



Understanding Career Self-Management Through Metaphors: Insights into the Perspectives of the Emerging Workforce

Kariyer Öz-Yönetimini Metaforlar Aracılığıyla Anlamak:
Yeni Ortaya Çıkan İşgücünün Bakış Açısına İlişkin Bir Çalışma

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Abstract

Individual career management involves exploring personal and environmental factors and setting realistic, achievable goals. The career self-management approach holds the individual solely responsible for career behaviors while also considering external factors. However, career development and management have been particularly challenging in developing countries due to the increasing surplus in labor markets. Economic and political factors in such countries may lead individuals to demonstrate more proactive behaviors. In Türkiye, although the current career literature focuses on the concept of career for individuals entering the labor market, through various conceptual and empirical studies, the meaning of other self-career management concepts has not been sufficiently explored. Therefore, this study examines university students' perspectives on career self-management elements, including the notions of career, career planning, career exploration, and goal setting. Data were collected from 386 university students at two different public universities, and metaphor analysis—a method associated with the phenomenological approach—was used. As a result of the data analysis, four themes were identified: the meaning of career, the meaning of career planning, the meaning of career exploration, and the meaning of goal setting, along with various subcategories under each theme, in alignment with career literature. The most common metaphors regarding careers were “marathon” and “stairs.” Gaining insights into the perspectives of the emerging workforce on career concepts may provide valuable information for higher education institutions and career counselors.

Keywords: Career, Career Planning, Career Exploration, Career Goal Setting, Metaphors.

Özet

Bireysel kariyer yönetimi süreci, kişisel ve çevresel faktörlerin keşfedilmesini, gerçekçi ve ulaşılabilir hedeflerin belirlenmesini içerir. Kariyer öz-yönetim yaklaşımı, dış çevre faktörlerini dikkate alırken, kariyer davranışlarının esas sorumlusunu birey olarak kabul eder. Ancak özellikle gelişmekte olan ülkelerde, işgücü piyasalarındaki işgücü arzının artması nedeniyle kariyer öz-yönetimi bireyler için zorlayıcı hale gelmektedir. Ekonomik ve politik faktörler nedeniyle bu tür ülkelerde bireyler, diğer ülkelere kıyasla daha proaktif davranışlar sergileyebilmek zorunda kalabilmektedirler. Türkiye’de mevcut kariyer yazını, çeşitli kavramsal ve görgül çalışmalarla işgücü piyasasına yeni giren bireyler için kariyer kavramının kendisine odaklansa da diğer kariyer öz-yönetimi kavramlarının anlamı yeterince incelenmemiştir. Bu çalışma, üniversite öğrencilerinin kariyer öz-yönetimi unsurları olan kariyer kavramına ilaveten kariyer planlama, kariyer keşfi ve hedef belirleme konularına yönelik bakış açılarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışmada iki farklı devlet üniversitesinde öğrenim gören 386 üniversite öğrencisinden veri elde edilmiş ve fenomenolojik yaklaşım için bir analiz yöntemi olan metafor analizi kullanılmıştır. Verilerin analizi sonucunda kariyer yazınına paralel şekilde kariyerin anlamı, kariyer planlamanın anlamı, kariyer keşfinin anlamı ve hedef belirlemenin anlamı isimli dört tema ve her temanın altında farklı alt kategoriler belirlenmiştir. En sık kullanılan metaforların “maraton” ve “merdiven” olduğu görülmüştür. Bu araştırmanın sonuçlarının yeni nesil işgücünün kariyer kavramlarına bakış açılarının anlaşılmasının yükseköğretim kurumlarına ve kariyer psikolojik danışmanlarına yol gösterebileceğine inanılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kariyer, Kariyer Planlama, Kariyer Keşfi, Kariyer Hedefi Belirleme, Metaforlar.

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The current era presents both demanding and challenging circumstances for the career development of individuals. Due to several factors, such as the economic climate (Jayachandran, 2021; Vuolo et al., 2012), immigration trends (Autin et al., 2018; Dheer & Lenartowicz, 2017), and contemporary labor market competitiveness (von Arellano-Bover, 2020; von Wachter, 2020) has accelerated. The global workforce is becoming increasingly diversified, and career changes are often unexpected and challenging (Borgen & Edwards, 2019). The transition from conventional career patterns to self-managed careers has led to a growing demand for the new generation workforce to recognize the scarcity of career options and build the mentality and skills necessary to successfully discover and navigate career opportunities that align with their objectives and capacities (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). While there has been much debate about the nature of employment opportunities, there has been a lack of investigation into the consequences of the Industry 4.0 era on the domain of career and how university students perceive the current labor market requirements and the subsequent effect on their strategic career planning (Hirschi, 2018). Thus, the present study presents theoretical frameworks to investigate the significance of career-related concepts, including career, career planning, career exploration, and career goals.

