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Journal of Sustainable Tourism

ISSN: 0966-9582 (Print) 1747-7646 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rsus20

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To cite this article: Siamak Seyfi, C. Michael Hall & Marianna Strzelecka (2025) Gen Z – pioneers or paradox in sustainable tourism?, Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 33:6, 987-1015, DOI: 10.1080/09669582.2025.2491702

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2025.2491702

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Published online: 22 Apr 2025.

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JOURNAL OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM
2025, VOL. 33, NO. 6, 987–1015
https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2025.2491702

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Gen Z – pioneers or paradox in sustainable tourism?

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ABSTRACT

Frequently labeled the "greenest generation," research often portrays Generation Z (Gen Z) as a generation with strong pro-sustainability sensibilities. However, closer scrutiny exposes a disconnect between their stated intentions and actual behavior. This editorial reflection draws on the contributions to the Special Issue "*Gen Z: The Sustainable Tourism Generation*?" and a critical scoping review to question whether Gen Z can genuinely support a shift toward sustainable tourism. The studies in this issue address themes such as pro-environmental behavior, political consumerism, ethical choices, food waste, and psychological ownership of destinations. Overall, they demonstrate a fragmented body of work, split between those who argue for Gen Z's deep engagement with sustainability and others who highlight inconsistencies. By synthesizing insights from the special issue and mapping them against broader trends in the literature, this editorial argues that current scholarship risks overstating the coherence of Gen Z's sustainability orientation. It urges researchers to interrogate the structural, cultural, and psychological barriers that mediate the translation of values into action. Finally, it outlines a future research agenda that calls for greater theoretical clarity, comparative and longitudinal designs, and a move beyond celebratory narratives, to better understand Gen Z's actual role in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals within tourism and beyond.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 28 October 2024
Accepted 4 April 2025

KEYWORDS
Gen Z; green generation; ethical tourism; sustainable tourism; sustainable development goals; attitude-behavior gap

EDITOR
Xavier Font

Introduction

Growing global concern over issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss has intensified scrutiny of the travel industry's social and environmental impacts (Hall, 2019; Scott et al., 2024) prompting increased public demand for more sustainable forms of travel consumption (Seeler et al., 2021). This shift aligns with the aims of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12, which calls for "responsible consumption and production"

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and points out to the need for collective responsibility. Yet, progress toward SDG 12 remains limited within tourism, where the pursuit of leisure and enjoyment often stands in tension with sustainable behavior (Greene & Dolnicar, 2024; Khater et al., 2024; MacInnes & Dolnicar, 2024; Viglia et al., 2024). This structural contradiction continues to frustrate efforts to reform tourism consumption patterns in meaningful ways.

Among younger travelers, Generation Z (Gen Z) is often labeled the "sustainability generation" due to their reported environmental awareness (Djafarova & Foots, 2022; Robichaud & Yu, 2022). Compared to Millennials and Generation X, Gen Z is typically portrayed as more digitally connected, mobile, and values-driven – traits thought to align with sustainable tourism ideals (Salinero et al., 2022). Their environmental concern, ethical consumption habits, and ease with technology are frequently cited as distinguishing features, especially in how they relate to sustainability in tourism (Corbisiero et al., 2022). However, these assumptions are often based on self-reported attitudes rather than verified behavioral patterns.

Despite the optimism surrounding Gen Z's potential to advance sustainability, this view requires careful scrutiny. Much of the existing literature relies heavily on self-reported intentions rather than observed behaviors which offers a limited basis for assessing their actual impact (Seyfi et al., 2024). This overreliance risks overstating the significance of Gen Z's values without clear evidence of consistent action (Greene & Dolnicar, 2024; MacInnes & Dolnicar, 2024; Viglia et al., 2024). The well-documented gap between attitudes and behaviors is especially evident in this cohort, where environmental concern often coexists with high-carbon travel habits and price-sensitive decision-making (Seyfi & Hall, 2024). Factors such as psychological convenience, performative social media engagement, and economic insecurity – including limited income and precarious employment – may help explain these inconsistencies. While Gen Z is frequently framed as a driver of implementing the SDGs (Yamane & Kaneko, 2021), the evidence remains mixed. This raises key questions: Do their behaviors meaningfully differ from previous generations? Can they truly lead a shift toward sustainability, or does their rhetoric exceed their practices?

This editorial positions the Special Issue "*Gen Z: The Sustainable Tourism Generation?*" within wider academic and industry debates on sustainability and generational analysis and examines the extent to which Gen Z either aligns with or challenges dominant narratives about generational influence in shaping sustainable tourism. In doing so, it addresses main gaps in tourism research by scrutinizing the implications of Gen Z's travel consumption for the sector's long-term sustainability. The Special Issue brings together studies that explore how Gen Z's environmental awareness, consumer behavior, and travel practices intersect within the sustainability agenda. Key themes include pro-environmental behavior, political consumerism, ethical decision-making, food waste, and psychological ownership of destinations. This editorial synthesizes these contributions and maps shared theoretical and methodological patterns, offering a roadmap for understanding Gen Z's engagement with sustainability.

