

Perceptions of Graduate Students Regarding Migration and Immigrants: A Phenomenological Study

Emrullah Akcan*

Rümeysa Çelik**

Kemal Faruk Bakır***

Abstract: The Syrian conflict that began in 2011 transformed Turkey into a principal destination for large-scale migration, generating considerable social, economic, cultural, and educational consequences. Understanding the anti-migrant attitudes emerging across society on a sound empirical footing matters greatly for the design of future migration policy and for social cohesion. This study examines how postgraduate students specializing in migration studies perceive the notions of migration and the migrant. Working with forty graduate students enrolled at the Migration Institute of Gaziantep University in 2024–2025, the research adopted a phenomenological design, drawing data from semi-structured interviews subjected to content analysis. Although participants recognized benefits such as cultural enrichment and additional labour, their accounts were dominated by concerns over integration difficulties, economic strain, unemployment, and irregular migration. The “migrant” was frequently imagined as socio-economically and educationally disadvantaged. Accordingly, the authors recommend macro-level policies grounded in state oversight, legal frameworks, and qualitative criteria.

Keywords: Migration, Perception of Migrants, Graduate Students, Phenomenology, Social Cohesion

Lisansüstü Öğrenim Gören Öğrencilerin Göç ve Göçmenlere Yönelik Bakış Açıları

Öz: 2011’de başlayan Suriye iç çatışması, Türkiye’yi büyük ölçekli göçün başlıca varış noktalarından biri hâline getirerek toplumsal, ekonomik, kültürel ve eğitsel açıdan derin sonuçlar doğurmuştur. Toplumda beliren göçmen karşıtı tutumların sağlam bir ampirik zemine oturtularak anlaşılması, gelecekteki göç politikaları ve sosyal uyum süreçleri bakımından büyük önem taşımaktadır. Bu çalışma, göç alanında uzmanlaşan lisansüstü öğrencilerin göç ve göçmen kavramlarına ilişkin algılarını incelemektedir. Gaziantep Üniversitesi Göç Enstitüsü’nde 2024-2025 öğretim yılında öğrenim gören kırk lisansüstü öğrenciyle yürütülen araştırmada fenomenolojik bir desen benimsenmiş; veriler yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelerle toplanarak içerik analiziyle çözümlenmiştir. Katılımcılar kültürel zenginlik ve iş gücü katkısı gibi olumlu yönleri kabul etmekle birlikte, anlatılarına uyum sorunları, ekonomik yük, işsizlik ve düzensiz göçe dair kaygılar egemen olmuştur. “Göçmen” çoğunlukla sosyo-ekonomik ve eğitsel açıdan dezavantajlı biçimde tasavvur edilmiştir. Bu doğrultuda devlet denetimi, hukuki çerçeveler ve nitelik ölçütlerine dayanan makro düzeyli politikalar önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Göç, Göçmen algısı, Lisansüstü öğrenciler, Olgubilim, Sosyal Uyum

* Corresponding author’s address: Assoc. Prof. Dr., Gaziantep University, Nizip Faculty of Education, Department of Primary Education, emrullahakcan@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-5492-4159.

** Independent Researcher, rmysdg7@gmail.com, ORCID: 0009-0002-6454-0017.

*** Independent Researcher, Ministry of National Education (Gaziantep), kemalfarukbakir@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-4441-7209.

1. Introduction

Migration, while being one of the most deeply rooted macro-sociological phenomena shaping human history, is a dynamic process that directly interacts with the social, cultural, economic, political, and educational mechanisms of societies (Kaştan, 2015). Behind the displacement of individuals or masses leaving the geographical borders where they were born and felt a sense of belonging to head towards new living spaces lie multi-layered push and pull factors such as demographic imbalances, environmental/climatic deformations, wars, and macro-economic instabilities (Bozan & Kaştan, 2018; Kaştan, 2016). Initially gaining visibility primarily within the framework of the labor market and economic indicators, the phenomenon of migration, as the process prolongs and exhibits a tendency towards permanence, progressively transforms the network of social relations, local cultural fabric, national security policies, and pedagogical ecosystems over time (Kaştan, 2016).

Located at the center of global migration routes and transit corridors, Turkey has hosted migration flows of various characteristics throughout historical processes. However, the civil war and humanitarian crisis that began in 2011 in its southern neighbor, Syria, led to the most mass-scale and difficult-to-control influx of asylum seekers in the history of the republic. Welcoming over four million asylum seekers under temporary protection status during this process, Turkey demonstrated an institutional reflex to manage the sociological, economic, and administrative dimensions of the crisis by establishing the General Directorate of Migration Management (currently known as the Presidency of Migration Management) under the Ministry of Interior (Tamer, 2019). The evolution of the process from temporary crisis management to a permanent model of social integration and governance necessitated the institutionalization of the subject within academia as an independent discipline and area of expertise. In this context, Migration Institutes and graduate programs established within universities have played a vital role in analyzing the process to scientific standards and producing rational policies.