Arnold (2002) posits that a career may be understood as a psychological construct that encompasses the range of activities undertaken across diverse organizational and social systems. The career trajectory of an individual includes their whole employment history, including various duties, responsibilities, and work-related engagements. The process of career planning involves a systematic and comprehensive approach aimed at promoting professional development, implementing strategies, examining potential opportunities, self-assessment, and evaluating the resulting results (Antoniou, 2010). Today, a career comprises an individual's self-perceptions of their comprehensive trajectory, which includes various forms of work such as paid, volunteer, temporary, and domestic, as well as their educational experiences (Greenhaus & Callanan, 2013). Career planning and exploration are essential components of the career development process, as highlighted by Rogers and Creed (2011). The clarification of career conceptions has significant importance, particularly in the context of emerging nations such as Türkiye. In Türkiye, there has been a notable increase in the number of graduates from higher education institutions. Consequently, these graduates are now encountering a more competitive job market due to the expanding pool of individuals seeking entry-level positions. Considering the United States of America, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024) declared that the unemployment rate among those aged 16–24 in the United States of America was 8.7% in August 2023. Unemployment rates in Europe can vary widely between nations due to differences in economic situations, educational systems, and labor

market regulations, although the European Union's overall unemployment rate (under 25) was 14.9% in January 2024 (Eurostat, 2024). According to the Household Labor Force Survey results, the unemployment rate was 8.5% in October 2023 (TÜİK, 2024). Türkiye has been experiencing a surplus of labor for a considerable period, resulting in heightened stress and anxiety among future labor market participants due to concerns about unemployment (Surat & Ceran, 2020). According to previous studies, career is one of the most critical difficulties that students encounter in Türkiye (Atik & Yalçın, 2010; Bostancı et al., 2005; Doğan, 2012; Güneri, 2006; Güneri et al., 2003). Also, it is important to highlight the inadequacy of career centers at universities and the limited availability of career counselors in Türkiye (Balın et al., 2021). Thus, university students or new graduates need to understand the meaning of career exploration, planning and goal-setting to develop an effective career strategy and reduce career-related stress.

As university students and recent graduates grapple with understanding the intricacies of career concepts, it becomes evident that investigating the perspectives of young individuals on these matters could provide insights into the domains in which higher education institutions and career counselors can enhance their assistance. Numerous studies attempt to investigate the meaning of career through the use of metaphors (Smith-Ruig, 2008). Metaphors are incomplete explanations of reality (Inkson, 2004; Rodriguez & Guest, 2010). Metaphors employed in career research serve to enhance comprehension beyond their basic and symbolic meanings, making them valuable in the contemporary dynamic landscape of careers (Inkson, 2006). Using metaphoric analysis, the novel viewpoints of individuals involved in career decision-making could be clarified.

The issue of career perspectives among students in higher education institutions has received much attention in career domain (Creed & Nacey, 2021). The nature of the career concept is inherently multidimensional, a facet consistently underscored by existing career theories (King, 2004; Lent, 2013). Yet, within the context of Türkiye, metaphorical studies involving university students concerning the career concept tend to predominantly concentrate only on what career means (Çetin et al., 2015; Korkut & Keskin, 2016). The most significant distinction of this study from prior research lies in its exploration beyond the sole focus on careers. Specifically, it employs the CSM approach empirically, which has been effectively applied to university students (Kleine et al., 2021), and aims to unveil how university students perceive concepts encompassed within the CSM approach, such as career exploration, career planning, and setting career goals. This study differs from previous research by assessing metaphors regarding career discovery, planning attitudes, and career goals to guide students, counselors, and institutions. By conducting an exploration of the multifaceted viewpoints of university students, this research not only enhances our comprehension



of how young individuals see and interpret their career self-management process but also has significant implications for universities and professionals in career development while also contributing to the academic literature on career development by employing phenomenology. Hence, this study has the potential to increase our holistic comprehension of career self-management.

Theoretical Background of Career Self-Management

Recognizing the career theories that are utilized by university students in the field of career is critical to understanding the process of career self-management. One of the most common of these theories is Career Self-Management (CSM), which involves the development, implementation, and monitoring of career goals and approaches by individuals (Hirschi & Koen, 2021). The theoretical foundations of career development and self-management cover an extensive and dynamic discipline that investigates the various processes, models, and frameworks that influence individuals' decision-making, growth, and contentment throughout the ever-changing domain of careers (Hirschi, 2018). Career development involves a comprehensive outlook incorporating several aspects and processes that characterize an individual's professional trajectory. It considers an individual's active engagement and external influences, including education, training, organizational support, and social variables that influence one's career. One of the early career development approaches belongs to Super (1980), who proposed a comprehensive framework for understanding an individual's life span, distinguishing several stages of *“development, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement.”* This theory focuses on the idea that career development is an ongoing and continuous journey that spans an individual's whole lifespan rather than being limited to their active employment period.

Another important career framework is the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which was inspired by Bandura (1989) and developed to enhance and establish connections between various theoretical perspectives in career development (Lent et al., 1999). SCCT examines the complex relationship between several factors, including individual characteristics, environmental influences, and behavioral patterns. These factors are believed to impact the mechanisms by which individuals form initial academic and career interests, create and modify their educational and vocational goals, and attain varying levels of achievement in their academic and career endeavors (Lent et al., 2008). Additionally, studies have examined the career decision-making process of both high school and university students according to SCCT (Gerçek et al., 2023; Lent et al., 2008). Another predominant career approach employed within the higher education context is Career Construction Theory (CCT) by Savickas (2002) which posits that individuals construct their professions and

derive meaning from work via storytelling and narrative identity. According to Savickas, a person's career is constantly influenced by their experiences, values, and objectives, rather than being predetermined or set.

