

UNDERSTANDING GENERATION Z: TURKIYE'S DESTINATION IMAGE BEFORE FIRST VISIT

Compreendendo a Geração Z: a imagem da Turquia como destino antes da primeira visita

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ABSTRACT

The destination image, a subjective concept, can vary not only among tourists from different nations but also among potential tourists from different generations. This study investigates perceived image of Türkiye among Generation Z tourists from various nations who have never travelled to Türkiye before. The study adopted a qualitative research approach, collecting data through semi-structured interviews and analysing them using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that destination atmosphere and perceived social environment are the most influential factors in shaping Türkiye's destination image, whereas political and economic factors have a lesser impact. Additionally, the study identified a shift in preferences regarding accommodation and transportation types among Generation Z compared to previous generations.

KEYWORDS

Perceived image; Generation Z tourism; Destination branding; Travel behaviour; Türkiye.

RESUMO

A imagem de destino, um conceito subjetivo, pode variar não apenas entre turistas de diferentes nações, mas também entre potenciais turistas de diferentes gerações. Este estudo investiga a imagem percebida da Turquia entre turistas da Geração Z de várias nações que nunca viajaram para a Turquia antes. O estudo adotou uma abordagem de pesquisa qualitativa, coletando dados por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas e analisando-os usando análise temática. As descobertas revelam que a atmosfera do destino e o ambiente social percebido são os fatores mais influentes na formação da imagem de destino da Turquia, enquanto fatores políticos e econômicos têm um impacto menor. Além disso, o estudo identificou uma mudança nas preferências em relação aos tipos de acomodação e transporte entre a Geração Z em comparação com gerações anteriores.

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Imagem percebida do destino; Geração Z; Intenção comportamental; Turquia.

INTRODUCTION

Referring to reflection of a tangible object in the mind, perception is the design formed in consciousness by traces and symbols received from external world (Khairi & Darmawan, 2021). The manifestation of this perception shaped in consciousness, specifically directed toward a tourist destination, is known as destination image (Králiková et al., 2020). This is because the beliefs, ideas, expectations, or impressions that take shape in consciousness and transform into perception are directed toward a tangible tourist destination (Pujiastuti et al., 2023). Perceived destination image, which significantly influences a tourist's choice, is the sum of an individual's biases, imagination, and impressions about a specific environment. It is emphasized that in perceived destination image, the greater the destination's impact on the tourist's beliefs and perceptions, the higher the likelihood of attachment to the destination (Law & Cheung, 2010).

Tourism is recognized as a significant driving force for development. Successful tourism activities in a destination will activate this force, thereby increasing the region's tourism revenue (Li et al., 2018). Therefore, a common concern for all destinations is the successful promotion of tourism development and the enhancement of tourists' intentions to revisit and recommend the region (Zhang et al., 2018). Tourists' ability to exhibit these behaviours is closely related to the interpretations they form in their minds about destination, that is, their perceived destination image (Zhang & Niyomsilp, 2020). When examining destination image studies, which have become one of the most intriguing and consistently popular topics in the literature (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Ghorbanzadeh et al., 2021; Akbara & Suryantani, 2024; Sio et al., 2024), it is evident that these studies are conducted after the visit. This emphasis on post-visit experiences has limited our understanding of how images are formed before tourists arrive. By shifting the focus to pre-visit perceptions, our study highlights a dimension that has been overlooked and allows for a richer discussion of how expectations, social media exposure, and global crises shape destination image in advance.

Generation Z, which possesses distinct characteristics compared to Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y (Ting et al., 2018) and accounts for 32% of global population alone, is expected to increase its participation in tourism proportionally as their economic gains rise in

the near future. Therefore, understanding unique characteristics of Generation Z, which differ from previous generations, is crucial for stakeholders in the tourism sector to develop more effective marketing methods and strategies. Recently, there has been a significant increase in the number of studies on Generation Z and destination image across various disciplines to better understand this generation (Hasanah et al., 2024; Mubarokah, 2024; Pompurová et al., 2024). Yet, most of these works describe general traits or post-visit impressions, without examining how Generation Z constructs an image of a country they have never visited. Our study addresses this gap by exploring predictive perceptions of Türkiye before the first visit. While we do not compare across generations, the findings provide a foundation for future research to do so.

Additionally, destination image studies on Türkiye (Akgış et al., 2023; Baloğlu & Mangaloğlu 2001; Yarcan & Inelmen, 2006; Güney et al., 2025; Alvarez & Campo, 2011; Andarabi & Uygur, 2017; Alrawadieh et al., 2018; Bekar et al., 2025, Ozretic-Dosen et al., 2018; Uner et al., 2023) were primarily conducted post-visit and without generational distinctions, which highlights a significant gap in the literature, making this study necessary to address this gap.

Türkiye is perceived as a hospitable, historical, entertaining, mysterious destination with delicious food and a destination of sea, sun, and sand on one hand (Uner et al., 2023), while it is positioned as a country with destination image characterized by traffic, hygiene, safety issues, human rights and gender inequalities, and being relatively unknown (Alrawadieh et al., 2018; Ozretic-Dosen et al., 2018). Discussing these contrasting perceptions is crucial, as they show that Türkiye's image is not fixed but evolves in response to crises and external influences. By examining how Generation Z interprets these dual narratives before visiting, our study contributes to a deeper understanding of how destination image is shaped in anticipation rather than experience.

