

Travelling of Generation Z: Theoretical Shift in Tourism and the Need for Strategic Adaptation

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Abstract: The aim of this review paper is to critically analyze and compare traditional and emerging theoretical approaches to the travel behavior of Generation Z as the most recent tourist segment. The analysis will focus on five key domains: motivation, accommodation, marketing communication, values (sustainability), and technological integration. The comparative framework highlights the gap between the product-oriented model (e.g., standardized hotels, mass advertising) and the demand for experiential, ethical, and digitally seamless offerings. The synthesis of findings will result in a proposal for transforming CR from a 'product seller' to an 'experience curator'. This new role requires the implementation of a model based on the experience economy and connectivity (eWOM), which effectively targets the search for authenticity and social validation among young travelers (D'Acunto et al. (2025)). The study identifies key directions for future research and recommendations for practice to address this dominant and formative group of travelers.

Keywords: Gen Z; Sustainable Tourism, Attitude-Behavior Gap, Tourism, Digital Natives, Accommodation, Gastronomy, Transportation.

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, tourism has been undergoing a dynamic transformation, driven primarily by digital innovations and the emergence of new generations of consumers. While older tourism models were based on mass production of tours, standardized services, and one-way marketing communication (Buhalis, 2003), the current environment requires personalization, connectivity, and ethical responsibility. This shift creates a significant gap between traditional theoretical approaches and the actual behavior of key consumer groups. Specifically, the behavior of Generation Z (Gen Z), which makes up an increasing share of global travelers, fundamentally undermines the validity of existing tourism management and marketing theories. The need for revision is therefore crucial to ensure the future relevance and sustainability of the entire sector.

2. Purpose and Contribution of the Article

The main objective of the article is to analyze, systematize, and critically evaluate the specific requirements, preferences, and behavior of Gen Z in the context of tourism and, where appropriate, identify contradictions between individual sources of information.

The aims of the study include:

- Defining and characterizing Generation Z based on theoretical approaches in the context of consumer behavior in tourism.
- Systematically analyze the specific requirements of Gen Z for key tourism products and propose their further development for entrepreneurs and destination managers.
- Analyze the suitability of traditional marketing approaches for communicating with Gen Z.
- Identify opportunities for further development of tourism in the context of Gen Z requirements.

3. Methodology

The methodology is based on a systematic review and synthesis of relevant academic literature without generating primary data. First, the research design was developed, and the review approach was chosen, focusing on a theoretical and analytical synthesis of knowledge from the fields of marketing, tourism management, and purchasing behavior.

Secondary data were obtained from relevant, internationally recognized academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost (especially Business Source Complete and Hospitality & Tourism Complete), and ProQuest. A combination of keywords and phrases was used for the search, including: "Generation Z," "sustainable

tourism," "attitude-behavior gap," "low-cost carriers," and "digital natives." The study primarily included peer-reviewed academic articles, chapters in edited books, and relevant theoretical works (e.g., Generational Theory) published between 2018 and 2025, reflecting the current characteristics and entry of Gen Z into the market.

Thematic analysis and synthesis were used, with relevant literature first grouped into thematic units (accommodation, food, transportation) based on the key requirements of Gen Z. Subsequently, a critical analysis of contradictions (e.g., the environmental gap paradox and the choice of LCC) was conducted.

The output of the study is a conceptual framework of Gen Z behavior in tourism, identification of the main barriers (price, comfort, influence of social media), and recommendations for practice and identification of theoretical gaps that serve as suggestions for future academic research.

4. Outputs

4.1 The Importance of Researching Generational Differences

Understanding the differences between generations is an important task for analyzing consumer behavior in tourism. The results of these analyses then represent an important strategic tool for the development of the entire sector (Dolnicar, 2012). In the context of a dynamically changing market and technological progress, it is necessary to segment the market with regard to the demographic and psychosocial characteristics of demand in order to properly understand customers and target the right products. Kotler et al. (2019) deal with segmentation and its impact on marketing, including individual segmentation criteria. Other authors differ slightly in their perception (eg., Wedel & Kamakura, 2000; Jobber & Ellis-Chadwick, 2020).