Theoretical frameworks that center on career self-management (CSM) include the social cognitive model of career self-management provided by individual career planning and management processes, which are outlined in various career management models, including the widely cited frameworks of King (2004), Greenhaus et al. (2010), and Lent and Brown (2013). In King's (2004) model of CSM, the self-management process involves positioning behavior, influencing behavior, and boundary management, which lead to life and career satisfaction. This comprehensive study by Greenhaus et al. (2010, p. 12) defines CSM as *“a process by which individuals develop, implement, and monitor career goals and strategies.”* Career self-management emphasizes the autonomous component of making career decisions, defining goals, and taking action. Based on SCCT, a social cognitive model of career self-management tries to explain adaptive process behaviors such as career exploration and job searching (Lent & Brown, 2013). On the other hand, the Social Cognitive Model of Career Self-Management (SC-CSM), the more extensive and upgraded version of SCCT, contains career planning, decision-making, job-finding, goal setting, and negotiating transitions significant for career development. Also, the practical side of SC-CSM is that it applies to job search behavior since it may be used to explain job search goals and actions (Lent & Brown, 2013). Put differently, understanding individuals' perspectives on career exploration, planning, and goal setting can offer valuable insights into job searching. Both career development and self-management models play a crucial role in pursuing individuals' objectives and ambitions, and they frequently combine within a complete framework for career planning and development. In the context of university students' career exploration, the career self-management model can be employed effectively (Kleine et al., 2021). Thus, we aim to explore young adults' perspectives on career self-management elements, starting with career planning, exploration, and goal setting.

The Notion of Career and Career Planning

A career is *“the experience of achieving goals that are personally meaningful to the individual, rather than those set by parents, peers, an organization, or society”* (Mirvis & Hall, 1994, p. 366). According to Wrzesniewski et al. (1997), individuals demonstrate a stronger sense of personal commitment to their jobs and perceive their accomplishments in terms of financial rewards and career progression. Thus, career planning at organizations is also essential to human resources management. At the individual level, a career may be defined as an enduring trajectory of employment and continuous professional growth that an individual follows to attain

personal and financial objectives. Pursuing a career is an essential component of adult life, with a substantial influence on an individual's sense of self-worth, way of life, and general welfare state (Wilhelm & Hirschi, 2019). Thus, exploring the meaning of a career for an individual is important, as it enables them to develop a vision for their vocational direction and ultimately build a more fulfilling life.

Career planning is a systematic effort toward career exploration, goals, and strategies (Greenhaus et al., 1995). The significance of career planning has traditionally held a prominent position in career guidance and counseling. Career planning is essential since it enables individuals to determine their career objectives, which then function as cognitive processes that structure, implement, and assess career-related actions (Luo, 2016). Career planning is establishing career objectives and developing methods to attain these objectives, taking into consideration available resources, alternatives, obstacles, and limitations (Zikic & Klehe, 2006). Career planning involves evaluating one's career objectives and considering available resources and limitations. This evaluation leads individuals to either reinforce their commitment to existing career goals or focus on pursuing alternate aspirations (Jawahar & Shabeer, 2021). Since career planning is crucial in facilitating successful job search activities and obtaining employment, particularly in dynamic and demanding work settings, an in-depth understanding of career planning enables individuals to make accurate decisions regarding their education, skills, and work opportunities, enhancing their financial security.

Career Exploration and Goal Setting

Career exploration is widely recognized as a comprehensive activity that enables people to acquire relevant information about their career development and provides them with problem-solving skills to navigate the complexities of the career journey, ultimately leading to accurate and optimal career decisions (Chen et al., 2023). Scholars have regarded career exploration as a crucial phase in an individual's career growth trajectory, occurring throughout adolescence and the beginning of adulthood. Career exploration was defined as "*purposive behavior and cognitions that afford access to information about occupations, jobs, and organizations that were not previously in the stimulus field*" (Stumpf et al., 1983, p. 192). According to the definition provided by Zikic and Klehe (2006), career exploration refers to acquiring relevant information that is beneficial to advancing one's career path. Werbel (2000) discovered that early job satisfaction during employment is influenced by career exploration before employment, specifically environmental exploration. Also, research has demonstrated that both career self-exploration and environmental exploration contribute to employees' assessments of person-organization fit and person-job fit (Nie et al., 2012).

According to Jiang et al. (2019), engaging in self-exploration enhances one's self-awareness and promotes the development of well-defined and focused interests. In the initial phases of their professional journey and engaging in extensive career exploration, young individuals tend to develop a well-defined understanding of the factors contributing to career success. Consequently, they exhibit greater confidence in making career-related decisions, leading to favorable outcomes such as increased levels of career satisfaction and alignment between their personal attributes and job requirements (Xin et al., 2023). Thus, it is essential to gain insight into future labor market candidates' career exploration perceptions, as they might be significant indicators of future job search efficiency and job and career satisfaction.