This dual perception highlights necessity of continuously examining Türkiye's destination image over time. Moreover, the terrorist attacks between 2015-2016, the political tensions following the downing of military aircraft in 2015, the attempted coup in 2016, the forest fires in 2021, and the significant loss of life and property after the 2023 earthquake are known as disasters that struck Türkiye. All these can be considered significant national crises that Generation Z, based on their birth years, could perceive. From this perspective, the questions explored and sought to be answered throughout the study are as follows:

Q1: *What is the perceived image of Türkiye among Generation Z, who exhibit a high tendency to use social media following crises?*

Q2: *What are the hypothetical new constructs that Generation Z, who have not yet visited Türkiye, will bring to the destination image?*

Q3: *How does the perceived destination image of Türkiye among Generation Z differ from the destination image identified in previous studies (fig.1)?*

In this context, the study focuses on destination image formed before a visit, rather than image typically defined by tourists after their visit. Since this aspect is often overlooked in destination image research, addressing it constitutes a significant contribution to the literature. Furthermore, examining the perception of Generation Z, referred to as the new generation in country image studies, will help fill an important gap in the literature. The ultimate contribution of this study is to reveal the perceived destination image of Türkiye as constructed by Generation Z, who are regarded as the inventors of change, before they visit the country. This exploratory study is expected to provide various insights into Generation Z and their perceptions of Türkiye and will contribute to the field of tourism both theoretically and practically. By identifying Generation Z's perceptions of Türkiye's image, the study will offer valuable insights that can assist brands and companies in shaping their marketing strategies. A key outcome of this research will be understanding the motivations and travel behaviours of Generation Z by determining their potential future preferences before they visit Türkiye.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

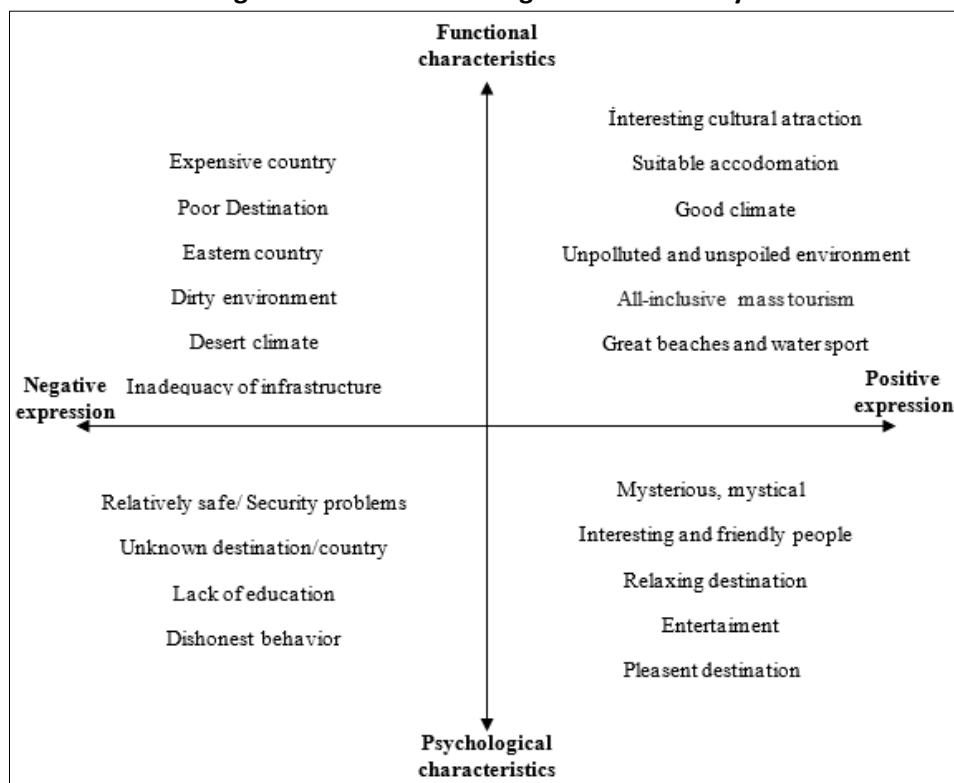
Destination Image of Türkiye – The true potential of a tourist destination depends on the image it creates, as this image can serve as a determinant of tourists' behavioural intentions to consume tourism products associated with that destination. This, in turn, influences the formation of expectations regarding future visits to the region (Al-Gasawneh & Al-Adamat, 2020). It is widely accepted that destination image affects tourists' subjective perceptions, behaviours, and destination choices (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020). The human brain forms a framework using experiences and information received from various sources, and this framework constitutes the destination image that emerges in individual's mind (Ragab et al., 2020). Every destination has its own unique image, which influences tourists' satisfaction (Dong

et al., 2023). A good image increases the likelihood of tourists visiting a destination and plays important role in distinguishing a destination from others (Marques et al., 2021).

The perceived destination image refers to tourists' understanding and impression of a destination. For those who have not yet visited the destination, this can also be influenced by the experiences of other tourists shared on social media (Sun et al., 2021). As a factor that can shape tourist behaviour before the visit, the destination image plays crucial role in shaping visitor perceptions. To develop a successful tourism destination, it is essential to place significant emphasis on enhancing the destination image (Marlizar et al., 2021).

