

# Comparing Four Generations of Rural Tourism Developers in Finland

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**Abstract:** Intergenerational differences have received growing scholarly attention in recent years, particularly in relation to work practices, communication styles, and values across professional and social contexts. This study explores the characteristics of rural tourism developers in Finland across four generations – Generation Z, Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers. Developers play a vital role in shaping rural destinations, and supporting their wellbeing directly contributes to the sustainability and regeneration of entire tourism ecosystems. Ensuring that developers are equipped, motivated, and supported aligns with the principles of regenerative tourism. The research is based on a questionnaire distributed nationally as part of the Rural Finland Tourism Hub project, co-funded by the European Fund for Agricultural and Rural Development. Due to the unequal distribution of respondents among the four generational groups, results were analysed qualitatively by a narrative approach. This provides valuable insights into generational tendencies while avoiding overgeneralization. The comparison focuses on four key aspects: (1) competence needs, reflecting the skills and knowledge rural developers consider essential for their work; (2) preferred communication and information channels, highlighting differences in how generations access, share, and process tourism-related knowledge; (3) cooperation patterns, describing how various age groups engage with partners and institutions in the context of rural tourism development; and (4) employment characteristics, illustrating differences in working conditions and orientation. The insights of this study hold relevance for tourism managers, educators, governing bodies, and financiers who seek to design support measures, training programmes, and funding instruments that are tailored to the needs of diverse developer profiles. Moreover, the study addresses a notable gap in tourism literature by providing a nuanced understanding of rural tourism developers' characteristics from a generational perspective.

**Keywords:** Rural Tourism, Generational Differences, Tourism Developers, Regenerative Tourism, Finland

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## 1. Introduction

Rural tourism developers form a key human resource in destination development, acting as gatekeepers of knowledge, networks, and funding opportunities that shape how tourism evolves at the local level. Their work is inherently multifaceted: developers navigate between strategic planning and hands-on project implementation, tourism and other rural development tasks, balance public, private, and community interests, and translate policy frameworks into locally adapted actions (Röntynen, 2025).

Rural tourism developers play a critical role in shaping the long-term sustainability of destinations. Supporting their skills, motivation, and wellbeing aligns with regenerative tourism principles, which emphasize the resilience of local ecosystems, communities, and economies. By examining generational differences among developers, this study provides insights into how intergenerational capacities can be leveraged to foster practices that regenerate rural tourism environments.

Despite the importance of these actors, little is known about how rural tourism developers differ across generations. At the same time, demographic shifts in the workforce mean that younger generations are increasingly present in development roles, while experienced professionals continue to hold institutional and strategic knowledge. Understanding how these generations compare is essential for designing support structures that strengthen rural tourism development and contribute to the wellbeing of those working within it. Yet, this gap has not been addressed in the context of Finland, where rural tourism plays a significant role in regional vitality and where developers' work is shaped by a distinct combination of public, private, and community-based actors (Röntynen, 2025).

This study responds to this gap by examining how Finnish rural tourism developers differ across four generational cohorts – Generation Z, Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers, based on nationally collected survey data. The guiding research question is: *How do rural tourism developers in Finland differ across generations?*

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Defining Generations

Generations are commonly understood as cohorts of individuals born during the same period who share formative experiences in similar socio-cultural, historical, and technological contexts (Campbell et al, 2015; Becton et al, 2014). These shared experiences contribute to collective identities that shape attitudes, values, and behaviors. However, defining generations is inherently challenging. Boundaries between generational cohorts are fuzzy, culturally specific, and often contested. Different studies employ slightly different birth-year cutoffs. These variations reflect both methodological choices and the recognition that generational identity is not strictly chronological but socially constructed. Furthermore, many observed differences attributed to generations may instead result from life stage, career stage, or cultural context (Becton et al, 2014; Swim et al, 2022). Therefore, while generational analysis provides useful frameworks for understanding patterns, findings must be interpreted cautiously, avoiding overgeneralization and stereotyping.