In addition to the above-mentioned, theoretical approaches use segmentation criteria that reflect fundamental social and cultural shifts (Gursoy et al., 2008). It is common to differentiate according to customer generations. Generational Theory (Strauss & Howe, 1991) is considered the basic theory that analyzes these shifts. This theory is often referred to as the theoretical basis for most generation-based marketing. In the context of tourism, the work of Gursoy et al. (2008) examine the differences between Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials in tourism. Prensky (2001) also presents a generational divide and introduces a key distinction between Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants. The significance of this theory lies in understanding how technology divides younger and older generations and what consequences this division has for marketing and tourism in general. A frequently cited source for classifying generations by year of birth is the standardized and widely accepted definition of segmentation variables by the Pew Research Center (2018), which is often adopted by marketing and sociological research (e.g. Bhardwaj et al., 2020; Cennamo & Slatten, 2019). Distinguishing consumers based on generations is justified by the assumption that individuals share a consistent set of values, attitudes, and consumer preferences (Schewe & Meredith, 2004).

Generational segmentation can provide deeper insights into consumer behavior, travel motivation, destination selection, preferred booking channels, and expected services, enabling businesses to create targeted and relevant products (Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2009). Currently, researchers' attention is shifting to the youngest adult generation entering the labor market and becoming financially independent: Generation Z (Gen Z). Its growing economic power and unique characteristics, influenced by the digital era, necessitate a detailed study of its specific demands on tourism. The above-mentioned Pew Research Center (2018) classification is the basis for one of the influential studies focused directly on Generation Z, which deals with the fact that Gen Z perceives sustainability and future trends in tourism (Williams et al., 2019). Varies in preferring booking platforms and expectations of hospitality services and influence of the digital environment on its decision-making process (Kaur & Gurbuz, 2020) and in their behaviour and attitude to sustainable travel and ethical consumption (Bolton et al., 2020).

4.2 Analysis of the Specific Characteristics and Behavior of Generation Z in the Context of Tourism

For the purposes of this article, it is necessary to define the specifics of the generations likely to significantly change the market in the future, as observed in the authors' practical experience. Generation Y are customers born approximately between 1980 and 1995. They are characterized by early adoption of digital technologies (Tóth-Kaszás, 2018), an emphasis on experiences (Gopaldas, 2018), including those less common for earlier generations (Marton et al., 2020), and the development of the sharing economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Travel is a means of self-realization and a desire for a flexible lifestyle. 1999; Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Travel is a means of self-realization and a desire for a flexible lifestyle. Generation Z are customers born

approximately before (Prensky, 2001). The same author adds that the primary feature of this generation is that it is the first generation of digital natives, having grown up with extensive access to the internet, mobile devices, and social media. This generation is characterized by value-oriented travel, strong environmental and social awareness, and a high dependence on user-generated content when making decisions (Pew Research Center, 2018).

4.3 Gen Z Approaches to Travel and Tourism

Gen Z does not separate the digital and physical worlds, which fundamentally influences the entire travel cycle from inspiration to sharing. Destination selection is strongly influenced by visual platforms such as Instagram and TikTok rather than traditional text searches (Bhardwaj et al., 2020). They often perceive travel as a form of social capital, with the goal of gaining experiences "worth sharing" (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Constant and fast Wi-Fi/mobile connectivity and a digital booking process are a must (Kaur & Gurbuz, 2020). Gen Z puts greater emphasis on reviews, videos from real travelers, and recommendations from influencers. Traditional promotional materials are less important.

Compared to millennials, Gen Z is considered more pragmatic and financially cautious, often seeking discounts and optimizing costs (Jobber & Ellis-Chadwick, 2020). They often choose cheaper forms of accommodation (hostels, shared accommodation such as Airbnb), which also offer them social interaction and authenticity. They prefer functionality and design over traditional luxury (Kaur & Gurbuz, 2020) and see travel as an investment in experiences and personal development, rather than rest or luxury (Gopaldas, 2018). For that reason this generation may prefer lesser-known destinations or parts of them (Williams et al., 2019). Their attitude shows increased sensitivity to the sustainability and ethical behavior of entrepreneurs (Halibas et al., 2025) but with a discrepancy between declared attitudes and actual behavior (Bolton et al., 2020). Their high price sensitivity may force them to choose cheaper, less sustainable options (e.g., low-cost airlines).