In the global tourism barometer for 2023, Türkiye ranks fourth with 55.2 million tourists and stands among the countries preferred by foreign tourists (UNWTO, 2024). The key point of interest here is perceived destination image of Türkiye among new generation tourists who use technology effectively and stay rapidly informed about everything. Based on Echtner and Ritchie's (1993) image study, researchers compiled Türkiye's general destination image elements from previous studies (Akgış et al., 2023; Yarcan & Inelmen, 2006; Güney et al., 2025; Mancı, 2022) before questioning Generation Z's perceived destination image.

Figure 1. Destination Image Frame of Türkiye



Source: Authors' own creation.

Figure 1 was developed in light of findings from previous studies on Türkiye's destination image. In this process, relevant expressions were systematically collected and coded according to the content analysis approach of Elo and Kyngas (2008). Following the three stages of content analysis proposed by Elo and Kyngas (preparation, organization, and reporting), the literature was carefully reviewed, expressions with similar meanings were coded, and then classified into thematic groups. Through this method, Türkiye's current destination image was revealed to include both positive attributes (Andarabi et al., 2017; Üner et al., 2023; Güney et al., 2025; Akgış et al., 2023) and negative attributes (Alrawadieh et al., 2018; Ozretic-Dosen et al., 2018; Bekar et al., 2025). Thus, Figure 1 was constructed by thematically classifying literature-based data through content analysis, transparently presenting the dual nature of Türkiye's destination image.

Expressions such as suitable accommodation, cultural attractions, mysterious and mystical country, hospitable people, delicious local food, relaxing destination, wonderful beaches and water sports, good climate, hygiene and cleanliness represent the country's positive destination image attributes (Andarabi et al, 2017; Üner et al., 2023; Güney et al., 2025; Akgış et al., 2023). Desert climate, expensive, eastern country, dirty environment, lack of hygiene, human rights and gender inequalities, unknown destination, infrastructure deficiencies, traffic congestion, lack of education, dishonest behaviours (Alrawadieh et al., 2018; Ozretic-Dosen et al., 2018; Bekar et al.,2025) indicate Türkiye's negative destination image.

Regarding the overall destination image perception of Türkiye, both positive and negative statements exist. Accordingly, no definitive image perception exists regarding security, cleanliness and hygiene, prices, and climate. Some tourists hold positive perception in this regard (Andarabi & Uygur, 2017), while others have a negative perception (Yarcan & Inelmen, 2006; Sürücü & Avcı, 2023).

From this framework, a research question to be answered is whether Generation Z, defined as masters of digital age with fast access to all information, will change Türkiye's existing destination image framework. Another question is how Generation Z will interpret ambiguous aspects in tourists' perceptions of Türkiye, such as safety, cleanliness and hygiene, price, and climate.

Here Are the Young People That Everyone is After: Who is this Generation Z? - Today, Generation Z is a target audience that deserves attention for both present and future destinations. Identifying this generation's destination image perceptions is crucial for countries aiming to become popular destinations in the future, due to their large numbers. Recognized as the children of the digital age (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018), this generation is known for their tendencies to join various social networks (Serbanescu, 2022), engage in remote communication and relationship-building (Pichler et al., 2021), adapt to change, and perform multiple tasks simultaneously (Larkin et al., 2020).

Generation Z, born in 2000 and later, is influenced by various personality traits such as awareness, emotionality, and motivation, which shape their consumption behaviour (Weligodapola et al., 2023). The most important travel motivation for Generation Z is spending time with friends and relaxing mentally (Richards & Morrill, 2020). Internet is a significant part of life for Generation Z and greatly influences their lifestyle. This generation frequently uses the internet and also has a higher rate of seeking information about tourism compared to other generations (Wang & Park, 2023).

Members of Generation Z, who are inclined towards high standards and comfort, prioritize quality and low cost over brand, enjoy online shopping (Sudirjo et al., 2023), follow campaigns (Munsch, 2021), and search for last-minute deals, thus forming a distinct consumer profile (Kharuhayothin et al., 2023).

The most important factor in determining the purchasing preferences and satisfaction of Generation Z tourists is perceived destination image (Haarhoff, 2018). Because tourism products are often intangible and similar to each other, competition between destinations is often based on "perception". However, a main goal of tourism marketing strategies is to replace a negative perception with a positive one or strengthen the existing positive perception (Avraham et al., 2016). At the end of the study, potential perceived destination image of Türkiye for the newly defined Generation Z profile will be identified and recommendations will be made to strengthen the perception if it is positive and change it if negative.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling and Data Collection - The research is based on an interpretivist paradigm as it adopts a sociological approach (Robinson & Schänzel, 2019) and seeks to understand a phenomenon

from the perspective of the interviewee (Luo & Ren, 2020). The interpretivist paradigm effectively elucidates the intricate causes and relationships linked to social occurrences. This framework seeks to comprehend individuals' motives, convictions, and values (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Accordingly, the interpretive paradigm was preferred in this research to provide a more accurate reflection of the researched group's reality. The study employs purposive sampling. In this method, the sample consists of individuals the researcher believes will provide answers to the research question (Lune & Berg, 2017). These individuals are selected based on research objectives. Categories like age, gender, and role within the organization can serve as a good starting point (Coyne, 1997). The decision to focus the research on a specific age group is the primary reason for employing a purposive sampling method. Accordingly, snowball sampling, a purposive sampling technique, was preferred. In this technique, the researcher focuses on individuals who can provide rich information and tries to gather new insights by asking them who else they can interview (Patton, 2015). To start from the right source and ensure the selection of the most relevant individuals, the university's international relations office was chosen as the source of data. With the guidance of this office, Erasmus students were contacted, and data collection began with a few snowball samples. This approach enabled inclusion of participants from countries with different cultural backgrounds. Although Guest et al. (2006) stated that 12 interviews would be sufficient for sample size, the interviews were terminated with the 13th participant. Accordingly, conditions such as the required number of participants, data saturation and the availability of the targeted sample were met (Marshall et al., 2013). Demographic information about the participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

