

Good Vibes Only: Gen Z Emerging Adult's Perspective on Career Planning

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ABSTRACT

Gen Z refers to individuals born between 1995 and 2010, often characterized by high curiosity and by growing up in a fully digital world. These traits may influence how they plan and approach their careers. This study explores how Gen Z individuals, during their emerging adulthood, perceive their current careers and plan for their future, as well as the factors they consider in this process. Therefore, this study aims to understand, explore, and explain specific aspects of Gen Z's career planning. This research employs a qualitative methodology with observation and semi-structured interview techniques to comprehensively explore the dynamics of Gen Z's career planning journey. The study involved three female students aged 21–22 as participants. Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which revealed several key themes: career identity exploration, career decision inspiration, career preference, career meaning, and perceived career constraints. The findings indicate that Gen Z's unique characteristics, their immersion in the digital landscape, and personal goals significantly influence their career meaning and career planning, along with how they perceive occupation. This research provides valuable insights for families, educators, and labor market practitioners to better support Gen Z in navigating their career journeys, ultimately helping to create work environments that align with Gen Z's aspirations.

Keywords: Career Planning, Gen Z, Technology, Emerging Adulthood, Digital Natives.

INTRODUCTION

Each generation has its own pattern in planning careers, and Generation Z (Gen Z), which has begun to enter the workforce and must think carefully about its future, is no exception. There are various classifications for the birth year range of Gen Z, spanning from around 11 to 28 years old. This wide age range includes individuals in both adolescence and adulthood stages (Bencsik et al., 2016; Cilliers, 2017; Murray Arnett, 2019). Gen Z individuals aged 18–28 are actively planning their careers because these foundational years shape the trajectory of their professional lives. Career planning begins with decisions about pursuing further education or entering the workforce and continues with how they maintain and develop their careers. A career is understood as the process of planning an individual's life in terms of work, education, and personal growth, as well as balancing these aspects (Sampson et al., 2020).

Research on Gen Z in the professional field has become increasingly prevalent. One of the most discussed factors is the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on Gen Z's preference for flexible work arrangements, with many opting for work-from-home (WFH), hybrid setups, or online-based jobs that still involve in-person interaction. Harari et al. (2022) demonstrated that

these social changes have made the majority of Gen Z more open and adaptable to rapid change compared to previous generations. However, the study also showed that Gen Z displays lower resilience than earlier generations. This finding aligns with Indonesian public opinion expressed across various platforms, suggesting that Gen Z tends to give up easily but remains highly curious and technologically adept.

Rachmawati (2019) conducted a literature review of multiple studies on Gen Z, especially in the professional domain, and found several similarities. One major similarity is that Gen Z is tech-savvy, flexible, and more realistic than previous generations, yet also less ambitious and more materialistic. In the workplace, Gen Z tends to prefer jobs offering flexible hours, openness to business travel without the desire to settle, opportunities for feedback from superiors, and roles that provide personal connections. Gen Z values training and feedback that support their growth within organizations, as these experiences make them feel acknowledged by their superiors.

According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory (in Santrock, 2011), the term "Emerging Adulthood" encompasses two stages: Identity vs. Identity Confusion and Intimacy vs. Isolation. Consequently, many emerging adults are still searching for jobs that fit their identities while also seeking relationships with others, often viewing their superiors as mentors rather than bosses. Emerging adults frequently change jobs in short periods—a behavior referred to as "job hopping"—to find roles that align with their identity or environments that satisfy their need for positive workplace relationships. Organizations that fail to meet emerging adults' expectations, such as by not providing sufficient training, may experience higher turnover rates.

In an initial interview, Shagita shared that she often thought of quitting her job or finding new employment because her supervisors undermined her performance without offering guidance for improvement. She also noted that few Gen Z employees remain in one role for more than a year.

Arnett (2019) argues that for emerging adults to thrive professionally, they must effectively utilize personal resources according to work demands and contexts. Companies can support Gen Z's development by offering tailored training that aligns with each employee's field and developmental stage. However, some Gen Z employees expect organizations to provide financial support for professional development and certification programs. Employees unable to attend such programs due to socioeconomic barriers may struggle to navigate the Identity vs. Identity Confusion stage successfully. For instance, a Quora user, Alvais Arkan, expressed frustration with his company's policy of requiring specialized certifications while demanding employees self-fund these credentials, despite insufficient compensation. This example illustrates the tension between organizational expectations and Gen Z employees' financial realities and developmental needs.

