

Generation Z's Approach to Sustainable Tourism: Factors in Green Accommodation Choice

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Abstract: This paper presents a conceptual complexity theory-based framework that reveals the choice of green accommodation of Generation Z individuals as a complex phenomenon of interacting actors and relationships among them. This paper also describes a portrait of Generation Z through the complex concept of smartness, which includes the traits of knowledgeability, digitality, sustainability, intelligence, innovativeness, agility, network based and learning. It is also emphasised that the changes to influence the positive behaviour regarding sustainable choices should be directed to these traits, using them as leverage points.

Keywords: Green Tourism, Generation Z, Green Accommodation, Accommodation Choice, Sustainability

1. Introduction

Scientific literature emphasises that the hotel industry produces various detrimental consequences, including toxic waste, extensive water and unsustainable energy consumption, carbon dioxide emissions and food waste (Leverenz et al., 2021). On the other hand, the hotel industry has the potential to act as a powerful change agent to comply with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to promote green consumerism (Wang, Wong and Narayanan, 2020). In this context, we discuss green hotels, which are also referred to as “eco-friendly”, “environmentally responsible”, “environmentally friendly”, “sustainable” and “environmentally oriented” (Wolfe and Shanklin, 2001). In the hotel industry, the concept of “green” denotes reducing environmental impact by engaging in eco-friendly practices in hotel operations (Chua & Han, 2022), such as saving energy and water, reducing waste, adopting sustainable products, all employed using specific tools and techniques (Qu et al., 2022). The criteria and indicators for green or sustainable approach are presented in globally accepted green hotel certifications, such as Green Key and Green Globe.

Accordingly, the implementation of a sustainable approach in the hotel and tourism industry is experiencing an upward trend, which influences the habits of the individuals who opt for such services. However, the factors that determine the choice of sustainable or green accommodation remain relatively under-researched (Kamboj et al., 2022). One could state that the intention to choose a green accommodation is one of the research branches regarding green hotel research (Chua and Han, 2022). Furthermore, there is scarcity of scientific research regarding green accommodation choices among young individuals, particularly Generation Z (Gen Z), although the latter accounts for a substantial part of the global population (approximately 25%). Despite the significant differences in comparison to the behaviour of Gen X and Millennials, Gen Z's green and sustainable consumer behaviour is understudied mainly because previous research gave more emphasis on the latter groups, treating them as full range adult consumers.

Being born between 1997 and 2012, Gen Zers are characterised by social awareness, environmental consciousness, digital literacy, and openness to innovation. However, although the representatives of Gen Z declare their support for the ideas of sustainability, their actual consumption habits often depend not only on value preferences, but also on practical aspects, such as price, convenience or availability of services. Thus, this paper **aims** to uncover the key factors that encourage or limit the behaviour of Gen Z in choosing green accommodation, whose providers actively implement environmental policies, supporting community development and the preservation of cultural heritage (Szczepańska-Woszczyńska, Thirakulwanich and Kot, 2024).

This paper is structured as follows: the first section introduces the concept of Gen Z and is portrayed through the lenses of smartness. The second section presents the theoretical framework, based on complexity theory. The third section examines the actions, which influence the positive behaviour regarding their green accommodation choices.

2. The Portrait of Generation Z: Smartness and Intention-behaviour Gap

Gen Z describes individuals who are born between mid-1990 and early 2010 – it is widely accepted that they are born between 1997 and 2012 (Slepian et al., 2024). One should state that consumer behaviour of Gen Z differs from other generations, especially in the area of digitalization and sustainability (Prayag et al., 2022). This paper emphasises that the individuals of Gen Z could be described through the concept of smartness, which says that a smart individual “is perceptive, quickly reacting to the environment, clever, inventive, and able to adjust to it by adequate decisions” (Jucevičienė and Jucevičius, 2014). Even more, smart dimensions, which could be applied not only to individuals but also to entire social systems, are as follows: knowledgeability, digitality, sustainability, intelligence, innovativeness, agility, network based and learning (Jucevicius and Liugailaite-Radzvickiene, 2013). Although an individual of any generation may possess beforehand mentioned features, scientific literature allows to connect the features of Gen Z to the features of smartness (see also Grumadaitė and Jose, 2024) as follows:

