

## Determinants of Generation Z's School Orientation and Career Choice

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### Abstract

*In the context of the globalized society where the digital revolution has projected waves of economic, political, cultural, family, etc. dimensions, we are discussing the digital generation which, due to its psychological profile, has been given various names: Generation Z, Wireless Generation, Wi-Fi Generation, Facebook Generation, Instant Generation, etc. Considering the common patterns of young people who belong to this generation - of thinking and relating to themselves, to society, to the activity carried out - the purpose of the study is to identify the factors that influence them in their school orientation and professional choice. The sample is made up of 90 students enrolled in the first year of undergraduate university study programs from the faculties of Humanities and Sciences and Economic Sciences of the Petroleum and Gas University of Ploiești. In order to collect relevant information regarding the determining factors in the school orientation and professional choice of young people belonging to generation Z, a questionnaire-based survey was used, applied online to first-year students enrolled in various specializations belonging to the two faculties mentioned above. Also, a focus group discussion proved to be useful to identify details about young people's aspirations, expectations and representations regarding school and professional orientation. The analysis of the data obtained following the application of the questionnaire, but also during the focus-group discussion, highlighted the different benchmarks that the young generation Z have in shaping their professional approach, beyond the common patterns impregnated by the digital society. The difference is given by the extent to which they are concerned with looking for answers to the questions "who am I?", "what do I want to become?", based on which they can outline their self-identity.*

**Keywords:** technology, generation Z, school guidance, professional orientation, self-identity

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## 1. Introduction

In the context of the globalized, digitally interconnected world, which leaves its mark on all the parameters of human development (social, family, cultural, economic, political, etc.), people are talking about a new generation, namely, generation Z. Some authors from the international specialized literature includes generation Z in the period 1997 - until now, while others are of the opinion that this generation is represented by those born in the period 1995-2012; after this year the Alpha generation is taking shape, whose psychological profile is still in their attention.

Referring to the dimensions of the digital revolution, the period in which this generation was born, Bonchiş (2021) presents the various names that have been attributed to it: the Net Generation, the Digital Generation, the Wireless Generation, the Wi-Fi Generation, the Facebook Generation, the Instant Generation, Hic et nunc generation etc. By association with the other generations, the same author sketches a representative picture of generation Z, revealing specific aspects.

Therefore, living in the middle of some of the most developed and sophisticated social networks, the Net generation differentiates itself from the other generations both by the style of clothing and by the way in which they access and process information; also, by the forms of communication and the ways of expressing emotions, through the attitudes it has towards family, school, career, religion.

Born into a digitally integrated world, young people of this generation are more concerned with getting information using media than traditional text. They also prefer iconic language over communication through the written or spoken word, hence a number of visual cognition-predominant skills that enable the digital native to find, analyze, interpret, use, and create images that facilitate probing a certain context. Visual understanding is connected with visual thinking, which, in addition to visualization, also involves the representation of notions, knowledge in the form of various structures (diagrams, drawings, models, etc.) that reflect the way the individual perceives, interprets and imagines them. Against the background of practicing visual thinking and related processes, visual intelligence develops, the digital native having the ability to graphically-visually represent certain ideas, to explore the surrounding environment, to orientate in space.

Because of the influences of the surrounding environment, research (Peterson, 2014; Kemp, 2014; Arar & Öneren, 2018) reveals that the thinking patterns of these young people are different from those of other generations; these digital native speakers have a more prominent part of the brain responsible for visual ability, which makes visual forms of learning more effective. Strongly oriented towards high technology, alongside these, kinetic skills support Gen Z's preference for play-based activities and experiential learning; young people are used to quickly accessing the information they process at the same pace and, not infrequently, superficially as they exhibit multitasking behaviors, solving several tasks simultaneously.

Born into a global society where affluence provides the cadence of unfolding, instant connectivity brings information overload, visual and sound stimulus excess, competition excess, predominantly intellectual interests and activities, coupled with a permanent desire for change. All this gives rise to the syndrome of accelerated thinking, which is a characteristic of the generation we are discussing. Gorgos (1985, p. 75, apud. Bonchiș, 2021, p. 133) defines the syndrome of accelerated thinking 'by an extremely rapid chaining of ideas in which the number of associations multiplies but loses in depth. The evocations are exacerbated but are minimized by numerous digressions that interrupt the main thread of speech, and the disturbances of attention make the subject unable to focus on a precise topic'.

In order to satisfy these young people's learning needs, it is essential to insert technology in education and to reorganize the educational process from a digital perspective. Thus, a new educational reality, represented by e-learning, m-learning, u-learning, creates appropriate contexts to facilitate the digital natives' learning process. Thus, ICT by means of various search engines, web pages, games, etc., which can be easily accessed from various digital devices, as well as the flexible and personalized educational experience represent the new basis of the educational process. (Tudor, Langa & Lazăr, 2023).

Dependent on devices, the time they spend on media platforms (5-6 hours a day) has an unfavorable impact on face-to-face communication, so words, expressions, and abbreviations take on a totally unusual form for adults; shaping communication skills through oral language is difficult; attention and focus on a matter/theme is in decline; the empathic capacity is low, young people showing boredom, irritability, anger in the face of contexts that do not respond to their quick and flexible way of acting; the difficulty of being aware of both one's own affective experiences and those of others creates obstacles to behavioral adaptation. All this feeds today's young people with feelings of loneliness and dissatisfaction, generating a state of anxiety against the backdrop of emotional instability.