Younger generations, particularly Millennials and Generation Z, currently dominate the workforce in many sectors, including tourism, and their influence on professional practices is growing steadily. Together, these cohorts comprise more than half of the global population and a majority of active employees, meaning that their values, preferences, and working styles are no longer future concerns but present realities (Forsman & Hupli, 2023). This demographic predominance underscores the importance of understanding their professional behaviours, communication patterns, and developmental needs, particularly in sectors such as rural tourism where innovation, networking, and adaptability are crucial for sustainable development. At the same time, previous research indicates that the typical rural tourism developer in Finland is approximately 50 years old, placing them predominantly within the Generation X cohort, while also reflecting considerable dispersion in both younger and older age groups (Röntynen, 2025).

### 2.2 The Significance of Rural Tourism and Generational Dynamics

Rural tourism represents a significant component of regional development, contributing to economic diversification, employment creation, and the maintenance of cultural and natural heritage in peripheral areas (Lane, 1994; OECD, 2020). In many rural destinations, tourism development relies heavily on a limited number of actors who mediate access to resources, funding, knowledge, and networks, making human capital a critical determinant of long-term destination viability and competitiveness (Röntynen, 2025).

As demographic change reshapes the tourism workforce, generational differences increasingly influence how tourism is planned, communicated, and developed, affecting priorities related to innovation, sustainability, and community engagement (Benckendorff, Moscardo & Pendergast, 2010; Baum, 2019). Understanding generational dynamics among rural tourism developers is therefore essential, as these differences may shape not only development practices but also the future trajectories of rural destinations themselves.

### 2.3 Generation Profiles in the Context of Rural Tourism Development

*Baby Boomers (1946–1964)* entered the workforce in an era of post-war economic expansion, hierarchical structures, and relative social stability. They are typically characterized by strong work ethics, respect for authority, and material achievement orientation (Becton et al, 2014; Stewart et al, 2017). In Finland, Boomers' early working lives were shaped by industrialization and systematic hierarchies, resulting in strong attachment to organizations and loyalty-driven career trajectories (Huhta, 2018). Boomers rely on traditional communication channels such as phone, email, and face-to-face interactions, reflecting their preference for structured and personal forms of communication. Their preferred communication channels are traditional, reflecting habits formed before the digital era (Forsman & Hupli, 2023). They favour in-person meetings, value direct collaboration, and enjoy the social aspects of working together (Forsman & Hupli, 2023), which could imply a tendency to favour formal gatherings, workshops, or consultations with colleagues and stakeholders, where interpersonal trust and relationship-building are emphasized.

In the context of rural tourism development, these tendencies could suggest that Boomers are likely to value stable, long-term projects, conventional organizational hierarchies, and clear guidelines for responsibilities. Their focus on material success and traditional measures of achievement may translate into a preference for tangible outcomes, such as increasing visitor numbers or revenue, rather than experimental or highly innovative approaches.

*Generation X (1965–1980)* experienced economic recessions, globalization, and high divorce rates among parents, which shaped their self-reliance, pragmatism, and skepticism toward institutions (Becton et al, 2014; Huhta, 2018). Gen X balances work and personal life, values autonomy, and prioritizes financial and career security over organizational loyalty. Technology adoption among Gen X tends to be utilitarian and pragmatic; while comfortable with email and web-based information, they generally engage less with digital media for social purposes (Calvo-Porrall & Pesqueira-Sanchez, 2020). Generation X shows a balanced approach to communication, using email, text messages, and voicemail, and typically preferring calls only during work hours to maintain work-life balance. They favour practical, well-organized meetings that focus on productivity and career growth opportunities (Forsman & Hupli, 2023).

In a rural tourism context, these traits may manifest as a preference for practical and self-directed work, careful assessment of risks in projects, clear agendas, goal-oriented discussions, and entrepreneurial approaches to development initiatives. Their emphasis on work-life balance could lead them to prioritize projects that are manageable within their personal schedules and that align with their family or community commitments.