One of the most prominent social fractures created by mass migration movements in host societies is the production of anti-immigrant sentiment and xenophobic schemas. Anti-immigrant attitudes, which until recently found a place predominantly in the far-right political rhetoric of Western European countries, have gained a visible momentum in Turkey in recent years, in parallel with the perception of socio-economic contractions and uncontrolled urbanization (Köybaşı, 2020). The attribution of isolated judicial or socio-cultural problems that cause public outrage to the entire immigrant population (wholesale homogenization) solidifies prejudices and deepens polarization. Behind anti-immigrant attitudes and stereotypes lies a multivariate structure comprising demographic, cultural, economic anxieties, and security perceptions (Yeşildağ, 2022).

At this point, the research problem lies in the need to understand how these negative perceptions and stereotypes in society resonate within the intellectual worlds of graduate students who receive academic education directly in this field and who will become the future migration experts, academicians, and policymakers. Although there are numerous quantitative and qualitative studies in the literature regarding the perception of migration among teachers, local populations, or students, those examining the deep-seated perceptual maps of graduate students specializing in the field of "Migration Studies" at a phenomenological level are highly limited. Yet, in the face of the increasing number of immigrants, the transformation of their roles in the labor market, and the fact that migration has now become a structural reality of Turkey, the intellectual capital in this field is expected to possess an objective, scientific, and analytical perspective. This study aims both to fill the gap in the literature and to guide future integration policies by revealing the perceptual world of the target audience regarding the phenomenon of migration, the immigrant profile, and the macro-policies implemented in all its clarity.

1.1. Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The primary objective of this research is to reveal the views, perceptions, and experiential schemas of graduate students studying migration studies regarding the concepts of migration and immigrants through a phenomenological approach. In line with this primary objective, answers to the following sub-questions were sought:

- What are the perceptions of graduate students regarding the effects of migration on the individual and society?
- How are the cognitive evaluations of the participants regarding the positive and negative aspects of the migration phenomenon shaped?
- What are the approaches of students toward the participation processes of immigrants in economic, social, and cultural life?
- What are the criticisms and solution proposals of the participants regarding the macro-migration policies in Turkey and the power of these policies to shape social perception?
- Of which codes does the schema of the “immigrant profile” in the minds of students specializing in the field of migration consist?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a phenomenological research design to examine in depth the perceptions, attitudes, and experiential schemas of graduate students studying in the field of migration studies towards the concepts of migration and immigrant. The phenomenology design is a powerful qualitative approach that aims to describe in all its clarity the experiences lived, meanings developed, and perspectives generated by individuals towards a specific concept or phenomenon, and to find the “essence” underlying these shared experiences (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Rose et al., 1995). The phenomenon focused on in this study is the social reflections of migration processes and the presence of immigrants. Since the objective is to reveal the subjective meaning patterns and consciousness structures developed on the subject by graduate students specializing in this field, the phenomenology design was determined as the most appropriate methodological ground.

2.2. Study Group

In qualitative research, rather than the concern of statistical generalization, the expression “study group” is preferred instead of “population and sample” because the objective is to reach information sources that can convey the phenomenon subject to the research problem in the richest and most in-depth manner (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). In determining the study group of the research, the criterion sampling method, one of the qualitative sampling strategies, was used. In this direction, the basic criterion was determined as “studying directly in a migration-themed institute or department at the graduate level.”

The study group of the research consisted of a total of 40 graduate students continuing their education at the master’s and doctoral levels at Gaziantep University Migration Institute in the 2024–2025 academic year. Since all of the participants received academic education regarding the theoretical, legal, and sociological dimensions of the migration phenomenon, they consist of individuals with a high level of awareness and qualified knowledge about the phenomenon targeted by

the research. In order to protect the identity confidentiality of the participants, codes such as P1, P2, P3... P40 were used instead of their real names in line with ethical principles.

2.3. Data Collection Instrument

In the research, a semi-structured interview form as one of the most fundamental data collection techniques of qualitative research was used in order to access the inner worlds, perceptions, and attitudes of the participants. Semi-structured interviews possess a high level of advantage in terms of offering guidance to the researcher to remain within the scope of the topic with pre-prepared questions, while granting the participant the freedom to convey their thoughts in a flexible and in-depth manner.

In the process of preparing the interview form, the relevant literature was first reviewed, and draft questions were formulated. To ensure the content validity and linguistic comprehensibility of the form, the opinions of two academicians expert in the fields of migration studies and qualitative research methods were consulted. In line with the feedback received from the experts, necessary corrections were made to the form, giving the data collection instrument its final shape. The interview form consists of in-depth questions querying the effects of migration, the participation of immigrants in socio-economic and cultural life, current migration policies, and the schemas of the immigrant profile in minds.

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

In the process of data collection, interviews were conducted with participants on a voluntary basis. Prior to the interviews, the purpose of the research was explained to the participants, and an assurance was provided that their identity information would be kept strictly confidential. The raw data obtained from the interviews were transcribed word-for-word into digital texts without allowing any loss of information or manipulation.

The content analysis method, one of the qualitative data analysis techniques, was used in interpreting the obtained data. Content analysis is the process of subjecting the collected data to an in-depth examination, bringing similar data together within the framework of specific concepts and themes, and organizing and interpreting them in a way that the reader can understand (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). The analysis process was carried out in the following stages:

1. Coding: The texts were read line by line, and meaningful units (codes) were extracted from the participants' expressions.
2. Finding Themes: By determining the relationships and commonalities between the obtained codes, they were grouped under overarching themes and subcategories (Positive / Negative dimensions).
3. Organizing and Describing the Data: The frequency (f) distributions of the codes and themes were calculated and structured into tables. Direct quotations were included in order to reflect the views of the participants objectively.