Beyond these aspects, the anchoring in high technology also implies the social anchoring of this generation which, being well informed on global issues, has developed different relationships, experiencing the feeling of 'togetherness' through communication on media channels. Compared to previous generations, this aspect makes it seem more socially active and more open to accepting cultural, ethnic, religious, sexual diversity, etc., often guided by the motto 'serve your community'.

In this sense the live streaming platforms create the context of online communities that manage to get young people's attention and interest, offering them a live entertaining show, consolidated on a basis of a well-prepared scenario starting from a concept. In order to create entertaining educational contexts, adapted to generation Z's interests and meant to keep their attention, Radu (2023) mentions that an important step teachers should make is to use some of the streamers' tricks used in their online meetings that attract the audience. Among these tricks, the following can be mentioned: forming a

strong community, by means of encouraging communication through asking and answering questions and by debating some issues that attract young people's preoccupations, sometimes by giving them advice; rewarding students and using an avatar as an identification mark in order to give them the feeling of belonging; creating community events to encourage team work and collaboration.

Bonchiş (2021) mentions that generation Z, which he also calls generation C - connection, communication, collaboration, creation- is anchored in the present, is brave but a little resistant to difficulties, independent and, at the same time, happy to work in a team, ambitious, nothing seems impossible to it, careerist, with a high level of self-esteem, inclined towards narcissism.

Thus, in order to prepare the future graduates to be competent in their field of study, universities should entirely re-evaluate their teaching process by organizing educational experiences around two new concepts: Classroom Laboratory (CL) și Virtual Project-Based Learning (VPBL). Based on constructivist theories, this approach emphasizes the students' active involvement in solving real-world problems, offering them opportunities to develop skills beyond their subjects of study, these skills being crucial in the present interconnected world. These skills are: efficient communication, team work, critical thinking, decision-making and problem-solving and reflexive thinking. Based on constructivist theories, this educational approach is very important (Luştea et al., 2023).

The exaggerated preoccupation of young people from generation Z on the way they look, but also on the way they are perceived by others, focuses their attention in an intense process of self-observation, self-analysis and self-reflection because, as Creţu (2009) mentions, they are in an accentuated phase of searching for self-identity. Thus, interested in finding answers to the questions 'who am I?', 'what do I want to become?', 'how do others see me?', 'how do I present myself as a person?', in order to strengthen and support their high degree of self-esteem (self-appreciation, self-respect, self-acceptance), the young people of Generation Z resort to the media to present themselves according to the standards of the group, of the community they belong to (or, perhaps, even just adhere to). We recall here the selfie culture, combined with the sharing of personal information on media channels.

At the same time, Creţu (2009) mentions that at the base of all the orientations, actions and efforts of these young people is the outline of the ideal of life. This essential vector gives meaning to all their activity and represents the synthesis of their experience and conception of life, consolidating on the outline of the physical self (somatic features), spiritual (values, aspirations, conceptions, etc.) and social self (self-concept, self-esteem, self-representation).

Although this generation was born to parents who introduced the Internet and media, they consider them old-fashioned, but on the other hand, they want to be supported, listened to and entertained, opting for entertainment. They oscillate between career and personal life, living life in terms of the following organization: 'completion of studies, financial independence from parents, travel, career, become more spiritually mature,

know exactly who I am, enjoy life before having responsibilities, follow their dreams, and then become parents, marriage taking place after giving birth to children' (Bonchiş, 2021, p. 75).

Educated, innovative and creative, open to communication and collaboration, with high technology as a working tool, these young people are prepared for the labor market facilitated by devices. They are well-informed and flexible, have quick learning skills on the job, show insight, find alternative solutions to problems and display multitasking behavior. Confident in their own strength, they are eager for rapid ascent, prefer immediate and consistent gratifications, direct feed-back, having high expectations from employers. For them, the workplace must be pleasant and attractive, offer a flexible and less demanding schedule that allows parallel jobs. In this sense, the name *homelanders* is proposed, explained by the fact that 'this generation will spend more time at home with their parents, and their jobs will adapt to online styles' (Parker, 2020, apud. Bonchiş, 2021, p. 67).

Currently, Generation Z represents about 1/3 of the entire population of the globe. Many of these young people are still studying either in vocational, secondary, post-secondary or university education, while a large part of them is already active in the labor market, having occupations that are or are not in line with vocational training and education.

Being at a stage of life in which the search for self-identity outlines the trajectory of all decisions made, goals proposed and actions taken, professional orientation and choice represent the vector that provides the cadence of the entire path to achieving self-awareness. The choice of studies and, implicitly, the profession in accordance with the structure of the personality and the requirements of society helps the young person to discover his/her uniqueness, to develop as an autonomous person, to propose clear goals and to act with dignity and responsibility to fulfill them.

Creţu (2009) presents the results of a study conducted by Erikson on how adolescents assume roles, set goals and act to achieve them. So, four categories of teenagers are mentioned, as follows:

- those who seem to immediately outline their self-identity by adhering to the conceptions and values of their parents, without thinking about their own capacities and interests. Thus, young people easily adapt to present demands, but the future can bring disappointments, as they notice that the choices made are not in accordance with the dimensions of their personality. In this circumstance, they either assume the continuity of the course, but remain unfulfilled, or suddenly change the trajectory of their life, with all the consequences that derive;

- those who find it difficult to form their self-identity because they go through a long period in which they make all the attempts to see what really suits them. These young people may often come into conflict with their family, but they acquire a positive and consistent self-identity that fits both the present and the future;

- those who waste a lot of time and energy searching for answers to the three questions - Who am I? What can I do? What will I be?- failing to make satisfactory choices;
- those who face much too high expectations from their parents and, because they cannot cope with them, do not feel appreciated, lose their self-confidence, relate negatively to their parents and look for other contexts in which to feel in out of constraints. In these circumstances, young people often engage in contexts contradictory to society's requirements, building a negative self-identity.