*Millennials (Generation Y, 1981–1996)* grew up during rapid technological and societal change, becoming the first truly global, high-tech generation (Becton et al, 2014; Stewart et al, 2017). They are characterized by ambition, optimism, diversity consciousness, and a strong desire for meaningful work (Stewart et al., 2017; Huhta, 2018). Millennials' approach to technology is immersive and multi-purpose; they are highly connected, engage with social media and interactive platforms, and value collaborative and experiential learning (Suyono et al, 2025; Calvo-Porrall & Pesqueira-Sanchez, 2020). Millennials are highly oriented toward digital communication, using text messaging, social media, and smartphones. They prefer spontaneous, interactive meetings, enjoy group discussions, and value participatory activities (Forsman & Hupli, 2023).

Within rural tourism, these characteristics might translate into openness to digital tools for marketing, networking, and knowledge sharing, as well as a preference for participatory and collaborative project designs. Millennials may engage enthusiastically in collaborative project planning, brainstorming sessions, and workshops, favouring flexible, creative, and digitally supported forms of coordination. Their orientation toward flexibility, lifelong learning, and purpose-driven work may encourage experimentation with new tourism products, responsible practices, or community-focused initiatives. They prefer interactive communication and positive workplace culture over hierarchical structures, reflecting a shift from time-based to output-based work assessment (Stewart et al, 2017).

*Generation Z (1997–2012)* represents the first fully digital-native generation. Exposed to smartphones, social media, and continuous online connectivity from a young age, they have developed advanced digital literacy, visual processing skills, and a preference for autonomous, fast-paced learning (Suyono et al, 2025; Visser & Terblanche, 2025; Huhta, 2018). Gen Z exhibits high social consciousness, global awareness, and a desire for meaningful, flexible work (Kykyri, 2025). Social media is central to both personal identity and professional development, serving as a tool for networking, informal learning, and collaborative project engagement (Yustika & Jaya, 2025). However, digital immersion also creates challenges such as information overload, online pressure, and stress, making wellbeing and work-life balance critical considerations for organizations supporting this generation (Kykyri, 2025). Generation Z predominantly uses smartphones and apps such as Snapchat, video platforms, and visual-symbol-based communication; they prefer social media alternatives over traditional meetings and generally have shorter attention spans during gatherings (Forsman & Hupli, 2023).

In rural tourism development, these traits suggest that Gen Z may prefer fast-paced workflow, digital tools for project management, and learning opportunities that are self-directed and practical. Their concern for social and environmental issues indicates a likely interest in sustainability, climate-change impacts, and inclusive practices within tourism initiatives. Moreover, their comfort with global connectivity and online collaboration may facilitate networking beyond local boundaries, integrating international perspectives into rural development projects. Gen Z developers may favour brief, visually rich, and highly interactive digital communication, such as virtual workshops, instant messaging groups, or video updates, rather than long, formal in-person meetings.

## **2.4 Positioning Rural Developers in Regenerative Tourism**

Regenerative tourism extends the principles of sustainability by seeking to actively restore, renew, and enhance local ecosystems and community wellbeing, positioning tourism as a catalyst for positive socio-ecological change rather than a neutral or extractive activity (Bellato, Frantzeskaki & Nygaard, 2022). Within this framework, rural tourism developers hold a particularly influential role, as their everyday decisions shape how natural resources

are used, how communities participate in tourism, and how long-term destination resilience is fostered (Cave et al, 2022). Their competence profiles, collaborative behaviours, and orientations toward innovation determine how effectively regenerative principles, such as community empowerment or ecosystem restoration, can be embedded in local tourism development. In the Finnish context, rural developers have already been identified as a heterogeneous but highly committed group of practitioners whose work spans project management, regional development, education, and entrepreneurship (Röntynen, 2025). Their strategic position between local actors, municipalities, funding bodies, and businesses places them at the heart of potential regenerative transformation, where intergenerational knowledge transfer becomes particularly relevant. Younger developers could contribute technological fluency, environmental awareness, and novel approaches to community engagement, while older generations could provide historical knowledge, strategic continuity, and place-based stewardship. Understanding these generational dynamics is therefore crucial for the operationalization of regenerative tourism in Finnish rural destinations and how supporting structures might be tailored to maximise developers' wellbeing and contributions to long-term destination regeneration.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1 Research Design and Approach