4.4 Specifics of Gen Z's Accommodation Requirements

Gen Z perceives accommodation as part of the experience. It is typical for them to seek unique, often authentic accommodation (Wang & Yotsui, 2021), which is more desirable than the standardized luxury of multinational hotel chains (Kim & Ritchie, 2014) with predictable comfort, greater number of passive services and requiring reservation systems and reception (Pesonen et al., 2015; Horváth et al., 2025). For these consumers, alternative accommodation (Airbnb, hostels, Couchsurfing, glamping) and seamless digital processes (booking, check-in, check-out) are adequate (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Wi-Fi connection is a matter of course, and its absence is unacceptable (Ding et al., 2023). Alternative accommodation offers Gen Z members the opportunity to achieve affordability, engage in social interaction, and access local knowledge (Guttentag, 2019). Ensuring digital accessibility is not an additional service, but an integral part of the experience (Gretzel, 2018). Accommodation serves as an entry point into the local culture (Petruzzi et al., 2023). When staying in hotels, they look for spaces to socialize and work, turning the hotel into a community hub (Wang & Yotsui, 2021).

To succeed with Gen Z, entrepreneurs must transform their product by converting their common areas (e.g., lobbies) into flexible, community, and co-working zones with perfect connectivity, which is essential. The offer should shift from accommodation to an experience package with seamless digital ordering. It is necessary to invest in technologies such as mobile check-in, communication via apps, and personalized digital guides. It is important to create "Instagrammable" places and details in the accommodation. Accommodation operators should make their space aesthetically appealing and shareable.

Tourist destinations need a fundamental review of investment, marketing, and legislative approaches, particularly in the area of the massive increase in short-term rentals, which can lead to housing affordability issues and disruption to local communities (Guttentag, 2019). DMOs can propose legislative integration of the sharing economy into the tourism ecosystem rather than simply suppressing it. Given Gen Z's preferences, destination organizations should not only promote luxury resorts, but also unique, local, and themed accommodation options.

4.5 Specifics of Gen Z's Dietary Requirements

Gen Z customers perceive dining as a key part of an authentic experience, shifting it from a necessity to a cultural and ethical experience (Kim & Ritchie, 2014). There is a clear shift away from eating in hotels and a preference for street food and local markets. Gastronomy is a way to learn about local culture (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010).

They actively avoid tourist traps and international chains, preferring authentic family businesses, local markets, and street food, and experiencing real local culture (Sheoran, 2025). The search for authentic dishes is one of the key manifestations of their demand (Kılıç et al., 2021). Taste alone is no longer enough; customers demand knowledge of the origin of ingredients, food preparation technology, and the story behind the dish (Nurhasanah et al, 2025); Li et al., 2017).

Gen Z customers are increasingly demanding vegan/vegetarian dishes and are interested in the local origin of ingredients (Souto-Moutinho et al., 2020), often for ethical or health reasons (Bobe et al. , 2025). They have high environmental and social awareness and require businesses to demonstrate a commitment to sustainability (Agrawal et al, 2023). The dish must be aesthetically appealing (i.e., "Instagrammable" or "TikTokable"). The plating of the dish and the atmosphere of the establishment are as important as its taste. The dish is key content for sharing and eWOM, which have become the main source of inspiration for choosing a place (Langaro et al., 2018b).

These customers expect seamless digital experiences—from fast and intuitive online reservations to digital menus and easy mobile payments (Ozdemir-Guzel & Bas, 2021). They also prefer flexible delivery and takeaway options that they can easily integrate into their non-linear lifestyle (Arunan & Crawford, 2021). Gen Z trusts reviews, recommendations from friends, and influencers on social media more than traditional marketing communications. Visual inspiration from TikTok and Instagram can often be the trigger for visiting a particular establishment. A new business development opportunity is the certification of food establishments not only for product quality but also for local and sustainable certifications (Wearing, 2018).

Destination management may focus on actively promoting authentic, non-touristy dining spots (such as markets and small family businesses) rather than supporting international chains, as Gen Z perceives local businesses as key to a destination's authentic image (Jiang et al., 2025; Zaim et al., 2024).

4.6 Specifics of Gen Z's Transportation Requirements

Gen Z actively considers the environmental and social impact of their transportation instead of speed and luxury (Ma et al., 2024). Their demand for transportation is complex and involves a compromise between three conflicting pressures: ethics, price, and digital fluidity. Although they are willing to pay prime for experiences, regarding transportation, they are often price-sensitive and prefer smart solutions (Robinson & Schänzel, 2019). Sustainability and social impact are two of the main factors in choosing a mode of transport and often a carrier (Souto-Moutinho et al., 2020), leading to higher demand for rail and bus transport (Dolnicar & Grün, 2008). This idea is also supported by the literature-defined shift of Gen Z away from car ownership and significant use of the sharing economy (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). When traveling within a destination, especially in cities, they use micro-mobility options (shared bikes, electric scooters, public transport) perceiving them environmentally friendly and flexible (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010).