- **Intelligence** means an ability to understand and manage signals that come from the environment. Gen Z is very questionable and easily understands the inconsistencies, including *greenwashing* or vague /false statements regarding sustainability practices (Di Pillo, Palombi and Strazzullo, 2025).
- **Innovativeness** – an ability to create new commercially adaptable products but also seeking to consume innovative products. According to Gordon (2024), Gen Z is a driving force to redefine the patterns of business and other areas, while entering the AI-driven era, by employing the skills of creativity, imagination, and rapid problem solving.
- **Network based (networked)** – seeking to get connected to various networks. In the case of Gen Z, these networks are mostly digital, especially social media (Instagram, TikTok) (Nuttall, 2025). Thus, it creates opportunities to increase the scope of influence making.
- **Digitality** – an ability to use Information-communication technologies. It is obvious that the representatives of Gen Z are very well familiar with digital technologies.
- **Sustainability** – Robichaud and Yu (2021) state that Gen Z’s individuals grew up in the era of an intense growth of economy, population, digital solutions, waste production and energy consumption, and thus strive for more sustainable products. Gen Zers are more concerned about environmental issues than previous generations (Prayag et al., 2022).
- **Agility** – an ability not only to survive but also thrive in an ever-changing environment. Since Gen Zers are growing up in a very turbulent environment economically, politically, digitally, and expect the agility qualities from business organisations in return.
- **Knowledgeability** – striving for new knowledge and managing it. Gen Zers tend to acquire new knowledge and skills constantly, especially by employing digital technologies (Wandhe, 2024).
- **Learning** – an ability to acquire knowledge continuously. Gen Z individuals are technologically dependent learners (Lopez and Abadiano, 2023).

The choices of Gen Z with previously presented traits to choose green accommodation may be restricted because of various barriers, which create a green *intention-behaviour gap* (GIBG). The theory of planned behaviour, developed by the psychologist I. Ajzen (Ajzen, 1991) emphasises that intention influences a behaviour, while the intention is determined by attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behaviour control. However, in various situations, including green choices, the intention doesn’t always lead to a particular behaviour. The gap between intention and behaviour could be seen as an inconsistency between what individuals claim about their concern for sustainability issues and what they do in terms of their sustainable consumption behaviours (ElHaffar, Durif and Dubé, 2020). What the “green gap” suggests is that most consumers continue to make purchasing decisions based on price, quality, convenience, and brand recognition, instead of making a sustainable purchase – Elhaffar et al. (2020) state that intrapsychic factors, contextual factors, methodological factors, prioritising the self and coping mechanisms could be defined as reasons for such a gap. Elhaffar et al. (2023) defined the following risks, such as switching costs (evaluation, search and learning costs, performance loss costs, uncertainty costs, brand relationship loss costs) and purchase costs. However, one should note that although young individuals are more eager to use sustainable services (Holmes, Dodds and Frochot, 2021), they still very often meet a challenge to recognise the authenticity and transparency of sustainability claims in the hotel services. For example, the research performed on Gen Z individuals revealed the scepticism about the portraying of sustainability in the services (“not everything that looks sustainable, is really sustainable”) (Grumadaitė, Babu & Jose, 2025). Yet, price is the main perceived barrier and biggest influence hindering Gen Z to make a sustainable consumption decision (Djafarova and Fouts, 2022). One should state that hotels sometimes follow the approach of *greenwashing* (Furlow, 2010), and it may intensify the

scepticism regarding sustainable services. While adapting the traits of smartness, presented in this paper before, Gen Zers easily recognise all the inconsistencies.

One should state that Gen Z emphasises *the quality* and *having fun* while choosing services. Scientific literature emphasises hedonistic (entertainment, pleasure) and utilitarian (monetary, convenience, timing, etc.) values regarding sustainability and sustainable consumption (Kamboj et al., 2022). The authors also emphasise biospheric values, when the customers “evaluate phenomena in terms of their benefits and costs to ecosystems or the biosphere” (Stern and Dietz, 1994, p. 70). Scientific literature also reveals that hotel consumers are self-interest motivated, in other words, they expect benefits from participating in green activities while staying in green hotels, including cost reductions (Chua and Han, 2022). Thus, if potential consumers expect some risks, reduced hedonic-seeking, some inconvenience, the decision making will be negative regarding green choice (Chua and Han, 2022).

It may be that macro-context itself hinders sustainable behaviour, thus, the conceptual framework on the complexity of the phenomenon of Gen Z to choose green accommodation is presented in the next part of the paper.

3. The Conceptual Framework on the Factors of Gen Z to Choose Green Accommodation

Accommodation system (hotels) takes an important part in the overall tourism system (Gruchmann, Topp and Seeler, 2022), which could be seen, following the perspective of complexity theory, as a complex network of many interacting agents, following a set of rules to increase the adaptability (Cilliers, 1998; Johnson, 1999). Thus, the tourism system as a complex adaptive system is characterised by nondeterminism, presence of feedback cycles (positive or negative), distributed nature, emergence and self-organisation (Baggio, 2008). Considering that the comprehensiveness of the phenomena in tourism and hospitality could be best portrayed using the system’s approach (Moscardo, 2021), the factors of the choice of green accommodation are also presented through the lenses of a complex adaptive system (see Figure 1).