Career goals are crucial to individuals' career strategies (Aryee & Debrah, 1993). London (1983, p. 622) defines goal setting as "*identifying specific career goals and making them concrete (e.g., putting them in writing)*." The theory of goal-setting places emphasis on the efficacy of particular and challenging objectives, how they relate to affect, mediators, self-efficacy, and its applicability across individuals, tasks, and countries (Locke & Latham, 2006). A career goal, a fundamental element of CSM models, is an aspirational career outcome, including objectives such as promotion, pay increase, or skill development, that individuals strive to achieve (Seibert et al., 2013). CSM involves the process of identifying goals and then facilitating the formulation and execution of a career plan. This approach enables individuals to make progress toward their declared career objectives. Goal setting is an essential process for an individual since it may result in career indecision, which refers to the absence of a career goal and may decrease subjective well-being (Priyashantha et al., 2023). Developed countries provide individuals with increased access to various services, such as career counseling, vocational training programs, and educational institutions. On the other hand, individuals living in underdeveloped countries may need to adopt a more proactive strategy to investigate and define career goals effectively, facilitating access to these resources. Given the paramount importance of comprehending the nature of career self-management, an examination of career exploration, planning, and goal-setting processes from the perspective of university students is crucial. Therefore, drawing from CSM, the study objective was to transcend the standard description of a career, examine career exploration, planning, and goal setting thoroughly, and reveal possible sub-categories. The research questions were as follows:

- What are the recurring themes in the metaphors addressed by senior university students when stating career, career planning, career exploration, and career goals?
- How might these metaphors inform our understanding of their career self-management perceptions?



Method

This study adopts the phenomenology approach, one of the qualitative research patterns. Creswell (2013) argues that a phenomenological investigation involves exploring a shared understanding constructed by individuals when they express their experiences about a particular phenomenon or topic through verbal expression. Using phenomenology is helpful when the study topic demands a profound grasp of shared human experiences, according to Creswell (2013). The researchers will find it more challenging to uncover the phenomenon's primary and shared meanings if participants' experiences differ. Metaphor analysis enables the exploration of the many interpretations and personal understandings of a particular concept component. This facilitates the emergence of diverse interpretations of a given topic by different people (Cassell & Bishop, 2019, p. 204). There has been a significant increase in studies using metaphors in the management and organization domains, and various methods for analyzing metaphors have been used. It was suggested that metaphor analysis allows researchers to examine how people build careers and how they are bound by them, providing critical insights that has been absent in previous studies (Mignot, 2000). For instance, Inkson and Amundson (2002) highlighted using metaphors to expand individuals' perspectives in imagining their career trajectories. Also, the use of metaphors in the career domain helps to go beyond their symbolic and basic meanings, which is particularly beneficial in the ever-changing world of careers (Inkson, 2006). Certain career researchers employed the use of metaphors to enhance comprehension of the given concepts (Ateş & Karatepe, 2013; Demirbilek & Korkmaz, 2021). The metaphors are not merely cognitive linguistics but fundamentally structure how individuals think and act, so they are a useful tool in career counseling methods because they encourage in-depth reflection and strategic career management (Stanley et al., 2021). The use of visual metaphors in career counseling serves as evidence of this, especially when it comes to assisting adults with self-reviewing career transitions (Barner, 2011). Since the concept of career self-management is complex and subject to a variety of factors, metaphorical career narratives may be used to shed light on this complexity (Chiaburu et al., 2006). Therefore, examining career self-management with the help of metaphors is accepted to be essential for revealing the different variables that affect career self-management.

Analyzing data and establishing appropriate categories or themes is essential to achieving an interpretation that accurately captures the core concepts and meanings of the phenomena being examined (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). This study's analysis strategy is thematic content analysis. Thematic content analysis is a qualitative method widely used to identify, report, and analyze data for people, situations, and events and the meanings they produce (Floersch et al., 2010). This method involves determining the frequencies of recurring analytical units in the data and assembling themes within themes that form a meaningful unity.

Participants and Data Collection Tool

This study adopted purposive sampling, which refers to including particular criteria participants satisfy during selection (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). The utilization of purposive sampling in qualitative research enhances methodological rigor and trustworthiness by ensuring alignment with the study objectives and method, thus contributing to the improvement of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Campbell et al., 2020). The decision on the sample size for this study was influenced by a combination of factors, including methodological rigor, the scope of the research questions, and practical concerns. The study sample consists of 386 university students studying in Istanbul and Kocaeli. Although the availability of participants at two distinct public universities facilitated the data collection process, it was not the sole factor in establishing the sample size. Qualitative researchers are required to take into account various elements, such as the topic of study and the scope of their investigation (Morse, 2000; Trotter II, 2012). Given the objective of the present study, which is to investigate the career perspectives of university students, a significant rationale for selecting a relatively large sample size is to encompass a wider array of viewpoints and encounters pertaining to career self-management. Furthermore, considering the varied perspectives of university students on career planning, exploration, and goal setting, which can be influenced by their academic fields, personal backgrounds, and life experiences, it was believed that utilizing metaphor analysis would be advantageous with a larger sample size. Previous research has utilized university students as participants in metaphor analysis, making use of large sample numbers to improve the depth of the findings (e.g., Ateş & Karatepe, 2013 (N = 250); Boylu & Işık, 2017 (N = 100); Çiçili & Kırbaşlar, 2015 (n = 95); Demirbilek & Korkmaz, 2021 (N = 353); Tortop, 2013 (N = 347)). Also, the diversity in career choice experiences and points of view could help researchers provide more insightful results.

In terms of gender, 61,1% of the participants were female, and 38,9% of them were male. Concerning age, 64.7% of the participants were between 18 and 20; 30.2% were between 21 and 23, and 6.1% of them were 24 and above. Data was collected via online forms in the spring semester of 2022-2023. Furthermore, apart from obtaining ethical approval from the author's University Ethical Commission, the study also obtained ethical consent from the students. The students were asked to complete four sentences, including "Career is like...because..."; "Career planning is like... because..."; "Career exploration is like... because..."; and "Career goals are like... because..." by words or phrases.