<i>Gender</i>		<i>Education</i>	
Female	6	High school	11
Male	7	Undergraduate	2
<i>Age</i>		<i>Occupation</i>	
19-28	13	Student	13
<i>Marital Status</i>		<i>Nation</i>	
Single	12	Czech	2
Married	1	Polish	6
		French	1
		Indonesian	1
		Italian	1
		Russian	2

Source: Authors' own creation.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The study aims to reveal destination image perception of Generation Z towards Türkiye. Accordingly, research questions were prepared based on the studies on factors related to destination image (Bekar et al., 2025;

Hasanah et al., 2024). Further to these questions, participants were asked six demographic questions regarding age, gender, country, education, marital status and occupation. The Interview Form is provided in the Appendix at the end of the study. The data were collected by audio recording between March 1 and April 30, 2024, with the consent of participants. All interviews, conducted by one of the researchers, were carried out face-to-face, and each interview lasted half an hour on average.

Data Analysis - The data were transcribed using MS Word. Content analysis was chosen for data analysis. Content analysis employed in this study is a widely adopted method in tourism research. Prior studies examining topics such as social media marketing and destination image, artificial intelligence and tourism, and robotic restaurant experiences (Wang et al., 2021; Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2022; Atsiz et al., 2023; Öğretmenoğlu et al., 2023; Tanrıverdi et al., 2025) illustrate the diverse applications of content analysis within the field. Building on this foundation, the present study demonstrates that content analysis serves as a robust methodological tool in tourism research, enabling the thematic classification of the results related to destination image. In this regard, content analysis is a systematic coding and theme development approach used to examine abundant text-based information in order to determine tendencies, frequencies, relationships, and communication structures of words (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). To apply analysis, three-stage content analysis method recommended by Elo & Kyngas (2008) was used. According to this method, the transcribed text was first read multiple times. Then, codes were identified using a manifest approach, which clearly describes what informants actually said. Thus, researchers could contextualize and enhance understanding of the latent meanings conveyed. In the last stage, themes were created subsequently.

Since perception of destination image is a frequently studied topic in the literature, a deductive approach was adopted during the analysis. Additionally, findings were compared with previous studies and supported by an inductive approach. This allowed the findings to be integrated with the previously discovered theoretical context. For example, "cultural factors" were mentioned by some participants as a sub-theme of perceived social environment theme. The comparison with the existing literature also confirmed that cultural factors play an important role in the formation of destination image (Kislali et al., 2020). The researchers read the text-based raw data several times before the coding process. During this process, themes emerged by grouping data that showed similarities in meaning. The researchers used the MAXQDA 20 software to perform the coding. An example of coding process is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Coding Example

<i>Interview (extracted from the data)</i>	<i>Open coding</i>
If I had the opportunity to travel today, the purpose of my visit would be to immerse myself in Türkiye's culture, history, natural landscape, while also seeking moments of peace and relaxation.	Cultural factors, historical heritage values, natural attractions, escaping from daily routine

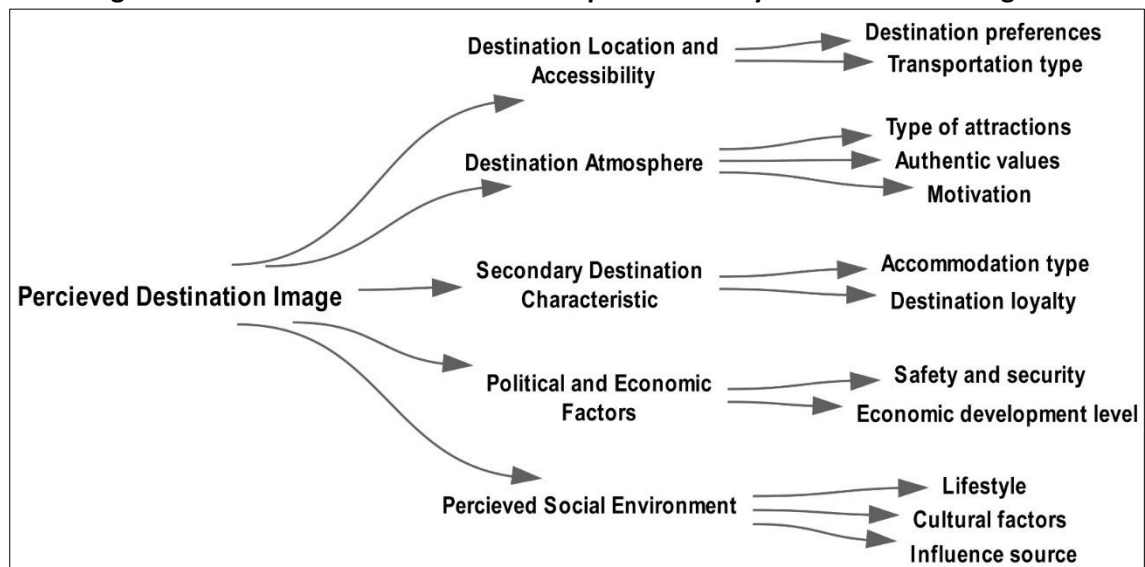
Source: Authors' own creation.