2.5. Validity and Reliability Studies of the Research

In qualitative research, the concepts of credibility instead of internal validity, transferability instead of external validity, consistency instead of internal reliability, and confirmability instead of external reliability are taken as criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the following measures were taken to fully ensure the criteria of scientific rigor and accuracy:

1. **Credibility:** While presenting the findings, raw quotations from the statements of the participants were transferred into the text without any changes in order to directly demonstrate the source of the data. Furthermore, the accuracy of the analyses was verified through expert review.
2. **Transferability:** The design, study group, data collection instrument, and analysis processes of the research were described in detail and transparently in a methodological manner.
3. **Consistency:** In order to test the compatibility of the obtained codes with the themes, the formula of [Percentage of Consensus = Agreement / (Agreement + Disagreement) × 100] developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used. In the calculation made over the independent codings of two different researchers, the percentage of consensus was found to be 92%, and it was determined that the analyses possessed a high level of consistency.

3. Findings and Discussion

In this section, the data obtained through semi-structured interviews from 40 graduate students studying at Gaziantep University Migration Institute were subjected to content analysis in line with the sub-objectives of the research and are presented in the form of tables and analytical explanations. Direct quotations were included in order to reflect the views of the participants objectively, and these findings were discussed within the framework of the relevant literature.

3.1. Findings Regarding the Significant Effects of Migration on the Individual and Society

In line with the first sub-objective of the research, the perceptions of graduate students towards the macro and micro effects of migration on the individual and social levels were examined. The frequency distributions of the obtained codes are presented in Table 1 under two main categories as Positive and Negative, without omitting any codes.

Table 1.

Code Distributions Regarding the Significant Effects of Migration on the Individual and Society

Category	Codes	Frequency (f)	Category	Codes	Frequency (f)
Positive	Cultural diversity	14	Negative	Adaptation	8
	Socio-Economic	7		Unemployment	6
	Interaction	3		Conflict	6
	Integration / Mingling	1		Inequality of opportunity	3
				Demographic structure	3
				Assimilation	3
				Belonging	2
				Anxiety	2
				Exclusion	2
				Alienation	2
				Stress	1
				Identity confusion	1
				Crime rates	1
				Corruption / Degeneration	1
				Loneliness	1

When Table 1 is examined, it is observed that graduate students produced a total of 4 positive and 15 negative codes regarding the effects of migration. In the context of the positive effects of migration, the code with the highest frequency is “Cultural diversity” (f=14), followed by “Socio-Economic” (f=7) dynamics, “Interaction” (f=3), and “Integration / Mingling” (f=1) codes. The participants viewed migration as a means of intercultural transfer and social enrichment. Some participant quotations illustrating this code are as follows:

“An increase in cultural diversity for society, mobility in the labor market, and social adaptation are necessities.” (P1)

“Migration affects the transfer of people’s cultures, the exchange of different cultures, and the mingling of people.” (P3)

“Intercultural interaction, cultural diversity, and acculturation can be observed.” (P9)

“Migration can affect individuals and societies positively in a cultural sense. Therefore, I can say that its most important effect is cultural diversity.” (P12)

In contrast, a broad schema was produced in the category of negative effects. As the most distinct structural problems, “Adaptation” (f=8), “Unemployment” (f=6), and “Conflict” (f=6) stand out. In addition to these, the participants touched upon the areas of socio-psychological crises such as “Inequality of opportunity” (f=3), “Demographic structure” (f=3), “Assimilation” (f=3), “Belonging” (f=2), “Anxiety” (f=2), “Exclusion” (f=2), and “Alienation” (f=2). The codes with the lowest frequencies are “Stress” (f=1), “Identity confusion” (f=1), “Crime rates” (f=1), “Corruption / Degeneration” (f=1), and “Loneliness” (f=1). It is observed that the participants receiving academic education in the field of migration think that if migration occurs in an uncontrolled manner, it disrupts the labor market in the host society and increases the risk of social conflict through cultural incompatibilities. In this direction, the remarkable expressions of the participants are presented below:

“Adaptation problem; they cannot adapt to the place they go to.” (P5)

“Migration negatively affects both individuals and society because getting used to a new culture brings about adaptation problems and identity confusion.” (P11)

“In countries like Turkey that receive uncontrolled and uninspected migration, however, people coming through migration experience adaptation problems in the country they arrive in.” (P14)

“Because they work for low wages, they cause the local people who are already working to lose their jobs, thereby increasing unemployment.” (P14)

“It creates anxiety, maladaptation, and a financial burden on society and the individual.” (P19)

“It causes cultural conflict, lowers the level of welfare, and problems like unemployment emerge...” (P29)

“Unemployment increases, the cost of living increases, and for this reason, unrests arise...” (P31)

When these obtained findings are compared with the literature, they confirm the dual nature of migration. Although it is accepted in the literature that migration structurally revitalizes the labor market and enriches cultural capital in host societies (Kaştan, 2015), it is known that uninspected migration waves trigger economic anxieties (unemployment, an increase in the cost of living) in

the local populace and lead to adaptation crises and identity conflicts by expanding the perception of social distance (Yeşildağ, 2022). It is meaningful that the participants also drew attention to this bipolar reality with an academic language.