Regardless of the situation in which they are, it can be noticed that family is a factor that has a significant influence on the school orientation and professional choice of young people. Bîrle (Bonchiş, 2011) mentions that the family's influences can be based on: aspirations regarding a certain socio-professional status; beliefs about what success means and how it can be achieved; the behavioral patterns in the family and the types of reinforcement used; family members' experiences related to various careers, etc.

The conscious and responsible choice of the professional path, taking into account the dimensions of the personality and the demands of society, but less of external influences, helps the young person to outline his/her self-identity without deviations or delays, bringing him/her personal, professional and social satisfaction. Establishing the professional trajectory involves school orientation, which involves completing a general training program (theoretical and practical) and specialized training, carried out in an institutionalized setting (school, university, etc.); that is, the choice of a training program in a certain field of activity, intended to provide the skills required by that profession (Dumitru, 2008).

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1. Objective*

The purpose of this study is to identify the factors that influence the school orientation and professional choice of young people who belong to generation Z, taking into account the psychological dimensions and behavioral patterns that the context of the globalized world has triggered.

In this sense, the research started from the following hypotheses:

H1: The more difficulties young people encounter in the process of defining their self-identity, the more they will let themselves be influenced by external factors in their school and professional choice;

H2: If young people orient themselves consciously and responsibly in their school and professional choice, then they will acquire a positive and consistent self-identity, suitable both for the present and the future.

### *2.2. Participants*

The sample was made up of 90 students enrolled in the first year of the bachelor's degree programs of the faculties of Letters and Sciences and Economic Sciences within the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploieşti (Romanian language and literature-English language and literature, English language and literature English-French language and



literature, Informatics, Public administration, Managerial and administrative assistance, Pedagogy, Pedagogy of primary and preschool education, Accounting and management informatics, Economics of trade, tourism and services, Finance, Banks, Management, Merceology and quality management).

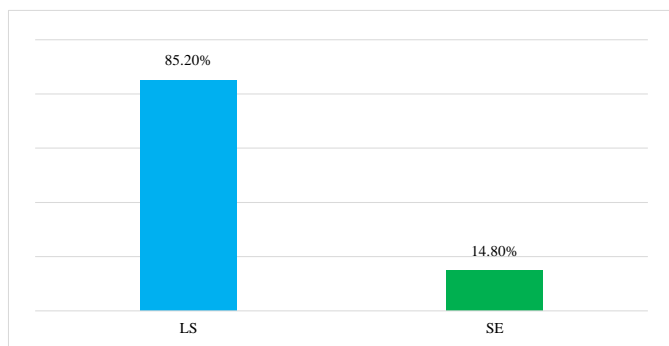


Figure 1. Faculties of the subjects of the study

Of these, 14.4% have previously followed other university undergraduate study programs, and 85.6% are in their first university undergraduate study program.

Regarding the age of the subjects, 85.6% are between 19-24 years old, 3.3% are between 25-30 years old, 2.2% are between 31-36 years old, and 8.9% are over 36 years old.

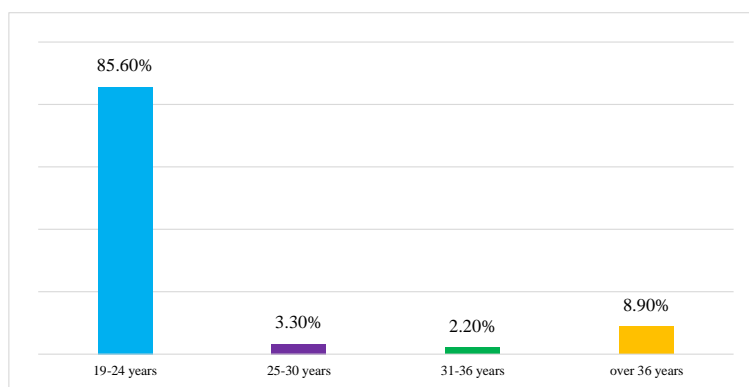


Figure 2. Subjects' age

### 2.3. Instruments and procedure

In order to collect relevant information regarding the determining factors in the school orientation and professional choice of young people belonging to generation Z, a questionnaire-based survey was used, applied online to first-year students completing various undergraduate university study programs within the two faculties mentioned above. The questionnaire was made up of 17 items organized both in the form of pre-coded questions that provided a varied list of answers and as complete as possible, and in the form of post-coded questions, open to allow the freedom of individualized expression of the answers. Also, a focus group discussion with 1/5 of them proved to be useful to identify details about their aspirations, expectations and representations regarding professional orientation and the labor market.