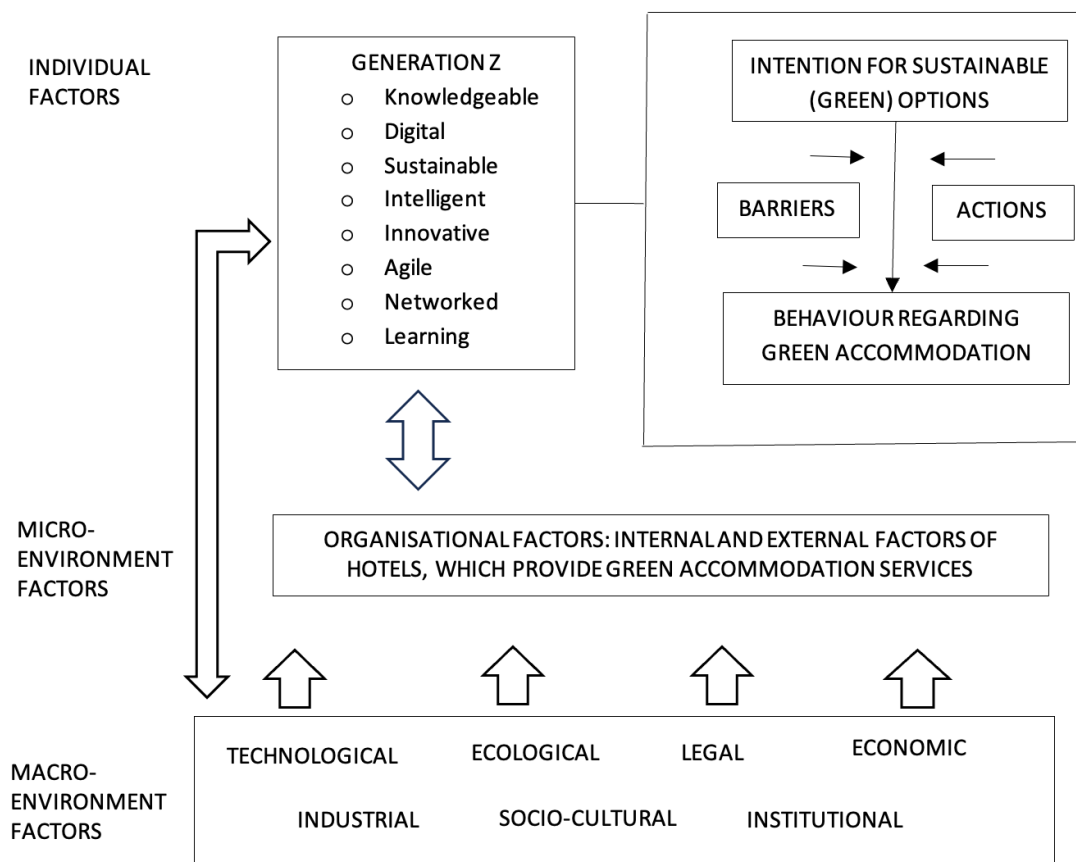


Figure 1: The conceptual framework on the factors of Gen Z to choose green accommodation (created by authors)

The conceptual framework presents the individual of Gen Z as a central actor in the system, which influences but also gets influenced by the processes, which occur in the hotel sector and beyond. It could be stated that Gen Z plays a significant role as a change **initiator** to initiate the changes in particular organisation (*micro-context*) and / or *macro-context*. On the other hand, micro and macro environments also influence the choices of Gen Z to choose green accommodation, and it may cause *intention-behaviour gaps* through various barriers. The authors of this paper emphasise that the actions to erase the barriers should reflect the traits of Gen Z's individual, which are presented in this framework.

The macro-context factors in Figure 1 are named as industrial, ecological, legal, economic, socio-cultural, institutional and technological factors. Thus, the choice of a green accommodation is the result of various interacting factors at national and / or international context. The factors are presented below.