Gen Z's high digital autonomy enables dynamic and non-linear transportation decisions and last-minute bookings using mobile apps (Tien et al., 2021). They use apps for last-minute planning and dynamic route management (Tien et al., 2021). Customers expect to be able to purchase mobile tickets, check in digitally, and make contactless payments (Chourasia, 2024). During their journey, they require Wi-Fi and real-time information about delays, routes, and transfers to be available on their mobile phones. The absence of connectivity during travel is considered unacceptable (Tien et al., 2021). They also clearly prefer ground transportation over short and medium-haul flights (Souto-Moutinho et al., 2020). Despite ethical reservations, low-cost airlines remain popular with Gen Z due to their affordability. However, the choice is often influenced by overall value and convenience (e.g., flexibility to change dates), not just price. This phenomenon has been addressed by numerous authors, e.g., Chowdhury, Ahmed & Sreejesh (2024), García, Jiménez & Osorio (2022), Kossyva et al. (2024), Teng et al. (2022).

Carriers can respond to Gen Z behavior with transparent communication and activities that lead to carbon footprint compensation (CSR activities) (Souto-Moutinho et al., 2020; Wearing, 2018)). Transport operators' communication should be digital and take place via social media through short dynamic videos (Langaro et al., 2018a) emphasizing the environmental benefits of traveling by train or bus. As Gen Z expects seamless digital processes from transport (Trihas et al., 2023). It is therefore necessary to invest in digitalization, online booking, mobile tickets and train staff in the use of digital tools.

DMOs need to support investment in infrastructure development and to communicate rail and bus networks as attractive and environmentally friendly alternatives to air or individual transport. At the same time, support for

micromobility (shared bikes, scooters) in cities is also relevant. The transportation must be easy to plan and dynamic. Destinations, cities and municipalities must support unified applications that offer public transportation, car-sharing, and shared scooters on a single platform (Salsabila & Prasetya (2023).

4.7 Specifics of Marketing Product Management for Gen Z

Traditional marketing and segmentation models (4Ps by McCarthy, 1960, extended by Booms & Bitner, 1981 for service sector), although theoretically consistent, fail to grasp the complex motivations and non-linear purchasing process of the younger generation. focuses on control over the product and other traditional parts of the marketing mix. In this approach, the customer is a passive recipient of the offer (Kotler, 2017).

Gen Z customers perceive their participation in tourism as a project of self-realization (Tussanee & Yutana, 2014), not just a product and rely on new forms of communication and sharing, such as eWOM and UGC, which makes the traditional marketing concept debatable (Chung & Koo, 2015). Lack of connectivity is considered unacceptable, underscoring the finding of the need for the fully digital integration of the traditional marketing (Gretzel, 2018).

Traditional segmentation models are often narrowed down to demographic segmentation (age, income), but Gen Z is primarily driven by values such as environmental and social impact. This generation is price-sensitive, but paradoxically willing to pay extra for a unique and valuable experience (Tie et al., 2021), which disrupts basic segmentation models (e.g. Loureiro et al., 2021; Souto-Moutinho et al., 2020).

5. Conclusions

The theoretical foundations for understanding Gen Z travel are rooted in models that emphasise experience, community, and digital connectivity. A comparative analysis has confirmed that key traditional theoretical approaches to tourism management (TM), which were dominant in the pre-2000 era, are failing in the Gen Z era. There is a strong shift from services to experiences. Travel is becoming an opportunity for personal growth. The future lies in the demand for authentic, meaningful experiences and for immersion in local culture. Young travelers actively seek out activities with a "wow" effect and photogenic potential, necessary for sharing and social validation (Schmitt, 2003). A significant use of the sharing economy with an emphasis on collaboration, trust, and efficient use of resources through platforms (e.g., Airbnb, Couchsurfing) allows them to reject standardized hotels and all-inclusive resorts and is a direct consequence of their preference for experiences and authenticity over conventional luxury. A theoretical transformation of the role of the provider from a "product seller" to an "experience seller" is essential for future success in tourism. This means selling authentic and local experiences, using the sharing economy to promote interaction, communicating sustainability transparently, and creating conditions that automatically generate high-quality and shareable content.