3.2. Findings Regarding Thoughts on the Positive and Negative Aspects of Migration

Within the scope of the second sub-objective of the research, the cognitive evaluations of the participants regarding the specific aspects of the migration phenomenon that they view as advantages and disadvantages were analyzed. The analysis results are summarized in Table 2, preserving all sub-codes in the available data.

Table 2.

Code Distributions Regarding the Positive and Negative Aspects of Migration

Category	Codes	Frequency (f)	Category	Codes	Frequency (f)
Positive	Acculturation	13	Negative	Economy	12
	Job area / Labor force	7		Adaptation	9
	Brain drain	2		Unemployment	8
	Sociology	1		Unplanned urbanization	6
	Empathy	1		Population density	6
				Conflict	6
				Education	5
				Health	4
				Racism	4
				Language	3
				Transportation	3
				Involvement in crime	3
				Politics	2
				Environmental pollution	2
				Chaos / Confusion	2
				Assimilation	2
				Belonging	1
				Religion	1
				Insufficient resources	1
				Social balance	1
				Integration	1
				Corruption / Degeneration	1
				Refugee problem	1
				Moral decline	1
				Security problem	1

When Table 2 is examined in detail, it is seen that the codes “Acculturation” (f=13) and “Job area / Labor force” (f=7) gain weight in the context of the opportunities presented by migration. In addition to these, the participants produced the codes “Brain drain” (f=2), “Sociology” (f=1), and “Empathy” (f=1) as strategic gains. The participants evaluate migration as an instrument for closing the labor shortage, increasing production, and the process of developing social empathy. Direct quotations support this perception:

“Positive aspects; acculturation, closing the labor shortage, contributions to the economy.” (P1)

“Positive aspects; labor force, cheap labor, and acculturation.” (P2)

“The increase of socio-economy and acculturation in the migrated place.” (P10)

“The positive aspects of migration can be the increase of economic opportunities and the richness of acculturation.” (P23)

“The positive aspect is acculturation, sociological diversity, and, along with establishing empathy over time, experiencing how it feels to be the ‘other’ is a positive effect for the individual and society.” (P27)

“I can say that it affects positively ... in terms of new people, new societies, and acculturation.” (P30)

On the other side of the coin, there are 25 different negative codes spread over a very wide spectrum. Chief among these are “Economy” (f=12) problems, “Adaptation” (f=9), and “Unemployment” (f=8), which shake macro-economic and micro-social balances. Furthermore, the codes “Unplanned urbanization” (f=6), “Population density” (f=6), and “Conflict” (f=6), which show the pressure of mass migration on urban and social infrastructure, are also striking. The codes “Education” (f=5), “Health” (f=4), and “Transportation” (f=3), which contain anxieties regarding the sustainability of public services, and the structures of “Racism” (f=4), “Language” (f=3), and “Involvement in crime” (f=3), which reflect social tension, have also taken their place on the map. The other codes at the lowest frequencies (f=2 and f=1) of the table are respectively as follows: “Politics” (f=2), “Environmental pollution” (f=2), “Chaos / Confusion” (f=2), “Assimilation” (f=2), “Belonging” (f=1), “Religion” (f=1), “Insufficient resources” (f=1), “Social balance” (f=1), “Integration” (f=1), “Corruption / Degeneration” (f=1), “Refugee problem” (f=1), “Moral decline” (f=1), and “Security problem” (f=1). This situation demonstrates that migration is perceived not only as a cultural phenomenon but also as an infrastructural, bureaucratic, and spatial crisis trigger. The expressions of the participants on the matter are as follows:

“Migration can also create adaptation problems and economic burdens.” (P4)

“I do not think migration has a positive effect... For example, unemployment, increase in rents, economic depression, cultural conflict, moral decline...” (P7)

“Negative sides; rent increases, cultural conflict, population crowding, transportation difficulty, cheap labor, economic problems.” (P17)

“Irregular urbanization, the emergence of health and economic problems, and the formation of insufficient resource situations.” (P24)

“The inability of the migrated mass to adapt to the place they arrive in, their inability to develop a sense of belonging, and their inability to show sensitivity in religious and political matters are the negative and most dangerous aspects of migration.” (P27)

These findings rationally reveal the transformative effect of the rapid and intense migration wave experienced by Turkey in the last decade on public services (education, health, transportation) and the urban space (Tamer, 2019). The fact that the Migration Institute students drew attention to the concentration in public services (education, health, transportation) shows that the pedagogical and bureaucratic burden management dimension of migration is coded as a primary risk area by academic circles as well.

3.3. Findings Regarding the Participation Processes of Immigrants in Economic, Social, and Cultural Life

Within the scope of the third sub-objective of the research, the cognitive approaches of graduate students regarding the integration and participation levels of the immigrant mass into the economic, social, and cultural areas of the host society were analyzed. In this direction, the codes produced by the participants were classified in Table 3 under three sub-dimensions and with their frequency values, in accordance with the nature of the fields.