This article is structured as follows. First, we address the question, Who is Gen Z, and why does this cohort matter? by examining their defining traits and assessing the implications for tourism. This section considers how Gen Z's values, behaviors, and technological fluency are reshaping demand and influencing industry responses. Second, we conduct a scoping review of existing research on Gen Z and sustainability,

synthesizing findings on their engagement with sustainable practices. Third, we present an overview of the contributions to this Special Issue, grouping the articles thematically and identifying key areas of focus. Finally, we propose a research agenda based on gaps in the literature, outlining future directions for understanding Gen Z's tourism behavior and its implications for the long-term sustainability of the travel sector.

Who is Gen Z and why this cohort matters?

Generational analysis offers a structured approach within the social sciences to examine how individuals born within a specific time frame develop shared traits shaped by common historical and socio-cultural experiences (Costanza et al., 2017; Thomson, 2014). Generational theory defines a generation as a cohort whose identity, values, and behaviors are influenced by formative events during key developmental periods (Li et al., 2013). Strauss and Howe (1997) describe this as a shared "location in history," while Kupperschmidt (2000) emphasizes the impact of critical life events in shaping a generation's worldview. One of the defining generational markers is the encounter with distinct communication technologies, which not only influence social and economic interactions but also shape modes of sustainability engagement and activism (Seyfi & Hall, 2023; Taipale et al., 2017).

Gen Z refers to the demographic cohort following Generation Y (Millennials) and preceding Generation Alpha. While definitions vary slightly, it is generally defined as including those born between the late 1990s and late 2000s (Seemiller & Grace, 2018, 2024). With an estimated 32% share of the global population, Gen Z represents one of the largest generational groups worldwide (World Economic Forum (WEF), 2018). Though still early in their working lives, they already exert notable economic influence – particularly in the leisure and travel sectors – where they have emerged as a strategic focus for the tourism industry (Seyfi et al., 2023).

Gen Z is often described as having come of age in a digital environment fundamentally different from that of previous generations (Taipale et al., 2017). As the first cohort born into widespread internet access, they are frequently labeled "digital natives" due to early and continuous exposure to digital technologies (Bhalla et al., 2021). However, this characterization largely reflects experiences in the Global North. Significant digital inequalities persist in the Global South, where many Gen Z individuals continue to face limited or inconsistent access to the internet. Although Gen Z is commonly portrayed as a digitally oriented generation shaped by online education, communication, and consumption (Roy et al., 2023), this generalization overlooks the reality that roughly one-third of the global population remains offline (Misra & Srivastava, 2024). As such, claims about Gen Z's digital fluency must be treated with caution, particularly in cross-regional analyses.

Global internet access remains uneven. In regions such as Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the Americas, internet penetration exceeds 95%, nearing universal levels (Table 1). However, youth in Africa and in low- and lower-middle-income countries continue to face substantial access gaps, despite being the most active users where connectivity exists (International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 2023). These headline figures also obscure deeper divides, including enduring gender disparities, with males consistently enjoying higher levels of access than females.

Table 1. Percentage of individuals using the Internet by age group, 2023.

Region	Youth 15–24	Rest of population
World	79%	65%
Africa	53%	33%
Americas	95%	86%
Arab states	78%	66%
Asia-Pacific	81%	63%
Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)	94%	88%
Europe	98%	90%
Low-income countries	45%	23%
Lower middle-income countries	71%	52%
Upper middle-income countries	96%	78%
High-income countries	98%	93%
Least developed countries (LDCs)	54%	31%

Source: ITU. https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/2023/10/10/ff23-youth-internet-use/.

Gen Z's immersion in a hyper-connected digital environment has significantly shaped their values, behaviors, and consumption preferences (Deloitte, 2024). This connectivity is often linked to preferences for personalization, identity expression, and technology-driven purchasing – traits said that distinguish them from older generations (Goh & Okumus, 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2018; Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). However, while digital fluency is frequently portrayed as a strength, it also introduces tensions. The environmental costs of digital infrastructure, data consumption, and artificial intelligence adoption raise important questions about the compatibility of Gen Z's technological habits with sustainable lifestyles. This contradiction remains underexplored.