#### 2.4. Data analysis and interpretation

Aiming mainly to identify the factors that influence the young people of generation Z in their school orientation and professional choice, one of the items of the applied questionnaire aimed precisely at this aspect. Thus, in choosing the current bachelor's degree program, the research subjects indicated the following factors: family (23.9%); friends (6.8%); former teachers who gave them guidance in choosing the studies and professions that suit them (17%); the learning experiences offered by different positive and/or negative models responsible for the learning situations they went through (23.9%); their desire to follow a training program that will provide them with general training for the profession they want (37.8%); the belief that this study program offers them professional training consistent with the dimensions of their personality and the expectations they have (40.9%); the desire to complete a bachelor's degree program that would offer them the prospect of a high socio-professional and economic status, stable long-term job (33%); the desire to complete any undergraduate university study program in order to integrate more easily into the labor market (8%); the desire to fulfill the parents' expectations, although this study program was not among their initial options – (3.4%); admission to this study program on a budgeted place (4.5%); curricular continuity between the profile covered in high school education and the specialization offered by undergraduate university studies as they want to deepen the field and establish the necessary skills for the profession they want (10%); the curricular continuity between the profile covered in high school education and the specialization offered by the undergraduate university studies which gives them comfort in studying the subjects, although they do not have clear prospects of following a professional path in this direction (14.8%); the desire to broaden their horizon of knowledge on this field of activity, although they have no clear intentions to follow a professional path in this direction (14.8%).

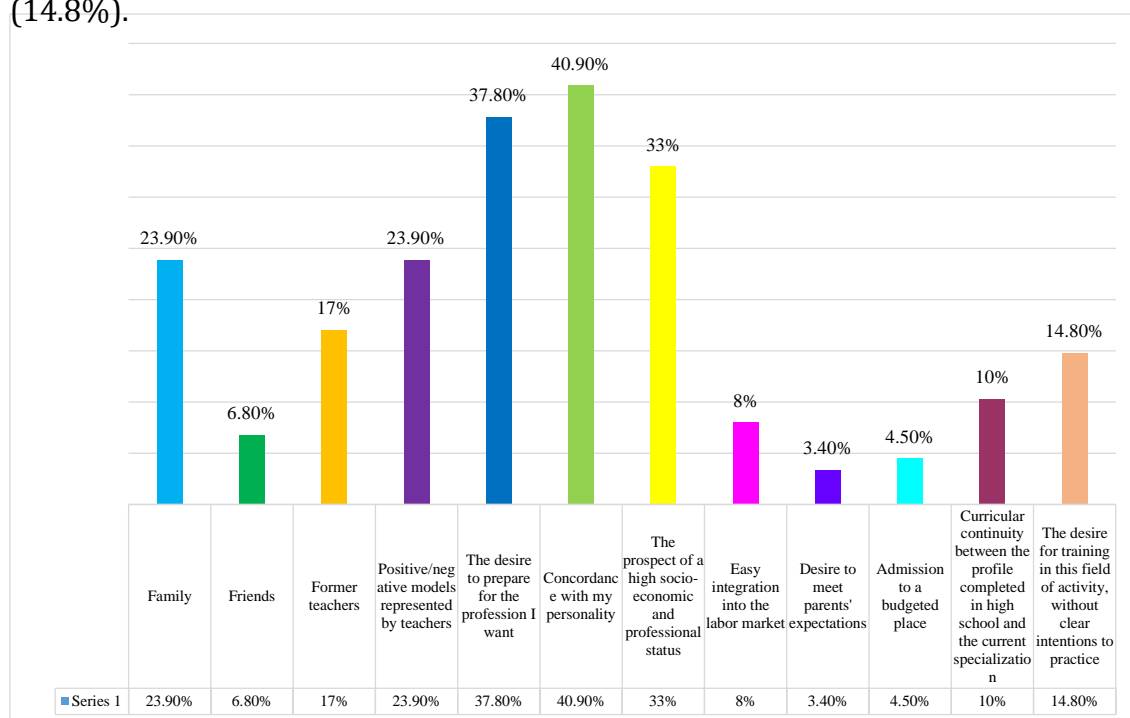


Figure 3. Determinants in the choice of the undergraduate university study program



It is worth noting that students who let themselves be influenced by various external factors (family, friends, easy integration into the labor market, admission to a budget place, etc.), without reflecting too much on their own capabilities and interests, have the age between the ages of 19-24 and this is in the first bachelor's degree program they are taking. Although, through the devices they use, they demonstrate creativity, flexibility, openness to communication and collaboration, a desire for independence, they are in the stage where they shape their self-identity, they have a strong preoccupation with the way they present themselves, as well as on how they are perceived by others. In the hope that they will choose an easier way of socio-professional adaptation that could support their self-esteem, but also the respect of those around them, they adhere to the conceptions and values of the more mature people in the social groups they frequent, without thinking too much on the questions 'who am I?', 'what do I want to become?'

Implicitly, the results of the study showed that these subjects did not have an explicit representation of their own identity at the stage when they were put in the situation of choosing their professional path. Thus, their answers can be seen in the figure below:

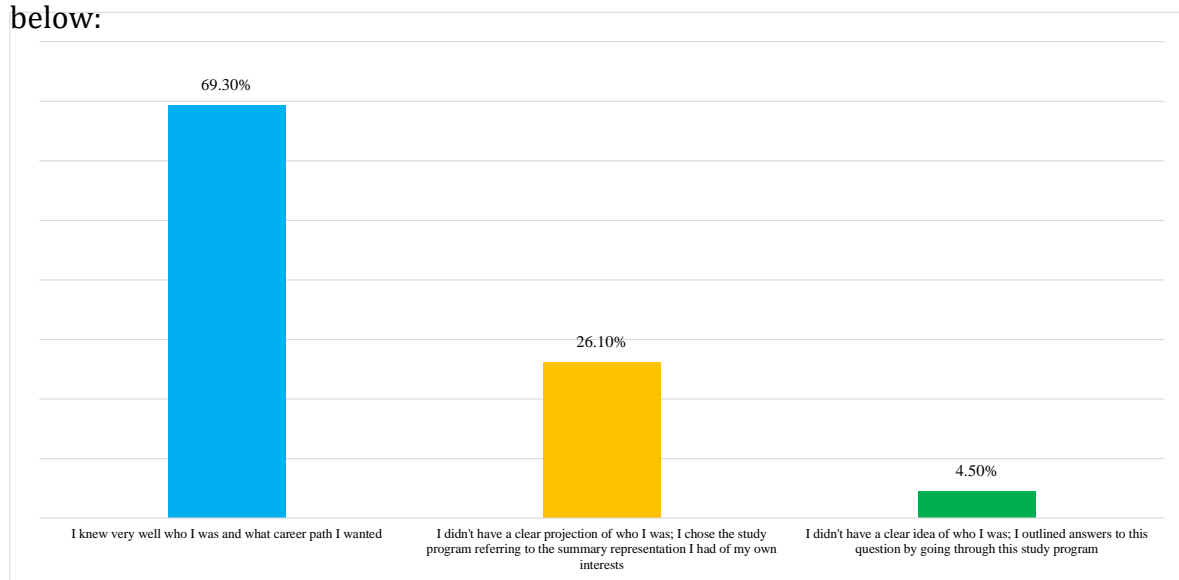


Figure 4. Self-identity and study program choice

Also, in choosing the bachelor's degree program, these subjects mentioned that they analyzed the educational offer made available only by the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti (38.6%); they researched the professional perspectives provided by each bachelor's degree program (17%); they analyzed the admission conditions, selecting undergraduate university programs that do not require an exam, but only a file competition (5.7%); they were superficially informed, they enrolled in several faculties and specializations, the goal being to occupy a budgeted place (3.4%).

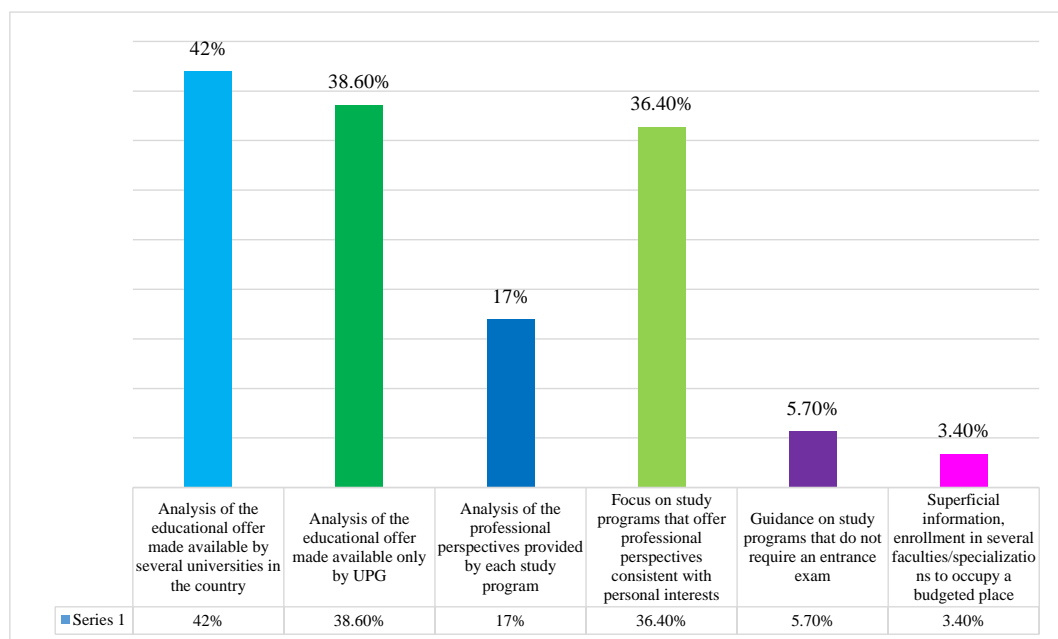


Figure 5. Stages preceding the choice of the bachelor's degree program

So, trying to make choices that will facilitate their educational and professional career, as well as adapting to the labor market, young people seek to outline a vague answer to the questions 'who am I?', 'what do I want to become?' beyond a well-defined trajectory, but only vastly outlined by the advice coming from the outside. The representation of these results creates the prerequisites for the validation of the first working hypothesis: the more difficulties young people encounter in the process of defining their self-identity, the more they will be influenced by external factors in their school and professional choice.

On the other hand, 69.3% of the subjects mentioned that at the time of choosing the study program they knew quite well who they are, what they can do, what skills they have and what they want to become in terms of their professional development. Part of them are the subjects who are over 25 years old and who are completing (or not) the second bachelor's degree program (14.4%). Being in the stage of youth, they have shaped their self-identity by doing all the trials during adolescence to see what really suits them. Thus, they report that the factors that influenced them to follow the study program in which they are currently enrolled are: the desire to follow a training program that will provide them with general training for the profession they want and the belief that the program of studies chosen offers them professional training in accordance with the dimensions of their personality and with the expectations they have.