Validity and Reliability of Data - To ensure validity, raw data and findings were compared by two researchers and a field expert, meeting the conditions of peer review and external audit (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, some participant statements were directly quoted to enhance the validity of findings (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). To increase the reliability of research, research process and design were described transparently and in detail, ensuring independence from personal biases (Noble & Smith, 2015). Finally, to ensure the reliability of the findings, coding was conducted independently by two researchers, who met several times to agree on the results (Barbour, 2001).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings on Generation Z's perception of Türkiye's destination image were addressed under five distinct themes. These themes, with their subthemes, are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Themes of Generation Z's Perception of Türkiye's Destination Image



Source: Authors' own creation.

Themes of Generation Z's Perception of Türkiye's Destination Image - Table 3 shows frequency and weight values of the themes related to Generation Z's perception of Türkiye's destination

image. Accordingly, Generation Z's perception of Türkiye's destination image consists of the following themes with their respective weights: destination location and accessibility (20.32%), destination atmosphere (34.15%), secondary destination characteristics (13.01%), political and economic factors (9.76%), and perceived social environment (22.76%).

Table 3. Themes of Generation Z's Perception of Türkiye's Destination Image

Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Destination location and accessibility	25	20.32%
Destination atmosphere	42	34.15%
Secondary destination characteristic	16	13.01%
Political and economic factors	12	09.76%
Perceived social environment	28	22.76%
Total	123	100%

Source: Authors' own creation.

Table 4 shows subthemes and frequency values of the themes that constitute Generation Z's perception of Türkiye's destination image. Following the identification of 123 codes, five main themes and 12 subthemes emerged. All subthemes are explained below by the order presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Subthemes and Frequencies of Generation Z's Perception of Türkiye's Destination Image

Code System	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	SUM
Perceived Destination Image														0
Destination Location and Accessibility														0
Destination preferences														13
Transportation type														12
Destination Atmosphere														0
Type of attractions														17
Authentic values														14
Motivation														11
Secondary Destination Characteristic														0
Accommodation type														13
Destination loyalty														3
Political and Economic Factors														0
Safety and security														9
Economic development level														3
Perceived Social Environment														0
Influence source														13
Lifestyle														10
Cultural factors														5
SUM	8	13	10	7	12	12	12	9	7	7	9	9	8	123

Source: Authors' own creation.

Destination Location and Accessibility – The destination location and accessibility theme shaping Generation Z's perception of Turkey's destination image consists of two sub-themes: destination preference and transportation type.

Destination preferences – Climate, natural beauties, tourists' personal characteristics, and socio-cultural factors can influence destination preferences (Dahiya & Batra, 2016). Similar factors have also influenced the preferences of Generation Z who chose Türkiye. Accordingly, while many participants preferred Türkiye primarily for its natural beauties and historical heritage, a few participants stated they chose Türkiye for its climate. Regarding natural beauties and historical heritage, Cappadocia and İstanbul stood out, while Antalya emerged as the most preferred destination for its climate. Some participant opinions are as follows:

“Ever since I saw the photos, the idea of traveling by balloon in Cappadocia has fascinated me.” (12). “I would love to visit İstanbul for its cultural heritage.” (P6).

According to Statista (2024), the most preferred destinations by international tourists visiting Türkiye between 2019 and 2023 were İstanbul, Antalya, Edirne, Muğla, and İzmir. However, the findings of this research suggest that the ranking of the most preferred destinations in Türkiye may change in future. Notably, Cappadocia tops the list of cities participants wish to visit in Türkiye.

Transportation type - Transportation needs and preferences can vary depending on individuals' age (Rahman et al., 2016). Accordingly, many participants in the Generation Z stated that if they were to visit Türkiye, they would prefer local transportation such as trains and buses. They believe that such transportation would allow them to better explore the local culture and natural environment. A participant's opinion on this finding is as follows:

“When I come to Türkiye, I would like to prefer public transportation such as buses and trains to see the local way of living. This would also help me to reduce the damage to the environment.” (P12).

Göransson and Andersson (2023) similarly stated that younger generations prefer public transportation as a mode of travel, while older generations typically prefer cars. The main reasons for the older generation's preference are the absence of fare issues, ease of planning transportation, and lack of the risk of standing during travel.

Destination Atmosphere – Three sub-themes emerged under the destination atmosphere theme that shapes Generation Z's perception of Türkiye as a destination. These sub-themes are type of attractions, authentic values, and motivation.