A survey was implemented in the nation-wide Rural Finland Tourism Hub Project, aiming to gain insights about rural tourism developers in order to support their work more effectively through new knowledge and networking activities. Besides the practical implications of fine-tuning the project activity according to the results, an observation about the prevailing profile of the Finnish rural tourism developer led to a scientific paper utilizing the survey data (Röntynen, 2025). The limitation, however, was acknowledged, that this study left possible sub-profiles and significant characteristics in the shadow of the dominant one. Therefore, the current study was undertaken, exploring the intergenerational differences between representatives of Finnish rural tourism development within the same set of data.

This study adopts a qualitative, narrative approach to examine generational differences among rural tourism developers in Finland. Given the uneven distribution of respondents across age groups, a narrative and descriptive analysis was deemed most appropriate to capture the nuanced tendencies of each generational cohort, while avoiding overgeneralization that could arise from strictly quantitative comparisons.

#### 3.2 Sampling and Participants

The survey targeted individuals actively involved in rural tourism development across Finland. Participation was voluntary, and respondents represented a variety of professional roles, including project managers, development experts, entrepreneurs, and lecturers. In total, 86 respondents completed the survey, but only 79 of them shared their age, spanning four generational cohorts (Table 1).

**Table 1: Generational Breakdown of Finnish Rural Tourism Developers and Survey Responses**

| Generation   | Birth Years | Age Range at Survey | Respondents (n) | Respondents (%) |
|--------------|-------------|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Generation Z | 1997–2012   | 12-27               | 4               | 5%              |
| Millennials  | 1981–1996   | 28-43               | 22              | 28%             |
| Generation X | 1965–1980   | 44-59               | 37              | 47%             |
| Baby Boomers | 1946–1964   | 60-78               | 16              | 20%             |

The majority of respondents were female, particularly among Generation X (86%) and Baby Boomers (87%), while Generation Z had an equal gender split (50/50). Respondents' professional affiliations varied across generations, including educational institutions, municipal development companies, LEADER action groups, tourism associations, and private enterprises, reflecting the diverse organizational contexts in which rural tourism developers operate (Röntynen, 2025).

### 3.3 Survey Instrument

The survey consisted of structured and semi-structured questions designed to capture multiple dimensions of professional life, including competence needs, preferred communication and information channels, patterns of cooperation with organizations, institutions, and peers, employment characteristics, such as job titles, work settings, and organizational roles. The questionnaire also collected demographic information (age, gender, employer type, and professional role) to facilitate generational categorization and contextual analysis.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Due to the unequal sample sizes across generations, particularly the limited representation of Generation Z, the survey results were analyzed using a narrative and qualitative approach. This method allowed for a rich, descriptive comparison of tendencies and preferences among generational cohorts, rather than relying on statistical significance tests, which could be misleading given the sample distribution. The analysis focused on identifying patterns in competence needs, communication habits, cooperation preferences, and employment characteristics, while situating these within broader generational traits documented in the literature.

The study builds on insights from previous research (Röntynen, 2025). By combining these earlier findings with a generational lens, the current study seeks to illuminate the distinctive tendencies and emerging needs of developers from different cohorts, providing a foundation for targeted support, training, and policy measures aligning with the principles of regenerative tourism.

## 4. Findings: Comparative Analysis of Rural Tourism Developers Across Generations

### 4.1 Competence Needs

Empirical data reveal that while all represented generations express broad competence needs, the focus differs substantially. Gen Z emphasizes financing, projectification, digital communication, and climate change competencies, reflecting their digital-native background and early exposure to global challenges. Millennials prioritize future competence, responsibility and sustainability, and data-driven management, consistent with literature highlighting their desire for meaningful work and strategic thinking (Stewart et al, 2017; Huhta, 2018). Gen X developers require balanced skills across future competence, productization, and benchmarking, reflecting their pragmatic and entrepreneurial orientation. Boomers focus on social media use, AI, and future competence, suggesting that even traditionalist generations recognize the importance of technology in modern rural tourism development. Critically, these patterns highlight that generational differences in competence needs are often shaped by both technological exposure and career stage rather than intrinsic generational traits (Becton et al, 2014).