Table 3.

Code Distributions Regarding the Participation of Immigrants in Economic, Social, and Cultural Life

Field	Codes	Frequency (f)
Participation in Economic Life	Cheap labor / Employment	11
	Adaptation / Integration	8
	Taxation / Informality	6
	Discrimination / Exploitation	5
	Entrepreneurship / Capital	4
	Unemployment (For local people)	3
	Consumption / Economic vitality	2
Participation in Social Life	Maladaptation / Ghettoization	12
	Social exclusion / Distance	9
	Prejudice / Stereotypes	7
	Crime / Perception of security	5
	Density in public services	4
	Social interaction / Solidarity	2
Participation in Cultural Life	Cultural conflict / Resistance	14
	Acculturation / Multiculturalism	10
	Language barrier / Lack of communication	8
	Anxiety of assimilation	5
	Religious commonalities / Proximity	3

When the “Participation in Economic Life” dimension of Table 3 is examined, it is seen that the participants oriented towards the codes “Cheap labor / Employment” (f=11) and “Adaptation / Integration” (f=8) with the highest frequency. Accepting that immigrants integrate into the labor market rapidly, the participants argue that on the other side of the coin, this situation produces disadvantages such as “Taxation / Informality” (f=6), “Discrimination / Exploitation” (f=5), and “Unemployment” (f=3) directed towards the local population. A limited number of participants, on the other hand, emphasized the “Entrepreneurship / Capital” (f=4) and “Consumption / Economic vitality” (f=2) dimensions of migration. Some participant quotations concerning the economic area are as follows:

“Participation in economic life is generally through informal and cheap labor. While this situation generates unfair competition for local tradesmen and workers, it also leaves the immigrant open to exploitation.” (P6)

“Immigrants opening their own workplaces and being included in the economy without paying taxes creates serious damage to the sense of justice in the local populace.” (P15)

“Looking at it positively, immigrant employment in heavy lines of work in industry that Turkish workers do not like ensures the continuation of production.” (P22)

In the “Participation in Social Life” dimension, a distinctly negative perceptual schema is dominant. The participants drew attention mostly to the phenomena of “Maladaptation / Ghettoization” (f=12) and “Social exclusion / Distance” (f=9). They expressed that the immigrant population concentrating in specific regions of cities closes in on itself (ghettoization), and this situation feeds the “Prejudice / Stereotypes” (f=7) with the local population. Furthermore, the codes “Crime / Perception of security” (f=5) and “Density in public services” (f=4) were coded as major obstacles before social integration, while the code “Social interaction / Solidarity” (f=2) remained quite weak. The expressions regarding this dimension are presented below:

“There is a complete segregation in social life. Immigrants are ghettoizing neighborhood by neighborhood; they do not establish contact with the local people. This tumbles up the perception of insecurity and crime.” (P18)

“The extreme density experienced in hospitals, schools, and parks leads the local people to place a social distance against the immigrant and to exclude them.” (P33)

The “Participation in Cultural Life” dimension forms one of the most dominant reaction areas in the table with the code “Cultural conflict / Resistance” (f=14). The participants define the insistence of the migrating masses on protecting their own cultural norms as an element of resistance and conflict. As the most fundamental structural reason for this, “Language barrier / Lack of communication” (f=8) and, in terms of the host society, “Anxiety of assimilation” (f=5) were shown. In contrast, the presence of participants who read the transformative power of migration as “Acculturation / Multiculturalism” (f=10) and establish a bond through “Religious commonalities / Proximity” (f=3) was also detected. Direct quotations regarding the cultural dimension are as follows:

“The biggest wall in front of cultural adaptation is language. When the language is not learned, communication breaks, and both sides become defensive to protect their own culture, which brings about conflict.” (P25)

“Although our being of the same religion seems like an advantage at first in establishing cultural proximity, deep differences in lifestyle and traditions render cultural conflict inevitable.” (P39)

These obtained three-dimensional findings reveal a very important paradox in the context of “social integration” and “economic rationalism” theories in the literature. It is striking that while the graduate students specializing in the field of migration studies accept the participation of immigrants in economic life as a dynamic reality (even if in the parenthesis of informality and cheap labor), they read social and cultural participation directly on the axis of “ghettoization” and “conflict.”

In the literature, ghettoization is defined as a spatial sanctuary developed by immigrants as a defense mechanism in host societies where they are structurally excluded (Köybaşı, 2020). However, the interpretation of this situation as a “maladaptation resistance” by the participants, who will be the future migration experts, can be evaluated as a structural indicator that social polarization and anti-immigrant discursive patterns have also permeated into academic layers (Yeşildağ, 2022).

3.4. Findings Regarding Macro Migration Policies in Turkey and Their Power to Shape Social Perception

In line with the fourth sub-objective of the research, the critical approaches of the participants towards macro migration policies carried out by the Republic of Turkey, institutional reflexes, and the structuring/transformative power of these policies on social perception were analyzed. The codes that passed through the intellectual filters of the participants and their frequency distributions are presented in Table 4, preserving all breakdowns in the available data.

Table 4.