Amid extensive commentary, stigmatization, criticism, and support directed toward Gen Z by older generations, fundamental questions arise: does Gen Z genuinely demonstrate lower resilience than its predecessors, or is it navigating different developmental contexts and challenges? Viewed through the lens of emerging adulthood theory, many behaviors labeled as "weakness" may instead reflect normative identity exploration, boundary testing, and relationship seeking typical of this developmental stage across generations.

Although numerous studies have examined Gen Z characteristics and workplace behaviors, most originate from Western contexts—particularly North America and Europe—limiting their applicability to Indonesian contexts, where cultural values, family structures, educational systems, and labor market conditions differ significantly. Despite growing recognition of Gen Z's presence in the workforce, significant research gaps remain. First, there is limited empirical research specifically examining Gen Z's career planning processes, particularly through qualitative methodologies that capture rich experiential and subjective meaning. Second, few published studies explore Indonesian Gen Z's career planning within their unique cultural, economic, and social contexts. Third, most existing research relies on quantitative methods that assess career preferences or workplace behaviors, leaving qualitative exploration of the phenomenological experience of career planning—how Gen Z individuals understand, experience, and navigate decision-making—largely unexplored.

Addressing these gaps is crucial for several reasons. Gen Z currently represents the largest cohort entering Indonesian universities and workplaces, making it essential for educational institutions, employers, policymakers, and career counselors to understand their career planning processes. Misalignment between Gen Z expectations and organizational practices can result in high turnover, wasted training investments, and instability in the workforce. Furthermore, as Gen Z is expected to dominate the Indonesian workforce within the next decade, their successful career development is vital for sustaining economic productivity and social stability.

The novelty of this research, titled *GOOD VIBES ONLY: GEN Z EMERGING ADULT'S PERSPECTIVE ON CAREER PLANNING*, lies in its qualitative phenomenological exploration of Indonesian Gen Z emerging adults' lived experiences of career planning. It captures their subjective perspectives, meaning-making processes, and the contextual factors shaping their career journeys. By viewing career planning as an experiential phenomenon rather than a collection of discrete behaviors or preferences, this study offers depth and nuance beyond what quantitative studies can provide. Additionally, it addresses the significant research gap related to Gen Z career development in the Indonesian context, providing culturally grounded insights rather than extrapolations from Western samples.

The purpose of this study is to understand, explore, and explain specific aspects of Gen Z's career planning processes from their own perspectives. Specifically, the research investigates: (1) how Gen Z emerging adults conceptualize and understand the meaning of a "career"; (2) what factors inspire and influence their career decisions; (3) what preferences characterize their ideal career contexts; (4) how they explore and develop career identities; and (5) what constraints they perceive in pursuing their aspirations.

The benefits of this research extend to multiple stakeholders. For families, the findings offer insights into how to support Gen Z members' career development while respecting their autonomy and developmental needs. For educators and career counselors, the results inform the creation of career guidance programs, curricula, and support services aligned with Gen Z's unique traits. For employers and human resource practitioners, understanding Gen Z's career planning processes enables the development of recruitment strategies, onboarding programs, training initiatives, and retention practices that resonate with Gen Z's values and expectations. For policymakers, the findings contribute to evidence-based policymaking addressing youth employment, education-to-work transitions, and workforce development.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative methodology to examine the lived experiences and phenomenological perspectives of Gen Z individuals engaged in career planning processes. Qualitative approaches enable rich, detailed exploration of how participants subjectively understand, experience, and make meaning of career planning—insights unavailable through quantitative methods.

This study utilized a phenomenological paradigm, which does not prescribe fixed or predetermined interpretations of events or experiences. Phenomenology assumes that multiple valid interpretations of lived experiences exist, rejecting notions of singular "correct" or "incorrect" understandings. Instead, phenomenology seeks to uncover the essential structures of experience as participants themselves perceive and construct meaning.

The analytical approach employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative method examining specific phenomena in extensive detail through in-depth case examination. IPA involves intensive analysis of individual cases followed by cross-case comparison to identify patterns revealing similarities and differences between cases, ultimately clarifying and explaining the phenomenon under investigation (Eatough & Smith, 2017). IPA's idiographic focus—emphasizing detailed examination of individual experiences before seeking commonalities—makes it particularly appropriate for exploring subjective career planning experiences.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling (Neuman, 2014), a non-probability sampling technique selecting individuals who possess specific characteristics relevant to the research question. Inclusion criteria specified:

- (1) Gender: Female participants (note: while the original design intended to include both genders, recruitment ultimately yielded only female participants)
- (2) Age: 22-25 years old, aligning with generational theory defining Gen Z as individuals currently aged 14-28 years and corresponding with Arnett's (2019) conceptualization of emerging adulthood spanning ages 18-29
- (3) Educational status: Currently enrolled eighth-semester university students, as this academic stage typically coincides with active career planning, particularly for careers aligned with chosen academic majors
- (4) Career planning engagement: Actively engaged in career planning processes, ensuring participants could provide substantive reflections on their experiences

These criteria ensured participants possessed relevant experiences while representing the specific demographic of interest—Gen Z emerging adults at a critical juncture in their educational and pre-professional trajectories. The decision to focus on eighth-semester students reflects recognition that this period typically involves intensive career planning, including decisions about graduate education, job searching, internship participation, or entrepreneurial ventures.