Analytic Procedure

To conduct data analysis, two researchers developed a coding schema for thematic content analysis and independently performed the coding process. Following coding procedures,

the metaphors produced by participants, which exhibited comparable characteristics and themes, were categorized into distinct groups. Themes were predetermined as career, career planning, career exploration, and career goals according to previously mentioned career theories and prior studies. Sub-themes were determined according to the study findings and named according to theoretical background. Phenomenological validation involves participant verification and coder agreement (Creswell, 2013). The process of corroborating with participants involves the researcher and participants discussing the data analysis. This interaction confirms that the meanings derived from the data align with the perspectives and expressions of the participants, whether explicit or implicit.

In qualitative research, reliability refers to the consistency of the researcher's methodology and the ability to replicate the results under similar conditions. Utilizing two researchers to autonomously construct a coding schema and conduct analysis is a reliable approach to improving reliability. Thus, two researchers analyzed the data independently and then reviewed the results by comparison. The inter-coder reliability formula developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) is a commonly employed approach for assessing coding reliability. According to the provided formula, the similarity rate in the used coding form is estimated to be 92% in this study. This estimation is derived by considering the number of agreed-upon views and disagreeing opinions. It may be asserted that the encoding exhibits a considerable degree of reliability.

Validity in qualitative research, also known as credibility, concerns the degree to which the study accurately represents the perspectives, experiences, and realities of the participants. Researchers use triangulation as a method to validate study findings (Guba, 1981). The process of triangulation entails the utilization of several data sources, researchers, or theories in order to validate the obtained results. By collecting data from different

sources, engaging multiple researchers in the data collection process, and employing different methods, reliability can be ensured (Carter, 2014; Noble & Smith, 2015). This study attempted to ensure validity by using a heterogeneous sample from two separate institutions and taking into account various career theories referred to in the theoretical framework.

Results

After the data analysis, four main themes named as "Meaning of Career," "Meaning of Career Planning," "Meaning of Career Exploration," and "Meaning of Goal Setting". The first theme is called "Meaning of Career," which comprises three subcategories, namely: "Career as a Trajectory," "Career as a Priority," and "Career as Thriving". As seen in ■ Table 1, the first category includes metaphors such as "marathon," "stairs," "tree," "climbing the mountain," "racing," and "target," all of which metaphorically portray the profession as a trajectory or pathway for progression. The concept of career is often seen as a critical aspect of an individual's existence, often symbolized by metaphors such as "taking a breath," "gold/diamond," "family," and "future." Students also described careers as thriving by using metaphors such as "learning," "effort," and "achievement," which are related to personal growth.

The second theme was "Meaning of Career Planning," which includes four subcategories: "Planning as an Endeavor," "Planning as a Construction Process," "Planning as a Preparation Process," and "Planning as an Essential Element." The most common metaphors within this theme are "life itself (42)" and "constructing a building (36)", underlining the importance of career planning for an individual's life. As seen in ■ Table 2, metaphors extracted from the study data show young individuals emphasize that career planning requires effort, discovery, and finding ways, and that it is an essential part of everyday life.

■ Table 1
Theme 1: Meaning of Career

Theme 1	Categories	Metaphors (f)*
Meaning of Career	Career as a Trajectory	Marathon (69), stairs (60), reaching to one's target (33), climbing to a tree (31), climbing to a mountain (18), racing/running (10), starting (4), traveling with a car/ on a bus/ by a ship (5), war (2)
	Career as a Priority	Taking breath (12), valuables such as diamonds and gold (10), the priority of life (11), hope (9), family/marriage/friends (7), gambling/lottery (6), future (5), power/reputation/status/money (5), water (3), life perspective/life philosophy (2)
	Career as Personal Growth	Learning (24), making an effort (21), expression of the self (14), personality/character (7), personal achievement (5), father/teacher/school/library/book (9), growing a plant/ raising a baby (4)

*f: Frequency of occurrence, Source: Table by the authors



Table 2

Theme 2: Meaning of Career Planning

Theme 2	Categories	Metaphors (f)*
Meaning of Career Planning	Planning as an Endeavor	Making effort (28), setting goals (27), dreaming (18), discovering the self (11), game/chess/puzzle (9), creating a vision (6), starting point (6), taking responsibility (4), defining priorities (4), climbing to a tree/a mountain (4), unnecessary effort (3), to be the lead of the story (3),
	Planning as a Construction	Constructing a building (36), cooking (25), building the future (24), building a base for life (3)
	Planning as a Preparation	Mapping/navigating (46), getting ready for a race/journey/trip (22), exhibiting diligence and discipline (8), taking measures/ foreseeing (5)
	Planning as an Essential Element	Life itself/ (42), a decision that needs to be made carefully (29), insurance/ investment for the future/for the self (19), hope for the future (5)

*f: Frequency of occurrence, Source: Table by the authors

Table 3

Theme 3: Meaning of Career Exploration

Theme 3	Categories	Metaphors (f)*
Meaning of Career Exploration	Internal Exploration	Finding yourself (44), discovering one’s talents (42), discovering interests (28), discovering life purpose (22), discovering dreams (17), enlightenment (14), and being reborn (11)
	External Exploration	Exploring life (39), entering an unfamiliar territory (35), looking for treasure/awards (30), discovering new places/routes (25), looking for life success (25), an ongoing journey (21), a guide in life (19), assessing alternatives (14)