Economic factors. Economic conditions are often explained through *Gross Domestic Product (GDP)*, which is the total monetary value of all finished goods and services produced within a country's borders over a specific period, typically a year, and the *Consumer confidence index*, which measures the degree of optimism that consumers have regarding the economy in general (Matias et al., 2024). The research, which was performed by Matias et al. (2024) revealed that GDP and consumer confidence index has a positive impact on the success of the hotel industry. It means that under good economic conditions hotels may attract many customers and create more opportunities to develop innovative services and invest more into sustainable practices. On the other hand, Gen Z is able to explore a bigger variety of hotels, especially those who provide green accommodation, starting from the individuals who are already capable of entering job markets.

Socio-cultural factors. However, since Gen Z covers the age groups from 13 to 28 years old, it is obvious that a part of Gen Z is dependent on the adults and not only in the matter of economic situation of households but also *shared values, beliefs, behaviour norms, family and other reference groups*, and other social factors. The differences in green choices depend on different generations, while Baby Boomers are the least eager, for example, to pay for sustainable services and the individuals of Gen Z – the most (Nichols and Holt, 2023). However, following the results of various research studies on the sustainable behaviour among different generations, one could state that the choices for green accommodation or other sustainable services supposed be more based on individual characteristics than to a belonging to a different generation – the individuals of different generations still demonstrate various intention- behaviour gaps, such as feeling concerned about the environment but paying less attention about water resources (Millennials in the research of Zuo et al. (2015)) or valuing environmental preservation but disagreeing to pay more for sustainable products (Gen Z in the research of Gomes, Lopes, & Nogueira (2023)). In the case of individual context, the choice for green accommodation may be affected by a number of key socio-demographic and behavioural characteristics, such as religiosity, age, personality traits, and even the length of stay (Chua and Han, 2022).

Technological factors. The development of innovative technologies increases the probability and scope of green /sustainable approach's adaptation in the hotel industry. According to Bekele et al. (2024), the adaptation of innovative technologies includes digital transformation, sustainable business model innovations, environmental sustainability technologies (water conservation, energy conservation, waste management and carbon emission reduction). Such innovations are influenced not only by consumer's preferences and enterprises' initiatives but also by **legal factors** regarding **ecological context** in the regional, national and international context.

An individual, representing Generation Z, in this Figure, expressing the traits of knowledgeability, digitality, sustainability, intelligence, innovativeness, agility, network based and learning, may have an intention for sustainable (green) options, but they may be restricted by various barriers, which inhibit the actual behaviour regarding green accommodation, and these barriers may occur from various external factors or their combinations. On the other hand, Generation Z with its strong positive approach regarding environmental protection, is also becoming a driving force to change the external context in order to initiate the changes to remove the barriers.

Institutional factors. North (1990) argued that institutions are "human-made constraints that provide structure for political, economic, and social interaction" and distinguished two types of institutions, or "rules of the game in society," that interact with each other and co-evolve—formal institutions, associated with constitutional, legal, and organizational templates, and informal institutions, associated with culturally transmitted codes of conduct, values, and norms. In addition, it is important to state that Institutional environment strongly affects legislative, political, economic, socio-cultural and ethical contexts (Sukhostavets, 2017). Accordingly, it positively impacts the hotel industry, and in return gets more power to influence consumer behaviour. While analysing institutional context, it is necessary to explore the concept of *social capital*, which is defined through bonding

and bridging relationships that extend beyond personal acquaintances (Putnam, 2000). Trust is one of the most important dimensions of social capital and a key factor influencing entrepreneurial behaviour and societal functioning. Social capital in a particular context leads to various cooperation forms, including industrial clusters and other cooperation forms, which allow sharing the responsibilities to create sustainable offers to consumers.

Industrial factors. According to the Green Lodging Trends Report 2018, of 4,544 hotels from 61 countries, 99.4% utilized energy tracking system, 75.6% practiced recycling in common areas of property, 98.1% tracked water consumption regularly, 98.3% checked heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) filter regularly, 91.5% adopted line/towel reuse program, 77.2% had written environmental policies in place, and 90.0% conducted annual staff training on green practices (Greenview, 2019). Green hotels typically involve saving energy (e.g., automatic LED room and lobby lights) and water (e.g., greywater recycling, low-flow toilets), reducing waste (e.g., promoting reuse), and using environmentally friendly products (Qu et al., 2022; Verma, Chandra and Kumar, 2019). Industrial factors may define particular patterns for the sector enterprises (**organisational factors**), however, any enterprise can also become a leader and role model to other enterprises in the industry and to the consumers.

4. Actions to be Made to Reduce/Eliminate Minimise or Erase the Barriers of Intention-Behaviour Gap in Gen Z' Individuals

The authors of this paper emphasise that interventions to bridge the intention-behaviour in Gen Z's individuals should be anchored in their generational traits that function as effective leverage points.