Three participants meeting all inclusion criteria were recruited and participated in the study: Participant 1 (Winnie, pseudonym): A 22-year-old female student majoring in Visual Communication Design with specialization in photography. Winnie has pursued career development in photography through internships and employment in her preferred field while simultaneously working in other domains to supplement income. Participant 2 (Nia,

pseudonym): A 22-year-old female student majoring in Communication Studies. Initially motivated by aspirations of becoming an actor, she chose film studies but subsequently discovered passion for social media management, leading to career direction change. Nia has professional experience as a social media manager at a restaurant and currently works as a digital marketing specialist at a shopping center. Participant 3 (Elsa, pseudonym): A 22-year-old female student majoring in Law. Her motivation to become a lawyer emerged after witnessing family members treated unfairly during an inheritance dispute, where her lawyer uncle provided legal defense. Despite believing she pursues the appropriate educational path toward her legal career goal, Elsa currently operates a business selling artificial flower bouquets rather than completing law-related internships.

These three participants provided sufficient data for IPA analysis, which prioritizes depth over breadth. While small samples limit generalizability, they enable the intensive idiographic analysis central to phenomenological inquiry.

Data collection employed semi-structured interviews, an approach involving prepared core questions while maintaining flexibility for follow-up questions exploring emerging themes and pursuing in-depth information from participants. Semi-structured interviews are semi-formal in nature, allowing conversations to flow naturally resembling casual dialogue between interviewer and interviewee while maintaining focus on research topics (Easwaramoorthy & Zarinpoush, 2006).

Interview protocols addressed multiple domains:

- (1) Career conceptualization: How participants define and understand "career" and related concepts
- (2) Career inspiration and influences: Factors, experiences, and individuals shaping career aspirations
- (3) Career preferences: Characteristics of ideal work environments, roles, and organizational cultures
- (4) Career exploration activities: Participation in organizations, internships, and other exploratory experiences
- (5) Career constraints and challenges: Perceived barriers, obstacles, or difficulties in pursuing career goals
- (6) Career planning processes: Strategies, decisions, and considerations in planning professional futures

Interviews were conducted individually, audio-recorded with participant consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Interview duration ranged from 60-90 minutes, providing sufficient time for in-depth exploration while preventing participant fatigue.

Transcribed interview data were analyzed following IPA procedures outlined by Eatough and Smith (2017), involving:

- (1) Immersive reading: Researchers read each transcript multiple times to achieve deep familiarity with participant experiences and language
- (2) Initial noting: Researchers documented descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual observations about transcript content, attending to what participants said, how they expressed themselves, and potential deeper meanings
- (3) Developing emergent themes: Initial notes were transformed into concise themes capturing essential meanings within transcript segments

- (4) Searching for connections: Relationships among emergent themes were identified, creating thematic clusters representing overarching experiential patterns
- (5) Moving to next case: Steps 1-4 were repeated for each participant transcript
- (6) Cross-case analysis: Themes from all participants were compared to identify both common patterns and unique individual variations, resulting in a final thematic structure representing the phenomenon of Gen Z career planning

Analysis was conducted iteratively, with researchers moving between individual cases and emerging cross-case patterns to ensure both idiographic depth and identification of shared essential structures.

Data credibility was established through member checking (participant feedback), a triangulation method enhancing trustworthiness. Triangulation involves using various data sources or verification methods to confirm research themes and interpretations (Candela, 2019). Member checking entails returning to research participants to verify whether collected data and interpretations accurately reflect what they conveyed and intended. Participants reviewed interview transcripts and preliminary thematic analyses, providing feedback, corrections, or elaborations. This process ensures findings represent participants' lived experiences rather than researcher impositions.

Additionally, peer debriefing with research supervisors and colleagues provided external perspectives on emerging interpretations, challenging potential researcher biases and strengthening analytical rigor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants' Background

There are three participants in this research, they are Winnie, Nia, and Elsa. All of them are 8th semester university students who are actively planning their careers. Winnie is a 22-year-old student majoring in Visual Communication Design with a focus on photography. Winnie has a passion to develop her career in photography by joining internships and working in her preferred field, but she realizes that the salary she earns is still not enough, so she works in other fields as well.