### 4.2 Communication and Information Channels

Communication preferences show clear generational trends. Gen Z relies primarily on social media, favoring fast, visual, and interactive formats. Millennials adopt a hybrid approach, using newsletters and social media (mostly Facebook), and appreciating events and presentations for knowledge exchange. Gen X engages with multi-channel, formal, and data-rich formats, including newsletters, reports, and official statistics. Boomers favor traditional media and structured, face-to-face communication. These findings align with literature emphasizing generational differences in technology use and communication modalities (Calvo-Porrall & Pesqueira-Sanchez, 2020; Forsman & Hupli, 2023), but the data also reveal overlaps: both Millennials and Gen Z value interactive events, and Gen X and Boomers actively seek evidence-based information, indicating shared professional priorities despite different communication habits.

### 4.3 Cooperation and Organizational Engagement

Generational patterns extend to organizational affiliations and cooperation. Gen Z developers engage mainly with educational institutions, reflecting their early career stage and learning-oriented mindset. Millennials utilize educational organizations but also show interest in development companies, aligning with their career ambitions and networking orientation. Gen X frequently interacts with Visit Finland, regional organizations, and development agencies, reflecting their pragmatic, multi-stakeholder approach. Boomers favor educational institutions and have less engagement with consultancy services, consistent with literature describing their preference for established hierarchies and institutional loyalty (Becton et al, 2014; Huhta, 2018). These patterns

illustrate that while generational tendencies exist, organizational structures, professional roles, and sectoral practices mediate the extent of intergenerational differences.

#### 4.4 Employment Characteristics

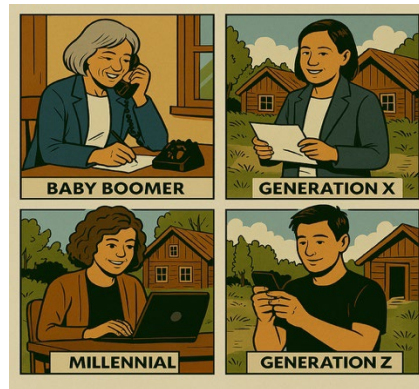
Roles and titles vary across generations. Gen Z is exclusively project managers, often employed in educational institutions or associations, reflecting their entry-level status. Millennials occupy project management, coordination, and entrepreneurial roles, highlighting transitional career stages and diverse work motivations. Gen X members hold development management and expert roles, emphasizing practical, outcome-oriented contributions. Boomers occupy managerial, entrepreneurial, and advisory positions, consistent with accumulated experience and leadership orientation. Gender distribution also varies, with Millennials and older generations predominantly female, whereas Gen Z shows gender parity, reflecting broader societal trends in gender representation in Finnish rural tourism development. These observations demonstrate that generational differences intersect with career stage, gender, and organizational context, rather than solely reflecting generational identity.

### 5. Conclusions and Discussion

The findings of the study suggest that while generational differences in rural tourism developers are observable, they are nuanced and mediated by professional context. In terms of digital orientation, Gen Z's reliance on social media and fast, visual communication sets them apart from all older generations. Millennials are digitally fluent but prefer structured, collaborative learning. Gen X and Boomers are more utilitarian and formal in technology use. As far as learning and competence development are concerned, younger generations emphasize self-directed, experiential, and future-oriented learning, whereas older generations balance competence needs with established practices. Boomers' work values emphasize organizational loyalty and hierarchical respect, Gen X seeks balance and autonomy, Millennials prioritize meaningful work and workplace culture, and Gen Z emphasizes flexibility, innovation, and social responsibility. Generational differences in communication preferences exist but are partly bridged by shared professional requirements; all generations engage with newsletters and events, though modes of interaction differ. Despite differences, all generations recognize the importance of future competence, sustainability, and networking. Generational boundaries are less rigid in practice, as professional roles, sectoral demands, and individual experiences intersect with generational tendencies (Becton et al, 2014; Swim et al, 2022). A synthesis of generational features combining literature and empirical findings are presented in Table 2. The generational profiles are complemented by AI images generated in Microsoft Copilot, using the study data as prompts (Figure 1).