*f: Frequency of occurrence, Source: Table by the authors

Table 4

Theme 4: Meaning of Goal Setting

Theme 4	Categories	Metaphors (f)*
Meaning of Goal Setting	Making Choices	Choosing from alternatives (41), setting targets/aiming/throwing arrows/shooting (38), setting up a game plan/future plan/packing for a travel (31)
	Achievement	To reach success (48), determining one’s life course (38), to struggle/to be challenged (37), slow/everlasting/ambiguous process (26), giving direction to the life (25), getting to know one’s self (24), realizing dreams (22), finding happiness (21), hardship/war/ complications (18), making the unknown clear (17)

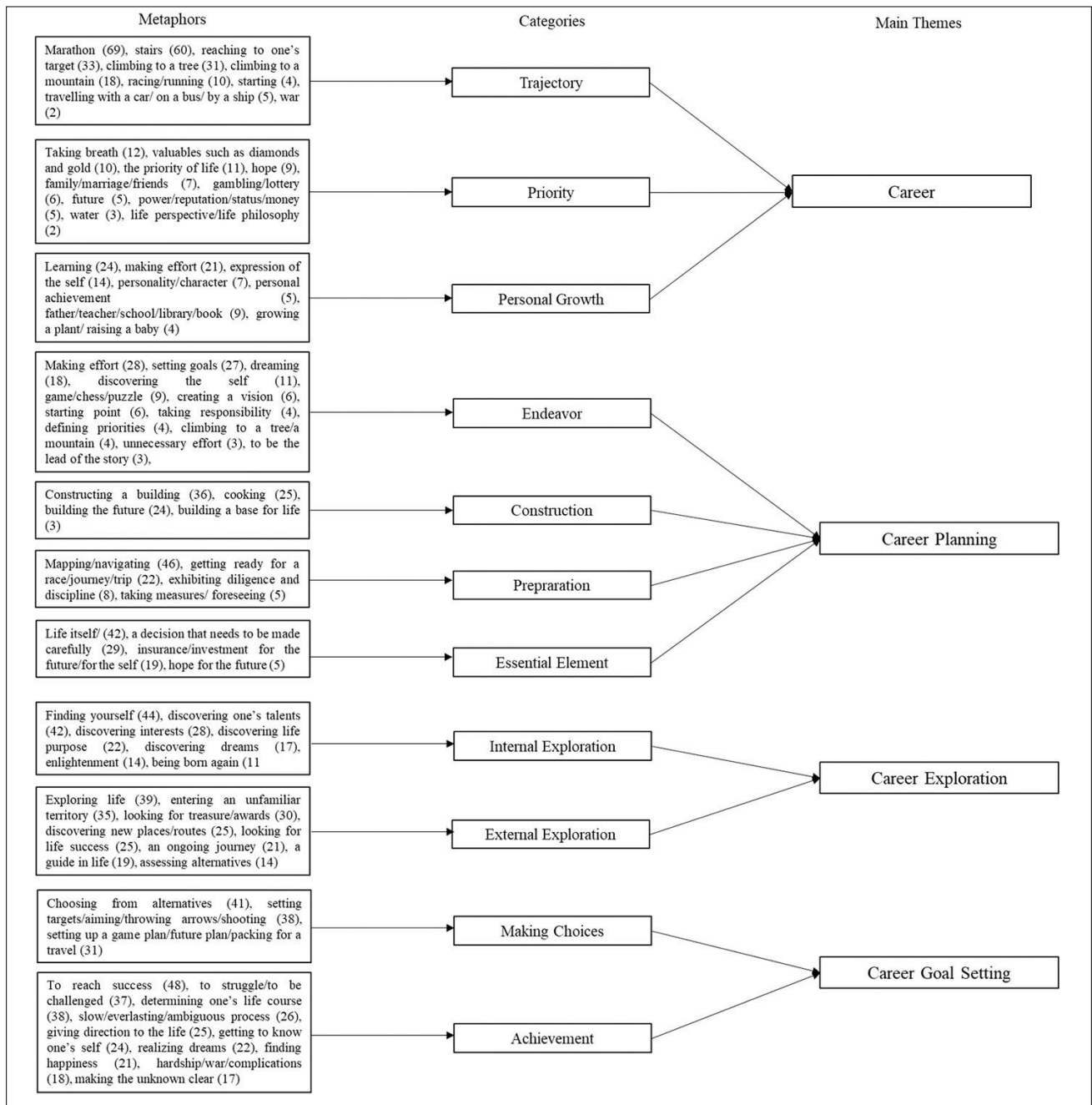
*f: Frequency of occurrence, Source: Table by the authors

Theme 3 was named Meaning of Career Exploration,” which comprises two subcategories: “Internal Exploration” and “External Exploration.” As seen in Table 3, the most frequent metaphor was “finding yourself (44), indicating career exploration is mostly attributed to self-discovery. Other metaphors were “discovering interests (28)”, “discovering life purpose (22)”, “discovering dreams (17)”, “enlightenment (14)”, and “reborn (11)”. The “External exploration” category comprises “exploring life (39)”, “entering an unfamiliar territory (35)”, “looking for treasure/awards (30)”, “discovering new places/routes (25)”, “looking for life success (25)”, “an ongoing journey (21), “a guide in life (19)”, and “assessing alternatives (14)”.