Nia is a 22-year-old student majoring in Communication Studies. Initially driven by her dream of becoming an actor, she chose to study film. However, along the way, she discovered a new passion in managing social media, which led her to change her focus. Nia has experience in working as a social media manager at a restaurant and she is currently employed as a digital marketing specialist at a shopping center.

Her motivation to become a lawyer was inspired after seeing her family being treated unfairly during an inheritance dispute, where her lawyer uncle came to their defense. Although she believes she is on the right path toward her goal, Elsa has chosen to run a business selling artificial flower bouquets rather than doing an internship related to her field of study in law.

Theme 1: Career Identity Exploration

Winnie, Nia and Elsa began to explore the work culture, the working styles, and the type of jobs they enjoy and prefer through non-academic activities. During an interview on May 8, 2024, Winnie explained "...I can talk to people, ...and I guess I always knew I was good at it". Winnie is one of the students who is quite active in participating non-academic campus

activities. She participated in all kinds of organizations that she was interested in and also joined various committees in a variety of roles.

Elsa participated in non-academic activities outside campus because she did not fit into the organizational culture and felt more comfortable joining a community that matched her interests, such as reading books and playing board games, "The book club usually meet up once a week, ... For the board game, it's only once in a while...", she explained in an interview on May 15, 2024.

Lastly, even though did not feel comfortable with the organizational environment, she still carried out her responsibilities because she did not mind the tasks assigned to her, as they aligned with her interest in marketing and social media. "I'm not really, like, active ... but I joined it to fulfill credit points ... it's not really me, actually...", she explained in an interview on May 10, 2024.

Theme 2: Career Decision Inspiration

Personal experiences and family interactions play a big role in shaping one's career inspirations. For Winnie, her interest in art came from her mother who was a photographer and dancer. Since childhood, she often participated in various art activities. "I'm just a mother's daughter, so I really want to be like my mom," she explained. Although she initially wanted to go to dance school, she eventually chose to major in Visual Communication Design, specifically photography, as a compromise between her interest and passion and her her parents' approval, as well as a tribute to her mother's footsteps.

Nia, on the other hand, looks up to her older siblings as role models. "Role models... actually from my own siblings," she said. Her three older siblings are successful in various fields of communication such as hospitality, media, digital marketing, and MC. Seeing their lifestyle and financial success, Nia was motivated to follow similar footsteps to achieve success and stability.

Meanwhile, Elsa was inspired by her uncle, who once mediated her family inheritance conflict. "My uncle, in quotes, 'saved' my family from right and left attacks," she explained. His assertiveness, confidence, and ability to "rescue" the family inspired Elsa to study law, so she could one day help others navigate similar challenges. All participants show that family is the main source of inspiration in choosing and pursuing their career paths.

Apart from inspiration, the biggest motivation that drives Winnie, Nia and Elsa in determining their career paths is the desire to earn a big income. Money is their main consideration in choosing their majors, jobs and career decisions. Winnie chose a major that combines art and business because of its financial potential: "Then I realized the money was there." She also started helping her father's business while developing her skills in branding and social media. Nia emphasized that money is her top priority, "Whatever that makes the most that I can," she said. She is open to any job opportunities as long as they are rewarding. While Elsa initially just wanted to join the vacation, the experience of selling bouquets made her realize that profit can come from anywhere. "The money is not bad," she said. For all three, careers are not just about passion, but also strategies to achieve financial stability.

Theme 3: Career Preference - Seeking Flexibility in Location and Time

Based on the interview results, Winnie, Nia and Elsa have a preference for flexible work in terms of time and place. Winnie dislikes static and time-restricted office jobs, she mentioned "I don't wanna be stuck at an office..." in the interview. She prefers jobs that allow for more

movement. On the other hand, Nia realized that a job with irregular working hours left her feeling exhausted and personally unfulfilled, "I ended up feeling drained and exhausted..." she said. This experience led her to switch to digital marketing, which is more flexible in terms of location, although still within the same area. Elsa was initially motivated to start a flower business to fund a vacation with her friends. However, she then saw the opportunity for flexibility in entrepreneurship, she said, "So, I started selling the flower bouquets during graduation season, and turned out I made a decent profit." This flexibility, driven by specific personal goal, align with the concept of Personal Goal and Outcome Expectation, that causes increased Self-Efficacy in carrying out these activities (Murray, 2019). For Elsa, the motivation to continue her flower business was not only because of money, but she also felt that the business was flexible enough to allow her taking orders while also staying focused on her studies.

