friends, and peers-exert a significant influence on their decision-making process, though not perceived as coercive.

This situation indicates that young people are engaged in an active process of exploration, balancing their own aspirations with suggestions from their social environment, thereby underscoring the importance of educational counseling for making responsible and well-founded decisions. 12.3% of students have not yet made a clear decision regarding their choice of university, remaining in a phase of analysis-a reality that is natural for the transitional period between high school and higher education. 7.4% of students find themselves in a pronounced state of uncertainty regarding their educational future. They reported that they have no clear plan and do not know which university to choose. The analysis of their responses points to several main factors contributing to this situation: a) The absence of self-knowledge and motivation: these

students encounter difficulties in identifying their own interests, strengths, and the confidence needed to succeed in the baccalaureate examination. b) Limited access to educational and professional information: these students are insufficiently acquainted with the options available in higher education and lack a clear understanding of the requirements and prospects associated with different specializations; c) Lack of familial support-these students do not benefit from guidance or encouragement from their families. d) Personal problems-in certain cases, the state of indecision is associated with factors such as family-related difficulties, which impair students' ability to concentrate on their educational future. The results illustrate that these students require individualized support to overcome their state of uncertainty, either in the form of psychological counseling to better understand their emotions and barriers and/ or vocational counseling to assist them in discovering their interests and selecting an appropriate professional pathway. The majority of students (95%) believe that this decision should result from a harmonious integration of vocation -understood as personal interests, passions, and aptitudes- with realistic career opportunities.

The distribution of students' responses regarding university choice outlines a stratified decision-making landscape situated between two poles: on the one hand, nearly 40% of respondents exhibit a high level of self-knowledge and autonomy, managing to make a responsible and realistic educational decision; on the other hand, a small proportion (7.4%) face pronounced uncertainty, lacking motivation, vocational clarity, and the necessary support. Between these poles lies half of the student cohort, positioned at various stages of the decision-making process-some influenced by external pressures, others engaged in active exploration yet still uncertain of the appropriate direction. This variation reflects the defining traits of Generation Z: a desire for authenticity and adaptability, but also the challenges engendered by informational overload, social pressure, and the acute need to balance personal identity with socio-economic realities.

In order to maintain objectivity and rigor, it must be acknowledged that, although the perspective offered by our exploratory study on the decision-making process of 12th-grade students is valuable, certain *limitations* cannot be overlooked. The sample size is relatively small, with limited representativeness and reduced diversity: all students come from a single county (Prahova), an area with specific socio-economic and cultural characteristics, and there is a lack of balanced coverage of all high school profiles and student backgrounds. From a methodological standpoint, the absence of triangulation, as well as the fact that the study was conducted two months before the Baccalaureate exam -when many students may reconsider their choices depending on their results- raises a number of additional limitations. Consequently, the study could be expanded by including in-depth individual interviews or by analyzing official statistical data on the university pathways of high school graduates, as well as by investigating other relevant factors such as economic aspects (e.g., study costs, family's financial situation, distance to university) or the institutional image (for instance, the prestige of the university), beyond the emphasis we placed on self-knowledge and social influences. Considering the specific characteristics of Generation Z, a potential comparison with other generations (Millennials, Generation X) also remains an interesting direction for future research, in order to highlight possible differences in educational motivations and decision-making processes.

Conclusions and implications

Our study examines the educational decision-making of Generation Z high school students in a specific socio-economic and cultural context (Prahova County, Romania, in school year 2024-2025) and wants to show how enhanced cooperation between universities and pre-university education can better support students' transition from school to professional life. Generation Z holds the potential to construct responsible educational pathways coherent with their own aspirations, provided that they are supported through adequate counseling, access to relevant information, and an environment conducive to personal and vocational development.

We would like to put forward a few practical recommendations for teachers and parents in light of the findings of our study and taking into account the specifics of this generation outlined in the theoretical substantiation part:

- *The need to strengthen students' and young people's self-knowledge.* Young people must be able to make decisions that are more confident and better aligned with their professional interests and career opportunities. "Who am I?" is one of the fundamental questions that teachers (but also parents) can help adolescents answer realistically, through open discussions that encourage reflection, the identification of detailed and meaningful responses to questions about their passions, motivations, or how they envision themselves in the near and more distant future. In this way, we could prevent the increasingly frequent "I don't know" response to questions that ask students to name their strengths, describe themselves in a few words, or identify aspects of their own personality (knowledge, skills, values) that could contribute to teamwork in seminar or class projects;

- *Reducing the influence of external pressure.* Our respondents declared that their choice of educational and career path was shaped by parents, peers, or social trends. Therefore, parents and teachers should act as agents who reduce, rather than reinforce, social and family pressure. In this sense, awareness among parents and peers of the impact of such pressure helps avoid imposing personal expectations or making comparisons, while guidance from teachers should empower adolescents to resist conformity pressures, to counter them, and to realize that, since each individual is unique, their educational pathway is also unique;

- *Early vocational counseling and support for the transition to higher education.* Although the students in our study were nearing the end of their final high school year, many of them declared that they were still in an exploratory stage, torn between personal aspirations and external suggestions. This indicates the need for earlier interventions in the form of vocational guidance -sustained, well-designed, and implemented collaboratively by specialists from both pre-university and higher education. Such efforts should not be concentrated only in the final year of high school, but should extend at least into the first year of university, when uncertainties and pressures may persist or even intensify. For this reason, information about university programs, professional opportunities, and career pathways should be made more accessible and transparent for high school students. Universities should also prioritize mentoring programs, optional courses dedicated to self-knowledge, time management, and career planning, meetings with professionals and alumni who can share real experiences, as well as the creation of student-friendly spaces that support adaptation to academic life. Many recent projects at the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiești -such as AVI ("Secure Your Professional Future"), EDIS 4 ("Inclusive Quality Education for Increasing Access and Participation

in Higher Education"), FAST ("Facilitating Access to Studies for Young People"), and LOGOS ("Optimal Links between Pre-university and Higher Education for Generating Learning Opportunities and Academic Success")- respond to these needs (see more at https://www.upg-ploiesti.ro/index.php/programe-si-proiecte/);

- *Personalized support for undecided and vulnerable young people*. Since 7.4% of respondents acknowledged that lack of family support, personal issues, or lack of motivation were factors contributing to their uncertainty and anxiety regarding educational choices, we believe it is essential to ensure tailored support for such students. The role of the school psychologist, vocational counselor, and parents in providing not only information but also a safe and encouraging emotional climate for adolescents facing difficult choices remains vital;

- *Balancing passion with pragmatism.* Inspired by the 95% of surveyed students who stated that their choices should harmonize passion with employment prospects, we argue that in order to foster among young people a balanced approach between "what I want" and "what I must do," between vocation and pragmatism, teachers should consistently demonstrate in their classes the link between the subjects they teach and their professional applications. At the same time, parents should promote useful skills, encouraging messages, and the understanding that while passion matters, it is equally important to be able to integrate successfully into the labor market with the competencies one has developed.

Through an integrated approach that encompasses both psychological support and early vocational guidance, the educational system can become a crucial pillar in fostering the autonomy and responsibility of young people. Thus, investment in the support offered to them is not merely a necessity but also a guarantee of a future society that is more balanced, adaptable, and better prepared to meet the challenges of the contemporary world.

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