Table 4 shows Theme 4: Meaning of Goal Setting. This theme comprises two subcategories: “making choices” and “achievement.” According to participants, career goal setting is related to choosing alternatives and setting up a plan to achieve success or happiness. The most frequent metaphors within this theme were “to reach success (48)”, “choosing from alternatives (41)”, “setting targets/aiming/throwing arrows/shooting (38)” and “determining one’s life course (38)”. The results are discussed in the discussion part in detail.

The complete data structure is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Data Structure (Table by the authors)



Discussion and Conclusion

Various economic and labor market developments exist that, beyond the reach of individual control, present a substantial threat to the trajectories of their careers. Simultaneously, career psychological counselors have endeavored to recognize and effectively address these issues to preserve individuals' professional prospects. Tomlinson (2008) conducted a study that revealed that students are more aware of the declining significance of their academic qualifications in a highly competitive job market.

This study aimed to explain the significance of CSM concepts, thereby facilitating a holistic comprehension of the emerging labor force in Türkiye. To achieve this objective, we examined predominant career theories to explore the conceptualizations of career, career planning, career exploration, and goal setting since these constructs are considered distinct. Consistent with expectations, our qualitative analysis yielded findings aligning with the existing research on career self-management.



The first theme titled “meaning of career” comprises sub-categories of “career as a trajectory,” “career as a priority,” and “career as personal growth.” Initially, the research participants tended to conceptualize their career as a trajectory, emphasizing its significance as a life priority and a means for personal development. “Path” and “goal” are the main metaphors that emerge in some career-focused studies that adopt a metaphorical approach (Korkut & Keskin, 2016). Indeed, trajectory emerged as an important category within the context of the meaning of career in this study. The notion of a career as a trajectory one can follow, climb, or run along implies that university students perceive their career as a continuous and evolving journey. The findings of this research align with those of previous studies mentioned in the literature (Creed et al., 2021; Dahan, 2014; El-Sawad, 2005; Inkson & Amundson, 2002; Smith-Ruig, 2008). Additionally, within this category, some participants employ the metaphor of a “ship”, which resembles the Career Sailboat Model proposed by Korkut-Owen et al. (2015). The journey is one of the critical metaphors of a career, as stated by Inkson (2004). Furthermore, the students offered metaphors such as inhaling precious gemstones, wealth, influence, existence, optimism, and the essentiality of water, signifying that a career holds significant importance in their lives. Additionally, they established a connection between careers and acquiring knowledge, diligent work, and individual growth. The metaphors included in the data may indicate a high level of vocational consciousness within the university student population.

The second theme was “meaning of career planning,” including four sub-categories: “planning as an endeavor,” “planning as a construction,” “planning as a preparation,” and “planning as an essential element.” Career planning was characterized as a rigorous pursuit, a deliberate process, a proactive measure, and a fundamental component of one’s life by the participants. The findings derived from Theme 2 shows the association between career planning and a sense of personal responsibility for developing an effective strategy emerged as a significant factor with considerable implications for an individual’s prospects. As presented in theoretical background, career planning encompasses an entire process that involves self-realization, extensive research, preparation for a job search, and the following actions (Lent, 2013). The emphasis on these factors was observed in Theme 2, therefore aligning with the CSM approach. Hence, it can be asserted that those in the study possess a comprehensive understanding of the career planning process, albeit with minor variations in their interpretation of its essential components. Inkson (2004) posited that the concept of “construction” serves as a significant metaphor within the context of career development, aligning with established career theory frameworks. Aligned with this prior finding, the “construction” category was identified in Theme 2. The prevalence of “constructing a building” as the most often mentioned code under this category.

The third theme was “meaning of career exploration,” including two sub-categories, “internal exploration” and “external exploration.” The students characterized career exploration as a multifaceted endeavor encompassing self-discovery, skill identification, and the investigation of novel pathways. It is essential to acknowledge that the metaphors articulated by the participants were categorized into internal and external explorations, aligning with the existing literature on CSM (King, 2004). The participants ascribed internal investigation to self-exploration, highlighting the significance of this personal endeavor. The concept of external exploration was defined as the process of investigating several aspects of life, suggesting that university students understood the interconnectedness between career exploration and numerous external issues. These findings aligned with the previous research outcomes, suggesting that university students have the perception that career exploration is a process characterized by a significant amount of information collection (Manodara et al., 2021). Additionally, the participants used metaphors such as a life guide and looking for treasures, suggesting that the act of exploration would have lifelong effects on their lives and yield rewarding outcomes.

The fourth theme was named meaning of goal setting, consisting of two subcategories: “making choices” and “achievement.” The students’ characterization of career goal setting as a process similar to aiming, throwing arrows, or shooting a target is intriguing since it suggests a connection between goal setting and attaining one’s broader life objectives. Furthermore, the participants characterized choice-making as a process of deciding among alternatives and setting up a plan for the future. These metaphors indicate that the emerging workforce in Türkiye believes that they have different alternatives in the current labor market and that they are future-oriented. Future orientation is a positive attitude that makes positive contributions to future work and proactive career behaviors (Gerçek & Özveren, 2025; Strauss et al., 2012).

Considering the overall findings of this study, it was evident that the metaphors used by the participants were in parallel with CSM and prior research findings. Also, it is noteworthy to note that even though the studies regarding university students’ career perceptions include career indecision (Priyashantha et al., 2023) and career anxiety (Kleine et al., 2021), the current study explored mainly positive metaphors implying some level of hope in the emerging workforce. However, the nature of the current exploration limits the detailed connection between the students’ career perceptions and future orientations. In addition, when taken holistically, the themes that emerged in this study suggest that career goal-setting and career exploration metaphors are complementary, showing the association between them (Creed & Hood, 2014). The following sections discuss theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and future research directions.