At the same time, 54.9% of the young people who mention that at the time of choosing the study program they knew quite well what professional path they wanted are aged between 19-24. Although they are in the process of defining their self-identity, they have solid inner landmarks that guide them in the trajectory of all the decisions they make and the actions they take. Thus, the entire list of factors that were the basis of the choice of the

current study program targets aspects related to the intrinsic motivation of young people to prepare for the profession they aspire to. In this sense, the young people mentioned that before choosing the bachelor's degree program they are currently studying, they analyzed the educational offer made available by several universities and, implicitly, by the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiești and selected study programs that offered them professional perspectives consistent with their interests, expectations and personality dimensions.

At the end of the first year of study, 68.2% of the subjects who mentioned that they chose the specialized training program according to their personal wishes and interests, state that they are satisfied with the decision made because their expectations were met. These results create the prerequisites for the validation of the second working hypothesis: if young people are consciously and responsibly oriented in their school and professional choice, then they will acquire a positive and consistent self-identity, suitable both for the present and the future. A large part of the young people who did not have a clear representation of their self-identity and the professional path they wanted to follow, at the time of choosing the bachelor's degree program, mentioned that they have not yet evaluated the decision made because they have enough time to complete various situations and learning experiences to discover what really suits them (27.3%). Also, after completing the first year of study, 4.5% of them answered that the decision taken regarding school and professional orientation is categorically wrong because they were driven to fulfill their parents' expectations, without taking into account their own options.

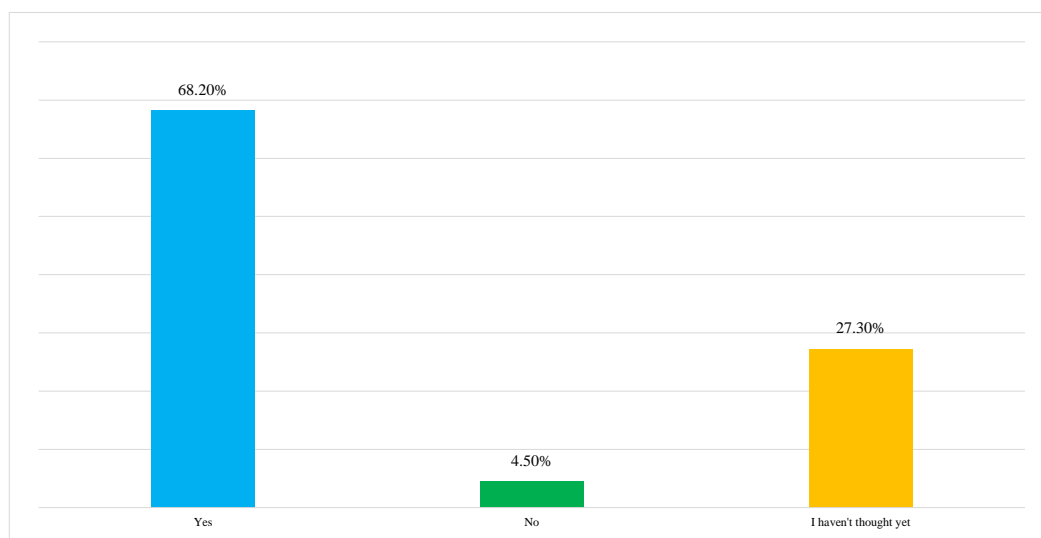


Figure 6. The chosen study program, an inspired decision?

Beyond the degree of assumption and responsibility in choosing the school and professional path, among the expectations that young people have from the workplace the following can be mentioned: employment with a work contract for an indefinite period that offers them stability (61.4%); employment with a fixed-term employment contract to have more freedom to go through different professional experiences (5.7%); ensuring

a job that is consistent with professional training, with the skills they have (40.9%); securing a position that is not necessarily consistent with their professional training; they are flexible, perceptive, eager for challenges and easily adapt to any demands that the job brings (8%); to offer the possibility of professional development and, implicitly, rapid promotion, higher status and salary (28.4%); to ensure a pleasant, safe work environment (22.7%); to offer a flexible schedule, which allows parallel jobs and, implicitly, the fulfillment of tasks from anywhere (18.2%).