Code Distributions Regarding the Relationship Between Current Migration Policies and Social Perception

Category / Dimension	Codes	Frequency (f)
Political / Institutional Criticisms	Lack of integration (adaptation) policy	15
	Border security and lack of inspection	12
	Legal / Legislative inadequacies	8
	Lack of planning and foresight	7
	Political / Discursive inconsistencies	6
	Problems of transparency and data sharing	4
Elements Shaping Social Perception	Media and disinformation	14
	Economic crisis / Resource sharing	11
	Rhetorics of political leaders	8
	Cultural distance and visibility	5
	Judicial incidents and security anxieties	3

When the “Political / Institutional Criticisms” dimension of Table 4 is examined, it is observed that the participants specializing in migration studies developed structural criticisms towards the macro policies of the state. The participants oriented towards the codes “Lack of integration (adaptation) policy” (f=15) and “Border security and lack of inspection” (f=12) with the highest frequency. They argue that the state views migration merely as a “temporary humanitarian crisis management” and has failed to develop a permanent and strategic adaptation program. In addition to these, the codes “Legal / Legislative inadequacies” (f=8), “Lack of planning and foresight” (f=7), and “Political / Discursive inconsistencies” (f=6) stand out. The code “Problems of transparency and data sharing” (f=4) is located at the lowest frequency. The striking expressions of the participants regarding this dimension are as follows:

“Turkey’s biggest mistake was assuming migration was temporary. Because a permanent integration policy was not produced, today we are experiencing blockages in social life. Institutions only save the day.” (P8)

“The open-door policy and flexibility in border security prevented the qualitative screening of the mass entering the country. Who would stay, for what purpose, and for how long was not planned.” (P20)

“There is no single standard in migration policies. Political discourses change constantly according to the conjecture, which both creates distrust in the immigrant and damages the local people’s faith in the state.” (P34)

When the “Elements Shaping Social Perception” dimension is analyzed, the dynamics manipulating the attitude of the public towards immigrants become clear. According to the participants, the primary actor behind the solidification of social perception in a negative direction is the phenomenon of “Media and disinformation” (f=14). It was stated that ungrounded news spreading on digital platforms triggers social outrage. This is followed by the codes “Economic crisis / Resource sharing” (f=11), which feeds the perception that resources are shared unfairly, and “Rhetorics of political leaders” (f=8), which contains populist approaches. “Cultural distance and visibility” (f=5), showing the lifestyle differences of immigrants in the public sphere, and “Judicial incidents and security anxieties” (f=3) are the other sub-parameters constructing the perception. In this direction, some participant quotations are presented below:

“The media directly manages the perception of immigrants. A single fake news on social media can demolish years of adaptation efforts overnight. Society is very open to disinformation.” (P13)

“As economic contraction is experienced, the local people charge the bill to the immigrant. The perception that ‘our resources are spent on them’ becomes the biggest fuel feeding racism and xenophobia during periods of economic crisis.” (P28)

These findings prove with scientific clarity that migration management does not consist merely of border control; the real area that needs to be managed is the “discourse and perception mechanisms.” The fact that the participants criticized the institutional reflexes of the state through “lack of foresight and integration” shows an exact parallelism with macro management discussions in the literature (Tamer, 2019).

At the same time, this strong emphasis made on the manipulative power of the media and political rhetoric in shaping social perception (f=14) reveals that the negative attitudes developed by the masses towards immigrants are the product of constructed discursive processes (disinformation) rather than rational experiences (Köybaşı, 2020).

3.5. Findings Regarding the “Immigrant Profile” Schema in the Minds of Graduate Students

Within the scope of the fifth sub-objective of the research, the abstract and concrete “immigrant” prototype constructed in the mental worlds of graduate students specializing in migration studies was attempted to be decoded. The first associations and cognitive schemas that come to the minds of the participants when “immigrant” is mentioned are classified in Table 5 along with all code breakdowns and frequency values.

Table 5.

Code Distributions Regarding the “Immigrant Profile” Schema in the Minds of the Participants

Category / Orientation	Codes	Frequency (f)
Socio-Economic Schemas (Disadvantaged)	Poverty / Misery	13
	Cheap / Informal worker	11
	Non-language speaking / Uneducated	9
	Housing / Struggle for survival	6
Psycho-Social and Emotional Schemas	Victimhood / War victim	14
	Maladaptation / Foreigner	10
	Future anxiety / Hopelessness	8
	Excluded / Other	5
Cultural and Demographic Schemas	Cultural distance / Different lifestyle	9
	Crowded family structure	7
	Arabic / Speaking a different language	6

When Table 5 is examined, it is observed that the perception of immigrants in the minds of graduate students is largely squeezed between the dilemma of “Disadvantaged / Victim” and “Maladapted / Other.” The code that the participants produced with the highest frequency in the psycho-social dimension was “Victimhood / War victim” (f=14). This situation demonstrates that students code immigrants in the first instance as the object of a humanitarian crisis. However, this positive/neutral emotional schema is rapidly followed by harsh socio-economic realities: “Poverty / Misery” (f=13), “Cheap / Informal worker” (f=11), and “Maladaptation / Foreigner” (f=10).