Type of attractions – Attractions are often regarded as centrepiece of tourism by many people. They provide people with activities and experiences, making them the primary reason for visiting a specific destination (Richards, 2002). This clearly explains why Generation Z prefers certain destinations in Türkiye. Many participants stated that historical, cultural, and environmental factors play significant role in their destination preferences. Some participants stated on this as follows:

“Türkiye is a destination with many civilizations and different cultures. For example, there are ancient cities like Çatalhöyük.” (P3). *“The first thing I would do in Türkiye would be to swim in the sea and then to try the food.”* (P4). *“The first thing that comes to my mind when I think of Türkiye is its unique food culture and Byzantine history.”* (P5). *“I would like to watch and experience the balloons in Cappadocia.”* (2). *“Climate is the most important factor for me to prefer Türkiye.”* (P11).

The study conducted by Baloglu & Mangaloglu (2001) almost a quarter of a century ago shows that the attractiveness factors in the choice of Türkiye as a destination have not changed in general.

Authentic values – Authenticity is an indicator of how tourists perceive and enjoy cultural tourism resources in a destination and very important for the competitiveness of a destination (Lee et al., 2020). Accordingly, to contribute to the competitiveness of the destination, authentic values that define Türkiye in the eyes of Generation Z were found. Some participant thoughts are briefly as follows:

“Baklava.” (P2). *“Cats, they're everywhere.”* (P3). *“Kebab.”* (P6). *“Turkish coffee.”* (P5). *“Hagia Sofia and Pamukkale.”* (P7). *“Beaches and cultural heritage.”* (P11). *“Atatürk.”* (P4).

Similarly, Ramkissoon and Uysal (2010) stated that perception of authenticity is an important factor in influencing tourists' behavioral intentions. Accordingly, authentic values of Türkiye found in the study can be effectively used to gain competitive advantage.

Motivation – A key determinant of tourists' destination choices is their motivations (Douglas et al., 2024). Factors driving Generation Z to Türkiye are primarily history and culture based. Turkish cuisine stands out culturally, while historical elements from civilizations like the Greeks and Romans are prominent historically. Some participant views on this are as follows:

“Türkiye, for example, has historical cities from Hellenistic period and, so, hosts various cultures. I would like to visit to see them.” (P5). “I want to try your food because Turkish cuisine is different from the others.” (P6).

Further to motivation derived from history and culture, the climate of Türkiye also plays a role in influencing Generation Z's preference for the country. A participant's view on this is as follows:

“Türkiye is not like northern countries. It has a different, warmer climate. That's why I would go there to relax and vacation.” (P8).

This finding aligns with the results of studies on Türkiye. It indicates that for those visiting Türkiye, individual motivation is primarily culture and history based. Further to cultural attractions, Türkiye's favourable climate and coastlines are also important sources of motivation for tourists (Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001; Kozak, 2002).

Secondary Destination Characteristic – The secondary destination characteristic theme shaping Generation Z's destination image of Türkiye includes two sub-themes, namely accommodation type and destination loyalty.

Accommodation type – Accommodation type can play a determining role in preferred tourist experience. For instance, nature-focused travellers may prefer a rustic accommodation experience, while others may opt for a more luxurious and comfortable type (Kruger et al., 2019). The findings show that the core motivations influence the accommodation type preferred by Generation Z when choosing Türkiye as a destination. Some participant thoughts are as follows:

“I would stay in a cosy guesthouse as it aligns with my preference for simplicity and tranquillity, offering a genuine and authentic experience.” (P12). “If I felt safe, I would prefer to stay in a tent.” (P6). “I prefer AirBnB or flat as it makes me feel like I'm staying in my own home.” (P8).

This finding shows that the accommodation preference of Generation Z is changing compared to previous generations. Those aged 55 and above prefer staying with relatives or in hotels (Losada et al., 2017), while Generation Y (1981-1996) favours bed and breakfast accommodations (Uysal, 2022).

Destination loyalty – Chen and Gursoy (2001) state that a significant relationship exists between destination loyalty and behavioral characteristics of tourists' destination preferences. Some participant statements supporting this relationship are as follows:

“Some emotional memories lead me to visit Türkiye.” (P2). *“I would love to visit Antalya because I have friends there with whom I had a great time and would like to see again.”* (P11).

The findings support the results in the literature. Factors such as natural attractions (Wu et al., 2018) and tourist satisfaction (Berezina et al., 2012) can influence the repeated preference of a destination based on destination loyalty.

Political and Economic Factors – Two sub-themes emerge within the political and economic factors theme shaping Generation Z's perception of Türkiye's destination image, namely safety and security, and economic development level.

Safety and Security – Safety and security factors play significant role in the decision-making for destination preferences. Tourists tend to alter their consumption behaviour and shift destination choices to safer regions when they perceive security concerns (Dahiya & Batra, 2016). This was also observed to influence Generation Z's preference for Türkiye as a destination. Some participant opinions are as follows:

“Many people around me claim that Türkiye is a dangerous country, especially for women traveling alone.” (P1). *“I would avoid Türkiye's northern regions due to the war in Russia and southern areas because of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria.”* (P6).

This finding indicates that safety and security factors will consistently remain crucial in destination selection. Reisinger (2009) states that safety and security conditions serve as a key criterion universally applied in evaluating tourism destinations.

Economic development level – Political instability, weak infrastructure, inadequate facilities, and poor resource planning and management can lead to low tourism activity (Awaritefe, 2004). Similarly, the study's findings reveal that a region's development level significantly influences its preference as a destination. Some participant statements on this are as follows:

“I would prefer cities with good infrastructure, culture, education and social life.” (P3). *“I don't prefer crowded and over-commercialized destinations.”* (12).