An analysis of the literature reveals a discrepancy between opinions on ideal travel and the reality that often stems from a lack of finances, especially in the area of transportation. This fact is referred to in theory as the environmental gap (Ștefănică et al., 2023), which already appeared among Millennials (Sherrington, 2023) D'Acunto and Filieri (2021) examined Gen Z's behavior on the internet and found that elements of sustainability appear less than expected in their online discussions. Hult et al. (2025) also agree with this view.

although Gen Z's environmental values are high, direct behavior (e.g., choosing eco-friendly transportation and accommodation) is often blocked by low perceived control (García, 2022), i.e., the feeling that their efforts will not make a difference, or a lack of available and affordable sustainable options. The biggest barriers are price and lack of information about sustainable alternatives (Kossyva, 2024). Gen Z has strong *intentions* to travel sustainably, but these intentions often fail due to practical/financial constraints. Although social media can increase environmental awareness, the pressure to share and the "Instagrammability" of travel can lead to the choice of less sustainable yet visually appealing experiences, thereby widening the gap (Simao & Al-Nahyan, 2022).

These theses are also supported by the work of Chowdhury et al. (2024), which addresses the paradox of *flygskam* (flight shame) among Gen Z in relation to environmental issues: Low-cost airlines minimize guilt by offering the perceived "cheapest available" option, which helps Gen Z justify their choice despite environmental concerns. Joshi and Singh (2023) confirmed the significant gap: low-cost airlines remain preferred because they are perceived as the only affordable option for gaining travel experiences shared on social media. Comfort and low price are strong barriers to the intention to travel sustainably (Teng et al., 2022).

The key identified causes of the gap in tourism stem from the discrepancy between Gen Z's attitudes and behavior, primarily caused by a combination of several factors: (1) price sensitivity, where it was found that for Gen Z, price (cheap tickets, cheap accommodation) is often a more important factor than the sustainability of the destination or transport; (2) sustainable travel is often more time-consuming and less comfortable, which Gen Z, with their limited time and desire for flexibility, does not prefer; (3) the desire to travel for social media content outweighs environmental concerns, leading to overtourism and fast travel.

Based on the findings, the following directions for future academic research are proposed:

1. Focus on quantifying authenticity and developing a reliable scale for measuring Immersion Score, which would allow businesses to standardize the measurement of experience value beyond mere service satisfaction.
2. Research the effectiveness and profitability of hybrid accommodation models (a combination of hostels, co-working zones, and hotel rooms) that Gen Z seeks. Based on the results, it should be possible to determine the optimal ratio between private and community spaces to maximize their satisfaction and the financial sustainability of accommodation facilities.
3. Segmentation based on the Traveler's Ethical Code (TEC): Move away from segmentation based solely on demographics (age/income) to a new segmentation model based on the traveler's ethical code (e.g., low vs. high willingness to offset CO2, preference for local vs. mass tourism).
4. Conducting an empirical study quantifying the direct influence of TikTok and Instagram content on destination choice.
4. Measuring the willingness of the younger generation to pay a premium price for demonstrably sustainable services.
5. Using advanced structural modeling methods to quantify how strongly variables such as "perceived behavioral control" and "sharing pressure" moderate or mediate the relationship between environmental attitudes and actual sustainable behavior.
7. Potential for positive use of social media pressure - verifying the degree of influence of users' sustainable choices on perceived social validation.
6. Geographical and cultural comparison: Comparative studies of Gen Z behavior in emerging markets with different economic barriers, family influences, and different approaches to digital platforms, are needed.

Given the identified gap, it is particularly appropriate to address the following research opportunities.

1. To model and quantify, using advanced methods, Gen Z's willingness to pay for specific sustainable attributes and to determine how strongly social validation pressure and perceived behavioral control moderate the relationship between environmental attitudes and the choice of, for example, a low-cost carrier.
2. To design and experimentally test the impact of changes in the digital environment (e.g., booking platforms). Specifically, it should be verified whether setting sustainable choices as the default/standard option can effectively overcome Gen Z's price sensitivity and comfort barrier when deciding on transportation and accommodation.
3. Comparative studies across different cultural regions to reveal how different economic and social factors influence the justification of choosing less sustainable options and how Gen Z's internal mechanisms for minimizing guilt differ in different market environments.

Ethics Declaration

The ethical clearance was not required for the research.

AI Declaration

Generative AI tools were not used to generate the text of this article.

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