**Table 2: Generational Comparison of Finnish Rural Tourism Developers**

| Generation   | Competence Needs                               | Communication Channels             | Cooperation Patterns                   | Employment Characteristics                    |
|--------------|--|------------------------------------|--|---|
| Baby Boomers | Future competence, AI, social media use        | Phone, email, face-to-face         | Formal meetings, institutional loyalty | Managerial, entrepreneurial, advisory         |
| Generation X | Balanced: future, productization, benchmarking | Email, reports, newsletters        | Multi-stakeholder, pragmatic           | Development managers, experts                 |
| Millennials  | Sustainability, responsibility, data-driven    | Social media, newsletters, events  | Collaborative, participatory workshops | Project managers, coordinators, entrepreneurs |
| Generation Z | Digital tools, financing, climate change       | Social media, apps, visual formats | Educational institutions, fast-paced   | Project managers in education/associations    |



**Figure 1: AI-generated Images of the Four Generation of Finnish Rural Tourism Developers**

While literature often emphasizes generational contrasts, the Finnish rural tourism data suggest a more nuanced reality. Stereotypes of Millennials as entitled, Gen Z as hyper-digital, or Boomers as rigid (Stewart et al, 2017; Visser & Terblanche, 2025) do not fully capture observed behaviors. Instead, competence needs, communication preferences, and cooperative practices emerge from the interplay of generational orientation, career stage, organizational context, and sectoral practices. Moreover, overlaps across generations – particularly regarding sustainability, future competence, and networking – underscore the potential for intergenerational collaboration. These findings reinforce calls for evidence-based, context-sensitive approaches to managing generational diversity (Becton et al, 2014; Campbell et al, 2015).

By recognizing generational differences among rural tourism developers, stakeholders can design support measures, training, and policies that maximize the potential for regenerative tourism. Intergenerational collaboration offers an opportunity to blend innovation, social awareness, and experience, ensuring that rural destinations not only sustain their current offerings but actively regenerate their ecosystems, communities, and local economies.

The insights of this study hold practical value for tourism managers, educators, governing bodies, and financiers who aim to design support measures, training programmes, and funding instruments that respond to the diverse needs of different generational profiles among rural tourism developers. Understanding these generational tendencies is essential not only for improving professional competencies and communication practices, but also for supporting the wellbeing of developers themselves – an increasingly recognized component of regenerative tourism. Regenerative approaches emphasize the health of social and human systems alongside ecological ones, and the capacity of rural destinations to regenerate ultimately depends on the resilience, motivation, and sustained engagement of the individuals responsible for their development. By tailoring support to the strengths and needs of each generation, stakeholders can contribute to more resilient rural tourism ecosystems.

At the same time, this study is not without limitations. The generational distribution of respondents was uneven, with younger cohorts underrepresented, which restricted the analytical depth and required a qualitative, narrative approach. The qualitative data could have been enriched with in-depth interviews of rural tourism developers representing the different generations, revealing not only the characteristics of each generation but also the interplay between them. This, however, remained out of the scope of the background project. Furthermore, the study is based on self-reported data from a single national context, limiting generalizability beyond Finland. Future research would benefit from larger and more balanced samples, comparative studies across countries, and deeper examination of how generational interplay shapes the capacity of rural tourism systems to pursue regeneration.

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## Ethics Declaration

Ethical clearance was not required for the research.

## AI Declaration

Microsoft Copilot was used in this research for language review and to create the images of the rural tourism developers.

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