This finding highlights a significant reality. Improving a region's infrastructure and tourism facilities can enhance its attractiveness as a destination (Manhas et al., 2016).

Perceived Social Environment – The perceived social environment theme, which shapes Generation Z's destination image of Türkiye, consists of three sub-themes: influence source, lifestyle, and cultural factors.

Influence source – Destination marketers use social media to influence destination choices through online communities (Tham et al., 2019). Additionally, tourists rely on social media as an information source to shape travel decisions (Lim et al., 2021). Most participants acknowledged the influence of social media on their destination preferences. Some participant views on this are as follows:

“Google Maps or online photos mostly influence my travel preferences.” (P7). *“I believe social media is the most effective channel because many influencers around us promote various cities.”* (P5).

The findings reveal differences, for instance, from Generation Y's destination preferences. This generation highly values friends' opinions and recommendations when making travel decisions (Morton, 2002).

Lifestyle – Abstract factors such as attitudes, lifestyle orientations, and personal habits can influence travel preferences (Mahpour et al., 2018). Participants who prefer Türkiye as a destination generally wish to travel alone. However, a small number expressed the possibility of traveling with close friends.

“I'm sure I would travel solo if I go to Türkiye.” (P11). *“I would likely travel with a friend who shares my mindset, preferring simplicity, peace, and cultural experiences.”* (P12).

The research shows that Generation Z's travel preferences differ from previous generations. While Generation X and Y tend to travel with family when choosing Türkiye as a destination (Akbay & Özel, 2020; Karaman & Aykın, 2021), Generation Z exhibits different patterns.

Cultural factors – Culture helps explain many patterns in tourist preferences and behaviours (Frías et al., 2012) and is a key precursor of destination image (Kani et al., 2017). Similarly, some participants noted the influence of cultural factors on destination choice. Accordingly:

"I know it's culturally very different from my own country, and I find the people very friendly." (P8). *"I've heard that people are very helpful and hospitable, which makes Türkiye worth visiting."* (P7).

This finding aligns with the results of Kislali et al.'s (2020) study on Türkiye, which highlights that cultural elements like religion, cuisine, lifestyle, and family ties play a significant role in destination decision-making and evaluation for Türkiye.

CONCLUSION

Destination image plays critical role in the success of destination marketing as it defines the destination comprehensively in the minds of consumers through various attributes (Rafael & Almeida, 2017). Preferences shaped by social and historical events necessitate considering generational shifts in marketing strategies (Zlatanova-Pazheva, 2024). Accordingly, the study aims to concretize Generation Z's image perception of Türkiye within framework of factors shaping destination image. Although Generation Y currently represents the largest active and working consumer population in tourism and other sectors (Bochert et al., 2017), uncovering Generation Z's preferences for Türkiye as a destination now can guide tourism marketers to gain competitive advantage.

The study's key finding reveals that digital age masters hold an overall positive destination image perception of Türkiye before their visits (Q1). Comparing findings with previous studies (Günay et al., 2025) shows that Türkiye's attractiveness factors as a destination remain largely unchanged (Q3). Türkiye has remained a preferred destination from past to present due to its exotic nature, colourful and attractive history, ancient ruins, local cuisine, and hospitality. Tourism preferences directly respond to natural, political, and economic crises, potentially leading to a pessimistic view of the sector (Cohen, 2012). Research findings show that despite recent natural disasters like earthquakes, Generation Z maintains a positive destination image of Türkiye. This result clearly indicates Türkiye's strong tourist image perception.

This study also provides frequency and ratio figures for themes and sub-themes. This data represents which themes are more important in the minds of Generation Z and which themes have a greater impact on the image formed for Turkey. It can be argued that these results may provide guidance to practitioners and policymakers in the field. A general assessment of research results, which have both theoretical and practical implications, shows that destination

atmosphere (34.15%) and perceived social environment (22.76%) are the most influential factors in Generation Z's perception of Türkiye's destination image, while political and economic factors (9.76%) have the least impact. Generation Z ranks Cappadocia high among preferred destinations in Türkiye. For transportation, they prefer public transit and shared transport for their environmental benefits and opportunities for local cultural interaction and similarly, choose modest and simple accommodation options for the same reasons. The elements shaping Türkiye's destination atmosphere (type of attractions, authentic values, and motivation) continue to influence image creation for Generation Z. Contrary to findings about previous generations (Richards & Morrill, 2020), Generation Z's preference for solo travel emerges as a notable finding. Throughout the study, Generation Z, as future potential tourists, did not mention cleanliness, hygiene, and price elements in Türkiye's destination image. Therefore, future studies on Generation Z and destination image could specifically investigate these elements. Finally, social media channels' increasing influence both in image creation and as information sources represents another significant finding requiring attention.