Knowledgeability. Since Gen Z are very curious and open to ask questions, the hotels should include designing green and sustainability messages in their communication strategies. Communicating information about green hotel initiatives is a resource for consumers to get green-related knowledge, which eventually promotes their pro-environmental behaviour or participation in green hotel activities (Teng et al., 2012). Additionally, environmental certifications, such as eco-labels, are used by green hotels to show guests that they are committed to being green (Martínez García de Leaniz et al., 2018).

Digitality. In green hotel management, communication appears to be an important means of activating hotel consumers to participate in the hotel's green initiatives (Chua and Han, 2022). Current literature has shown that promotional messages, which get shared via the internet or social media, have supported Gen Z to make purchase decisions. Promotional advertisements that get displayed on various social network sites like Facebook, YouTube or Instagram provide fundamental input about services and products (Vasan, 2021).

Sustainability. Consumers that participate in green activities are more likely to adopt green hotels. Green hotels can benefit by encouraging consumers to engage in green activities (Kumar et al., 2021). In particular, the literature reveals that environmental value, knowledge, awareness, consciousness, concerns and expectations significantly explained moral norms, and consumers who are driven by moral norms as guiding principles in life think they should do something to protect the environment; thus, they are likely to engage in green buying behaviour, including making a hotel selection decision (Chua and Han, 2022).

Intelligence. From a consumer perspective, key factors including environmental knowledge, awareness, consciousness, concerns, and hotel-triggered motivations are often associated with hotel employees and managers' green behaviour in workplaces (Chua and Han, 2022).

Innovativeness. *The diffusion of innovation theory* stipulates that the decision by a consumer to make full use of innovation can be stated as the decision to utilize the innovation to its fullest extent (Rogers, 2003, 1995). Thus, consumers should get involved in green practices in the hotel (such as waste recycling, conserving energy and water). In addition, one should state that innovativeness has a stronger effect on consumer adoption of green hotels than the innovation characteristics of green hotels. Thus, green hotels must target innovative consumers who actively participate in the testing of new high-tech products (Kamboj et al., 2022). Designing green-related interventions to induce different pro-environmental behaviours in consumers in an either deliberate or undeliberate way should be optimized. Finally, the application of co-creation concept in the development of hotel guest experience is recommended (Chua and Han, 2022).

Agility. Employing Artificial Intelligence tools in order to increase the speed of analysis in green decisions.

Networked. Consumers' belief about the benefits of going green, belief about other people's acceptance of a pro-environment behaviour also play an important role in choosing green services.

Learning. Green hotels can curate loyalty by keeping their consumers and followers up to date about the latest green products in the market and trending issues in the environment to retain high levels of green involvement (D'Souza and Taghian, 2005).

On the other hand, considering the traits of Gen Z, one should state that Gen Z itself becomes a leading power to change the rules in the hotel (accommodation) sector to request sustainability (ecologically, socially, financially) patterns in hotels as a prerequisite to provide high quality services even without emphasising sustainability as an additional bonus to ask for a higher hotel price.

5. Concluding Remarks

This paper presents a complex adaptive system's approach, which explains a choice of green accommodation as a result of various factors at individual, organisational (micro) and macro level factors, such as industrial, socio-cultural, institutional, ecological, technological, economic, legal factors. One should state that a complex adaptive system approach sees any phenomenon not as a sum of its parts but as a synergy of interacting actors and relationships between them. Thus, the decision of the representative of Gen Z to not use the green accommodation despite the positive values regarding sustainability and intentions to behave sustainably may be caused by various external factors that restrict such a behaviour. The solutions to overcome these barriers should be directed to the traits of smartness (knowledgeability, digitality, sustainability, intelligence, innovativeness, agility, network based and learning), thus these factors could act as leverage points to move a system to a different level.

Although our framework used in this study is theoretically grounded, it gets enhanced when validated empirically. A mixed – qualitative and quantitative – research methodology could be applied in order to evaluate a multilayer phenomenon of complex actors and relationships among them. Empirical research would test the correlations among different micro and macro factors, intentions and choices regarding green accommodation of Gen Z; to reveal the manifestations of smart traits in the behaviour of Gen Zers as consumers in the case of green accommodation; to define the smart solutions regarding positively affecting green accommodation choices.

The theoretical framework, which is presented in this paper, creates a further basis for empirical research that concentrates on the attitudes and factors in choosing green accommodation among the individuals of Gen Z in different international contexts as well.

Ethics Declaration

Ethical clearance was not required for the research.

AI Declaration

AI tools were not used for the creation of this paper.

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