While defining the immigrant profile, the participants mostly emphasized educational and linguistic deficiencies (“Non-language speaking / Uneducated”, $f=9$) and cultural fractures (“Cultural distance / Different lifestyle”, $f=9$). The codes with the lowest frequencies are “Future anxiety / Hopelessness” ($f=8$), “Crowded family structure” ($f=7$), “Arabic / Speaking a different language” ($f=6$), “Housing / Struggle for survival” ($f=6$), and “Excluded / Other” ($f=5$). The raw expressions of the participants reflect this mental prototype clearly:

“When the word ‘immigrant’ is mentioned, the first thing that comes to my mind is unfortunately poverty, that great victimhood brought by war, and the struggle to stay alive. People who speak no language, working under the harshest conditions in streets and factories, are visualized in my eyes.” (P2)

“The immigrant profile in my mind is a profile of the ‘other’ who has left everything behind in his own country, and when he comes here, is exploited as cheap labor, lives at the very bottom socio-economically, and is constantly excluded by the local people.” (P16)

“No matter how many theories we read academically, the immigrant profile we see when we go out on the street is crowded families, individuals who have not been able to overcome the language barrier, and a community resisting integration into our lifestyle culturally.” (P32)

These findings directly overlap with the theoretical axis of the “Victimization and Otherization of Immigrants” frequently discussed in international migration literature. The fact that the most dominant code in the minds of the participants is “Victimhood” ($f=14$) evokes Agamben’s (2005) conceptualization of “bare life”; the immigrant is perceived as a subject stripped of his legal status, existing solely with the desire for asylum and staying alive.

However, the codes of “Poverty” ($f=13$) and “Maladaptation” ($f=10$) coming immediately after this humanitarian approach summarize how the reality of Syrian refugees in Turkey is perceived at the local level. As also emphasized in the “Syrians Barometer” studies conducted by Erdoğan (2018), the host society initially accepted the refugees with the schema of “muhajir/guest,” but with the process becoming permanent, the profile in minds has evolved into the image of a “foreigner who is a burden, maladapted, and ghettoizing.”

3.6. Discussion

In this study, the perceptual maps of graduate students specializing in migration studies towards the phenomena of migration and immigrants were examined in depth. The findings obtained regarding the first two sub-objectives of the research (Table 1 and Table 2) demonstrate that the participants possess a dual cognitive schema while evaluating the effects of migration. At the theoretical level, the participants affirm migration with codes such as “cultural diversity”, “acculturation”, and “revitalization of the labor market”. This situation overlaps with the theoretical approaches in the international migration literature, suggesting that migration enriches the cultural capital of host societies and provides demographic dynamism (Kaştan, 2015; Kaştan, 2016). On the practical plane, however, it is observed that negative codes such as “adaptation problems”, “economic burdens”, “unemployment”, and “conflict” are much more dominant in terms of frequency and diversity. These rational anxieties of the participants show a parallelism with national literature findings indicating that uninspected mass migration waves trigger perceptions of economic threat (cost of living, employment contraction) in the local populace and lead to adaptation crises by expanding social distance (Koçak & Terzi, 2012; Yeşildağ, 2022).

The findings regarding the participation processes of immigrants in economic, social, and cultural life (Table 3) point to a striking integration paradox. While the participants view the participation of immigrants in economic life as high on the axis of “cheap labor and employment”, they argue that this situation produces “informality” and “exploitation”. In the dimension of social and cultural participation, the codes “maladaptation/ghettoization” and “cultural conflict/resistance” possess the highest frequencies. In the literature, ghettoization is defined as a spatial defense sanctuary developed by immigrants against structural exclusion (Köybaşı, 2020). However, the fact that the participants, who are prospective migration experts, coded this situation as an “adaptation resistance” on the part of immigrants can be interpreted as an indicator that social polarization and anti-immigrant discursive patterns have also permeated into academic layers (Yeşildağ, 2022a). Furthermore, the presentation of the language barrier (f=8) as the biggest obstacle before cultural participation is in direct compliance with the studies conducted on the pedagogical dimension by Bozan and Kaştan (2018), which emphasize that a lack of communication feeds otherization.

Institutional criticisms towards macro migration policies of Turkey (Table 4) demonstrate that the participants converge on the issues of “lack of integration policy” (f=15) and “lack of border security” (f=12). These structural criticisms towards the institutional reflexes of the state support the macro management literature, which argues that migration management must be removed from being temporary crisis-oriented and transformed into permanent integration strategies (Tamer, 2019). Among the elements shaping social perception, “media and disinformation” (f=14) ranks first. This situation confirms that the negative attitudes developed by the masses towards immigrants stem not only from rational and personal experiences but also from manipulative discourse processes constructed by the media (Köybaşı, 2020).

Finally, the “immigrant profile” schema in the minds of the participants (Table 5) is squeezed between the image of the “victim and other,” shaped on the axis of poverty, informal labor, and lack of language skills. Although the highest-frequency code being “victimhood/war victim” (f=14) points to a ground of humanitarian empathy, the schemas of “poverty” and “maladaptation” coming immediately after reflect a perception of social burden. As also emphasized in the large-scale barometer studies conducted by Erdoğan (2018), the host society initially accepted the refugees with the schema of “guest”; however, with the process becoming permanent and appearing uncontrolled, the profile in minds has evolved into the image of a “foreigner who is a burden, ghettoizing, and harboring a security risk.”