Theoretical Implications – In terms of theoretical implications, unlike previous studies in literature, this study focuses on destination image formation before the visit. This contributes significantly to destination management and marketing literature. It expands existing literature by emphasizing the importance of generational segmentation in strategic destination marketing. While previous studies (Günay et al., 2025; Andarabi & Uygur, 2017; Ozretic-Dosen et al., 2018; 2020; Bekar et al., 2025) focused on general destination image outcomes, this study fills a literature gap by focusing on specific generation, providing guidance for future image studies. The study compares findings with previous generations' destination preferences to determine changing trends in Turkish tourism. By addressing this current topic and establishing theoretical foundations for destination preferences, the research contributes to growing literature on Generation Z. Tourist destination choices can be influenced by socio-demographic characteristics, psychographic profiles, marketing variables, or destination features (Guillet et al., 2011). The study further contributes to literature by clarifying the weighted factors influencing Generation Z's selection of Türkiye as a destination. This result not only contributes to literature but also guides tourism service providers regarding factors requiring attention.

Contrary to previous findings in literature (Richards & Morrill, 2020), Generation Z's preference for solo travel brings a different perspective to literature. The literature describes this generation as an elusive group that doesn't fit any pattern (Di Terlizzi, 2018). However, the

study's finding that they prefer simplicity and tranquillity without seeking luxury in accommodation could change future Generation Z literature. The findings align with existing literature regarding security concerns. As in previous studies (Mancı, 2022; Sürücü & Avcı; 2023; Alrawadieh et al., 2018), Generation Z also holds a negative perceived destination image of Türkiye regarding security.

Practical Implications – In terms of practical implications, research shows that marketers must adapt communication strategies to their target audiences' generational characteristics (Coreia et al., 2025). Recognizing heterogeneous structure between generations, adopting approaches tailored to specific generational tendencies is more important than applying uniform strategies. Compared to other generations, Generation Z cannot sustain life without mobile applications and technology (Pichler et al., 2021). This concept aligns with this study's findings. Accordingly, findings indicate that promotional activities targeting Generation Z should emphasize social media channels. This way, Türkiye can positively position itself by securing a significant place in future potential tourists' destination image perception.

Although the overall perception of Türkiye is positive, tourists express concerns particularly about conflicts in border regions. This could pose a significant barrier to Türkiye's appeal as a destination, as tourists prioritize personal safety and security when choosing destinations (Pizam, 1982). Moreover, Generation Z, adept at using technology, can quickly become aware of negative developments. To address this, influencers can consistently convey the message that Türkiye is a safe travel destination. This approach could help position Türkiye as secure destination for Generation Z. Social media is crucial not only for reversing negative perceptions but also for promoting Türkiye's authentic values and unique attractions. Findings reveal that Generation Z is primarily motivated by history and culture based authentic attractions. This preference can be explained by Türkiye's natural heritage, historical background, cultural diversity, and pleasant climate (Aygün-Oğur & Baycan, 2023).

While Türkiye has been primarily associated with İstanbul, Antalya, and İzmir (Statista, 2024), this study highlights Cappadocia's emergence as a prominent destination. Its appeal stems from nature and adventure tourism, including hiking and balloon flights. Considering this trend, investment in facilities, transportation, and public services should align with carrying capacity to maintain service quality. Additionally, comprehensive analysis of Cappadocia's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats would further enhance its attractiveness.

McKercher et al. (2023) link accommodation choice to tourist type, while Guo et al. (2020) highlight the role of expected benefits in transport selection. Findings indicate that Generation Z prefers eco-friendly transport to minimize environmental harm and modest lodging for authentic local experiences. Lifestyle and personal habits also influence travel choices (Mahpour et al., 2018), with findings suggesting a preference for solo travel. Businesses in transport and accommodation should align investments with Generation Z's lifestyle and expectations to enhance efficiency.

This study provides key insights for destination marketers on the attributes essential for Generation Z's satisfaction and loyalty. It suggests highlighting Türkiye's natural and cultural attractions can enhance their experience and encourage repeat visits, ensuring first-time visitors leave satisfied and return in the future.

Limitations and Future Research – This study has several limitations, leading to recommendations for future research. Since it employs a qualitative approach, it does not prioritize themes by impact or importance. A follow-up quantitative study could reassess these themes, enabling more effective marketing strategies. Additionally, this study focuses on Generation Z's perception of Türkiye's destination image. Future research could explore attractions, amenities, accessibility, human resources, image, and price (World Tourism Organization, 2007) to provide comprehensive view of Türkiye as a destination. This would help identify its strengths and weaknesses within these factors. Finally, due to nature of qualitative research, this study's population is limited. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable beyond this population. To enhance generalizability, a quantitative study could be conducted on same themes.

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Appendix: Interview Form

Demographic Questions

Gender:	Nationality:
Education:	Age:
Marital Status:	Occupation:

Interview Questions

How would you describe Türkiye in your mind?
What is the first word that comes to your mind when you think of Türkiye? Why?
When you close your eyes and imagine, what tourist attractions do you imagine yourself in Türkiye?
If you had the chance to travel to Türkiye today, where would you like to go and why?
What makes you have this opinion about this place that you have not visited yet? (e.g., social media, travelers who travel there, news, or emotional, etc.).
If you had the chance to travel today, what type of accommodation would you like to stay in, and why?
If you had the chance to travel today, what type of transportation would you like to use and why?
As Generation Z, who would you like to go on holiday with, and why?
If you had the chance to travel to Türkiye today, what would be the purpose of your visit?
What are the most important factors that influence your decision to visit a destination? (about destination, cultural, economic, nature, etc.)
Do you have a tourist destination in your mind in Türkiye that you would never visit? If so, why?
If there is anything you would like to add, please specify.

Source: Authors' own creation.