Theoretical Implications

This study demonstrated that career concepts, which are practice-based, could be expressed through many textual manifestations as metaphors (Mignot, 2000). Also, as Inkson and Amundson (2002) suggest career metaphors could be used to understand the real-life experiences of individuals. Future research endeavors could include more investigations into alternative models while concurrently advancing novel theoretical perspectives about the effective growth of individuals' career trajectories throughout the future landscape of employment (Hirschi, 2018). For instance, future research could focus on the role of the work values of the new generation, which could play a significant role in career self-management. This research was conducted within the specific cultural setting of Türkiye, where Hofstede's cultural dimensions indicate a prevalence of feminine cultural characteristics. According to Hofstede's framework (2001), values such as helping, collaboration, and sentimentality have significant importance in Turkish society (Cuhadar & Rudnák, 2022). The results indicate that university students see career as a personal journey rather than a competitive one. A substantial number of metaphors, such as "discovering one's talents," "discovering interests," and "finding yourself," support this point of view. Also, it was seen in this study that the use of terms such as "race" or "competition" about professional pursuits is very rare among the younger population in Türkiye. Consequently, these findings might suggest that the emerging workforce exhibits a more self-directed tendency rather than a competitive one. However, the current empirical evidence is insufficient to definitively support this assertion. On the other hand, due to their inherent focus on teamwork, millennials place a high value on the creation of strong and cohesive teams that emphasize inclusivity and diversity. For instance, Tolstikova et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study that indicates that Generation Z exhibits individualistic tendencies, with self-expression being a prominent recurring topic. Also, Sakdiyakorn (2021) found that university students' values, such as self-direction and universalism, Parallel to some of those findings, this research posits that individual characteristics have more prominence within the context of career management for young individuals. However, this issue requires additional research involving Generation Z from various cultural backgrounds. This study contributes to the international career literature by shedding light on the emerging workforce's understanding of careers using metaphors and by revealing some of their values.

Practical Implications

This study's findings suggest that university students see career self-management as a self-directed process consists of discovery and making choices. Hence, the concept of self-efficacy may play a crucial role in the process of career self-management, as it influences an individual's ability to make informed career choices and set realistic

career targets and expectations (Lent & Brown, 2013). The development of self-efficacy among people has significant importance for the labor market and the economy, as it empowers them to make more informed decisions about their career paths. Currently, it is widely believed that acquiring an in-depth understanding of the concept of a career and its significance in the context of meaning for the next generation entering the workforce would be an appropriate first step. Since this research employed metaphor analysis to investigate the perspectives of students about career self-management, to describe their career trajectories, the findings have the potential to improve career counselors' capacity to establish meaningful connections with their clients and provide more efficient support. Based on the metaphors obtained from this study, career psychological counselors could work on developing strategies for identifying goals and determining paths as university students see their careers to achieve their objectives. In this context, professional career counseling services at universities might provide seminars, workshops, and counseling. For instance, career psychological counselors may be able to assist individuals in recognizing the connection between their fundamental values and their career decisions. This may entail an examination of their values, such as family, authority, and reputation, and how these factors impact their career self-management.

The presence of business organizations and regional associations of trade on campus has the potential to enrich students' understanding of essential trends in employment (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). Gaining insight into the complicated nature of university students' attitudes toward career self-management has the potential to enhance the efficacy of the Turkish Employment Agency's (TEA/İŞKUR) career counseling services. By comprehending the career management perceptions and requirements of university students, TEA has the potential to cultivate stronger cooperation with higher education institutions. This may encompass collaborative efforts in the development of career services, cooperative research projects focused on labor market trends, and the establishment of internship and job placement initiatives that more effectively correspond to students' career objectives and the competencies demanded by employers. Generally, the success of higher education institutions is contingent upon students' employability (Tavitiyaman et al., 2023). Thus, universities could offer courses that promote self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and lifelong learning, potentially helping students make more accurate career decisions and facilitating a better match between sectoral demands and the skills of the emerging workforce.



Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are some limitations to this study. First, our study is limited to the sample, data collection tool, interpretation process, and data sources. This limited sample may not represent the broader population of university students. Also, the study was conducted at two public universities, and the findings may be influenced by the specific cultural, institutional, or regional contexts of these universities. This may limit the generalizability of the results to students in different institutions or cultural settings. Moreover, relying on self-reported data, especially career-related topics, may introduce bias. Individuals may provide responses they believe are culturally acceptable rather than stating their true perspectives. While metaphor analysis using a phenomenological approach offers rich qualitative data, it is subjective and subject to the researchers' interpretations. The findings may not be entirely objective, and different researchers might derive different themes from the same data. The study has a cross-sectional design, capturing perspectives at a specific point in time. This design limits the ability to infer causation or perspective changes over time. Longitudinal studies would provide a more dynamic understanding of how students' perspectives evolve. In addition, the study focuses on university students, and the findings might not directly apply to individuals at different career stages. Perspectives on career self-management may vary significantly between university students and professionals in the workforce. Despite various limitations, this study yielded initial findings for the general understanding of career concepts from a relatively large study sample, which could be a baseline for future research.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the Istanbul University Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee with number 1781447.

Author Contributions

Author 1: Study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation. Author 2: Study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

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