Theme 4: Career Meaning - "A Career is a Job You Commit To"

The participants had unique reasons for choosing their majors, reflecting their personal backgrounds and interests. Winnie chose Visual Communication Design because she wanted to learn things that she could not get from her surroundings, especially art and design, which she has been pursuing since childhood through various activities such as dancing, drawing and photography. Meanwhile, Nia chose Communication Science because of its broad flexibility that allows her to pursue a career in various fields such as film, marketing, and public relations. Although Nia was initially interested in becoming an actor and making movies, she later discovered an interest in marketing during college. Elsa, on the other hand, chose to major in Law because of a personal experience in her family when dealing with an inheritance dispute. She felt inspired by her uncle who was a lawyer and wanted to understand civil and inheritance law in order to help people in similar situations.

All three participants agreed that a career is not merely a job, but a dedicated pursuit aligned with personal interests, and is integrated into one's personal life. For Winnie, a career is work that involves the heart and soul, and becomes an important part of one's life. Nia has a similar view, stating that a career is a job that is chosen based on passion, not merely to make money, but a job that is integrated with one's identity. Meanwhile, Elsa emphasized that a career is a long-term work plan that remains connected to other aspects of life. According to her, an ideal career is one that is able to coexist with personal life without losing balance.

Theme 5: Perceived Career Constraints

Based on her explanation, Winnie expressed concern about how some Gen Z individuals set overly ambitious goals while lacking the necessary preparation. She shared a story of being asked for help by someone who wanted to be a photographer, but whose portfolio and photography skills were still very basic. Winnie thinks people often think photography is easy, so they think to achieve excellent results does not require much process. However, for her, photography requires a lot of preparation and learning about the aspects of photography, which is not something that can be achieved instantly or without effort.

Winnie, Nia, and Elsa each have their own experiences of dealing and how they manage their own sense of pride. During the interview Winne explained:

"They asked me, I wanna be a photographer xxx, please help me... Her portfolio was small, the photos weren't that great either, but she was like... shamelessly pushing hard... but she set herself very, very high, I feel like Gen z is very easy to think like "I can be like this",

and I'm someone who thinks like that too ... but I know my limits, like I know I can be up there, but right now I'm not there yet, so I have to start slowly going up." - Winnie (Interview: May 8, 2024).

Discussion

This research found that Gen Z tends to be explorative, digitally creative and confident, which is influenced by self-efficacy, outcome expectations and personal goals (Šverko & Babarović, 2019; Wehrle et al., 2019a, 2019b). The main driving goal in their career direction is financial motivation, which encourages them to actively evaluate their abilities and seek opportunities to achieve financial stability.

However, overly high expectations can lead to disappointment when reality does not match expectations. Nevertheless, Gen Z is still in the stage of identity exploration (Arnett, 2019), and they tend to engage on multiple activities simultaneously instead of changing goals frequently which reflects stability in their exploration process. The “job hopping” phenomenon among Gen Z is mostly influenced by their social role as children (Lent et al., 2002), where career decisions are still influenced by parents. Therefore, they prefer jobs that are flexible in time and location. Gen Z is also brave enough to fight for their career choices despite family pressure. Strong personal goals enable them to defend their choices, while still keeping their family as the inspiration. Experiences with family also shape vocational self- concepts that are important in interpreting work and planning careers (Jia et al., 2022; Rudolph et al., 2019; Savickas et al., 2018; Šverko & Babarović, 2019; Zhai et al., 2023).

The results of this study provide insights into Gen Z's motivations and values in career planning, and can serve as a reflection for other generations to understand their behavior more deeply. The limitation of this study is that the cognitive and socio-emotional development related questions lack in-depth exploration. In addition, all participants came from middle to upper socio-economic backgrounds, so they did not represent Gen Z as a whole. Future studies are recommended to include participants from diverse economic backgrounds and conduct cross-generational comparisons.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that the career planning process of Gen Z emerging adults involves a dynamic interaction of personal ambition, family influence, and experiential learning, with financial stability as a primary aspiration shaped by self-efficacy and outcome expectations. Family members act as key role models, while non-academic engagements such as organizational and community activities foster identity exploration and skill development. Gen Z's career preferences emphasize flexibility in time and location, allowing balance between work, personal life, and well-being, and reflect a deeper pursuit of career paths aligned with values and interests rather than mere employment. For future research, expanding the sample to include varied socioeconomic, gender, and geographic backgrounds, employing quantitative methods to validate findings, conducting longitudinal studies to trace career trajectory over time, and undertaking comparative analyses with other generations—including Gen Alpha—are recommended to provide broader and more nuanced insights into career development trends.

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