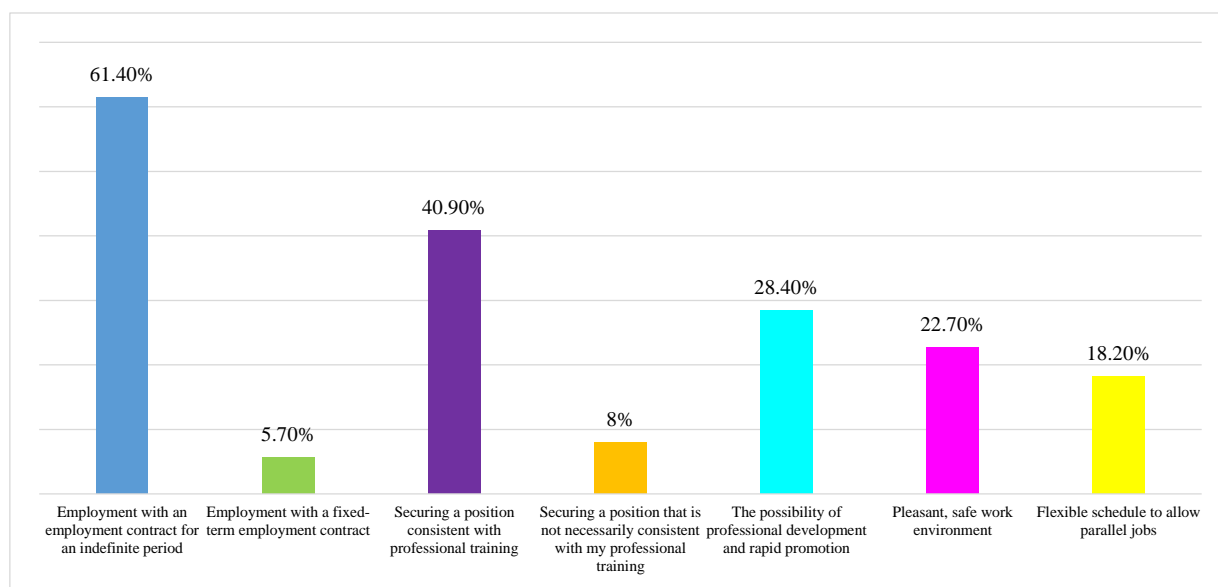


Figure 7. Expectations from the workplace

It can be noticed that the subjects who chose the study program in correlation with the personality structure, with their own ambitions, aspirations and capabilities, but also with the demands of society, tend towards jobs that offer stability over a long period of time, which are consistent with professional training and which offer the prospect of rapid promotion, preferably in a pleasant, friendly environment.

On the other hand, the subjects who chose the study program influenced by various external factors, without thinking too much about their own capacities and interests, rely on their flexibility, adaptability and insight, tending to jobs that are not necessarily consistent with their professional training, but still gives them the freedom to make various attempts, to go through different professional experiences.

All the variables that have so far shaped the choice of career path in one form or another reflect, unequivocally, the degree to which the subjects of the study have configured their career plan. Thus: 53.4% mention that they already have a defined career plan and all their professional actions are directed towards its fulfillment; 17% mention that they have a structured career plan, but they do not act persistently to fulfill it because, over time, the milestones of the plan can change; 21.6% mention that they do not have a career plan already thought out, considering that they still have enough time to make a decision; 8% state that they will be surprised by what destiny will offer them when they graduate the faculty.

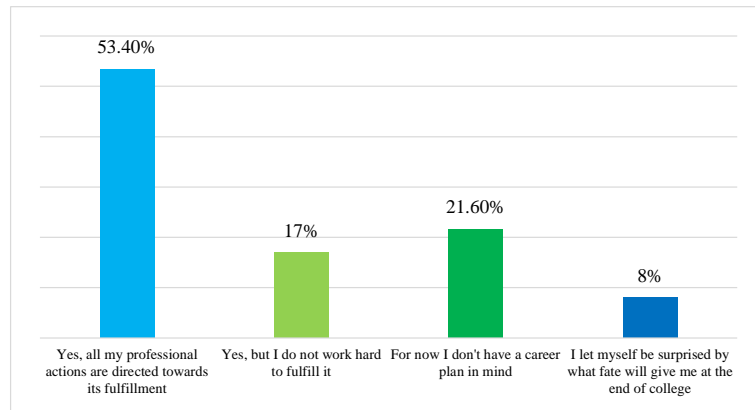


Figure 8. The existence of a career plan as the basis of the actions taken  
 Regarding the connotations that the study subjects attribute to professional success, these are the following: high socio-economic status (15.9%); high professional status (13.6%); balance between personal and professional life (73.9%); practicing a profession in the preferred field (55.7%).