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1. Conclusion

In this study, the subjective perceptual maps, experiences, and cognitive schemas of graduate students specializing in migration studies towards the concepts of migration and the immigrant were examined through a phenomenological approach. As a result of the content analysis of the obtained data, multi-layered, mutually reinforcing, and structural conclusions bearing a macro-sociological quality have been reached. The first primary conclusion obtained from the research is that the participants possess a distinctly bipolar cognitive schema while evaluating the macro- and micro-level effects of migration. As a reflection of the academic training process, the phenomenon of migration is affirmed on the theoretical plane by being associated with dynamic gains that enrich the social structure, such as cultural diversity, intercultural interaction, acculturation, and the revitalization of the labor market. Conversely, when it comes to the practical realities of everyday life, social maladaptation, escalating unemployment anxieties among the local populace, urban

infrastructure crises, unplanned urbanization, and potential social conflict risks are coded as much more dominant, voluminous, and high-priority risk areas. This tension observed between theoretical acceptances and practical anxieties clearly reveals the perceptual reflection within the academic community of the socio-economic and psychological turbulence generated by mass migration movements in host societies.

When the articulation processes of immigrants into the structural mechanisms of the host society are comprehensively analyzed, the existence of a deep asymmetry and a structural fracture among the sub-dimensions of integration stands out. The analytical approaches of the participants confirm that the participation of immigrants in economic life occurs quite rapidly, permeably, and functionally through the mechanisms of “cheap, precarious, and informal labor,” particularly in heavy industry and production branches. However, in contrast to this high permeability and articulation speed in the economic field, it is observed that social and cultural participation processes experience a serious blockage by hitting the walls of spatial ghettoization, a rigid perception of social distance, a deepening language barrier, stereotypes within the local populace, and mutual cultural resistance. This situation demonstrates that inclusion in economic life does not spontaneously produce social and cultural integration; on the contrary, uninspected economic articulation triggers ghettoization and social exclusion processes, thereby increasing social vulnerability.

Another remarkable and important conclusion of the research on the macro-political plane is the qualified and structural criticisms developed towards the macro migration policies and institutional reflexes carried out by the Republic of Turkey, especially post-2011. The graduate students, who represent the next generation of migration experts and policymakers, offer strong criticisms of current migration governance, highlighting the lack of a permanent, sustainable integration (adaptation) strategy based on legal foundations, a deficiency in process-oriented planning, a lack of foresight, and slackness in border security parameters. In connection with these managerial and institutional gaps, it has been determined that the largest macro triggers of the negative immigrant perception, xenophobic tendencies, and socio-cultural polarization—which have become chronic at the host society level—are the state’s lack of a long-term migration vision and the manipulation of the information pollution caused by this lack of vision through disinformation mechanisms in digital/traditional media. The inconsistency of political rhetoric and the provocative language in the media have been confirmed as the primary barriers that complicate rational migration management.

As a collective reflection of all these socio-economic, cultural, and political dynamics, the abstract “immigrant prototype” constructed by the participants in their mental worlds exhibits a highly ambivalent, fragmented, and contradictory structure. The cognitive schemas of the participants harbor, on one hand, an image of “humanitarian victimhood and sacrifice” consisting of individuals who are completely disadvantaged socio-economically, trying to survive in poverty and misery, speaking no language, and who have taken refuge in the country by fleeing the destruction of war. On the other hand, however, the very same schema is squeezed between a chronic perception of a “foreigner and other” who places a great burden on the limited resources, public services (education, health, transportation), and economic balances of the host society, ghettoizes urban spaces, carries the potential to erode the cultural fabric, and generates safety anxieties at the local level through judicial incidents. Consequently, it is clearly seen that even the minds of researchers specializing in the field of migration experience a dramatic tension between the raw sociological realities on the ground and the negative discursive hegemony constructed in the media; this situation renders the immediate implementation of rational, human-oriented, and security-centered macro policies an absolute necessity.

4.2. Recommendations

In line with the scientific results obtained from the research, the following macro and micro-policy recommendations are presented:

- The management of migration and refugees in Turkey must be entirely stripped of temporary crisis/asylum reflexes and transformed into a long-term, planned “National Integration (Adaptation) Strategy Document” that observes legal, qualitative, and national interests. Border security and country entry parameters must be tightened in an inspection-oriented manner.
- In order to prevent the uncontrolled ghettoization of the immigrant population concentrated in specific regions of cities, urban infrastructure crises, and the expansion of social distance with the local population, “dilution and balanced settlement” policies must be implemented without compromise.
- To overcome the language barrier, widely regarded as the greatest obstacle to integration, systematic and mandatory language mechanisms directed towards immigrant adults and children must be established. Curriculum regulations focusing on “multicultural pedagogy” and “social adaptation” must be implemented in faculties of education and schools.
- In order to combat disinformation on social media, unfounded judicial allegations, and hate speech, transparent and verifiable data sharing by official migration institutions (such as the Presidency of Migration Management) must be made periodic. Furthermore, constructive media content that will pull the social perception onto a rational ground must be encouraged.

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