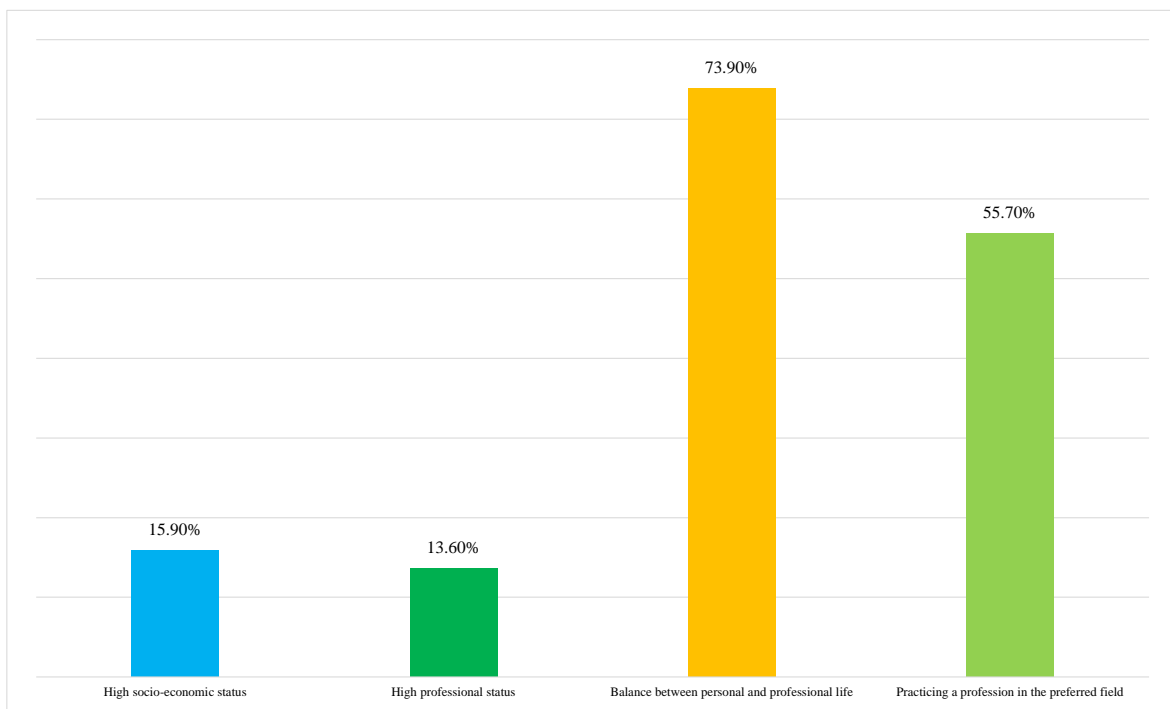


Figure 9. Connotations given to professional success

In order to reach these desired stages, the study subjects mention the need for: continuous desire for self-improvement, intrinsic motivation (I do what I do because I like it, because I can and want to become an expert), long-term maintenance of mental focus on the established plan, patience, perseverance, interpersonal communication skills, digital skills. In this context, the attributes that they consider necessary to cultivate are represented in the figure below.

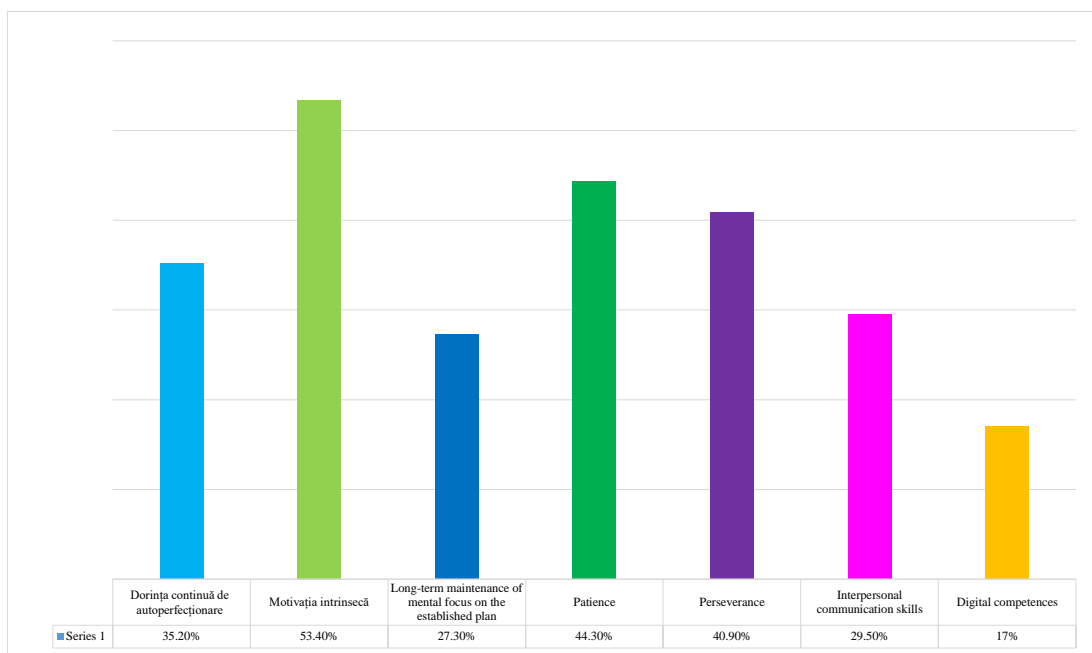


Figure 10. Attributes necessary to be cultivated to achieve professional success

Although 1/3 of the study subjects are in the process of defining their self-identity, not having a defined career plan, based on which to act in order to prepare both for easy integration into the labor market and to achieve professional success, however, the whole batch of subjects objectively appreciates the attributes they need to develop, demanded by the labor market in the global society.

### 3. Conclusion

Beyond the common features that the dimensions of global society impregnate in the profile of all young people belonging to generation Z (digital language speakers, device addicts, kinetic skills, preference for experiential learning, accelerated thinking, multitasking behavior, innovative, flexible, eager for rapid ascent, etc.), they have different benchmarks for shaping their professional approach, assuming roles and taking action to achieve objectives.

The distinction is determined by the extent to which young people are concerned with submitting to a process of self-observation and self-analysis, looking for answers to the questions 'who am I?', 'what do I want to become?'. The approach they choose to implement to outline their self-identity and, implicitly, their ideal of life, gives meaning to their entire activity. Thus, young people who think about their own capabilities, interests and aspirations, encouraged by family and friends, have a clear idea of who they are and what they want to become, responsibly choosing the school and professional path according to certain inner landmarks, such as: the vocation for a certain profession, the desire to follow a training program that ensures their general preparation for the field



they aspire to, the belief that the chosen study program offers them professional training consistent with the dimensions of their personality and the expectations they have.

On the other hand, young people who wander on the path of defining their own identity, not having a clear representation of their own capabilities and interests, are confused in choosing their school and professional path, allowing themselves to be influenced by various external factors. They adhere to the conceptions and values of the various people who are part of the social groups they attend, they choose study programs that do not take them too much out of their comfort zone, relying on the high capacity for adaptability and flexibility in achieving professional success that, those several of them equate it with reaching a high socio-economic status.

Thus, the optics through which young people look at the entire school and professional approach determines different directions of action, assuming the provided provisions, profiles different objectives, but also varying levels of achieving professional satisfaction and self-fulfillment.

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