Gen Z's formative years have coincided with global crises and social inequalities, contributing to the development of values such as universalism and a desire for stability and equity (Goh & Okumus, 2020; Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021; Seyfi & Hall, 2023). These values are often cited as the basis for their interest in sustainability. Yet, empirical studies repeatedly point to a mismatch between these stated commitments and actual behavior, reinforcing the well-established "attitude–behavior gap" (Greene & Dolnicar, 2024; MacInnes & Dolnicar, 2024; Viglia et al., 2024). Moreover, much of the research on Gen Z relies on self-reported data, which is prone to desirability bias and limits the ability to draw robust conclusions about real-world actions (Viglia et al., 2024). Recognizing these limitations is essential for anticipating how Gen Z may reshape tourism demand and whether their behaviors will align with sustainable consumption goals.

Gen Z and sustainability

Sustainability has become an increasingly influential factor in shaping consumer behavior, particularly among younger generations (Yamane & Kaneko, 2021). For Gen Z, sustainability is often framed as a core value, shaped by a period marked by environmental crises and global activism, including movements such as Fridays for Future (Giachino et al., 2022; Seyfi & Hall, 2023). In response, a growing body of research has investigated Gen Z's sustainability-related behaviors and consumption practices across diverse settings.

To examine this literature systematically and in line with the editorial's aims, we conducted a scoping review. This method is designed to map the scope of existing research, identify key themes, and highlight knowledge gaps (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010; Colquhoun et al., 2014). It is especially suitable in fields with dispersed and interdisciplinary research, such as Gen Z and sustainability, which spans tourism studies, environmental psychology, and consumer behavior. Following Arksey and O'Malley (2005) framework, with refinements by Levac et al. (2010), the review followed five stages. First, we formulated the research question: What are the recurring themes, patterns, and behaviors in how Gen Z engages with sustainability, particularly in tourism contexts? Second, we carried out a systematic search across Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using predefined keywords: "Generation Z," "sustainability," "sustainable tourism," "pro-environmental behavior," and "ethical consumption." Third, studies were screened using two criteria: (1) they must be peer-reviewed, and (2) they must address Gen Z's sustainability behaviors in tourism or adjacent areas such as environmental action or consumer behavior and ethics. Screening took place in two phases: initial review of titles and abstracts, followed by full-text assessment. Finally, studies were categorized by source (journal title) and study context, and key data were extracted, including research focus, methodology, and main findings. This synthesis is presented in Table 2.

It is important to emphasize that scoping reviews are designed for thematic mapping rather than causal inference or statistical synthesis (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Colquhoun et al., 2014; Levac et al., 2010). Our objective was not to estimate effect sizes but to identify recurring patterns and outstanding questions within a fragmented literature. Future studies may build on this work through more narrowly focused systematic reviews or meta-analyses.

As shown in the synthesis presented in Table 2, the literature on Gen Z and sustainability remains fragmented, revealing two distinct strands. One reflects optimism about Gen Z's commitment to sustainability, while the other adopts a more skeptical stance, highlighting inconsistencies between stated values and actual behaviors. Notably, these divergent perspectives do not align with specific methodological approaches, suggesting that the divide is interpretive rather than procedural. These contrasting views are discussed further below.

Optimism about Gen Z's sustainability orientation

One strand of research presents Gen Z as genuinely oriented toward sustainability, with a preference for environmentally responsible practices and a willingness to engage in eco-friendly behaviors. Sharpley (2021) suggests that Gen Z travelers are particularly attuned to sustainable tourism, often supporting initiatives such as eco-accommodation and community-based experiences. Similarly, studies by Hoang and Nguyen (2024) and Homer and Kanagasapapathy (2024) find that Gen Z's positive attitudes toward sustainable tourism correlate with environmentally protective actions. Giachino et al. (2021), focusing on Italian youth, report that Gen Z values nature-based solutions in urban settings, viewing them as integral to preserving both cultural and natural heritage.

Table 2. Select exemplars of research on Gen Z and sustainability.

Authors	Source	Country	Research focus	Method	Key findings
Bulut et al. (2017)	*International Journal of Consumer Studies*	Turkey	Explores sustainable consumption behaviors in relation to gender and generational differences.	Quantitative	Gen Z are more likely to reduce and prevent unneeded consumption.
Haddouche and Salomone (2018)	*Journal of Tourism Futures*	France	Investigates how Gen Z uses social networks and how they perceive sustainable tourism through their travel stories.	Qualitative	Sustainable tourism is not a key concept for Gen Z.
Dabija et al. (2020)	*Journal of Risk and Financial Management*	Romania	Examines Gen Z's perceptions of retailers' sustainability practices in emerging markets.	Qualitative	Gen Z favors retailers with proactive sustainability measures, such as resource preservation, environmental protection, and local community involvement.
Yamane and Kaneko (2021)	*Journal of Cleaner Production*	Japan	Investigates generational differences in pro-SDG attitudes, willingness to pay for sustainable goods, and job preferences for SDG-aligned companies.	Quantitative	Younger generations are more pro-SDG, willing to pay more for sustainable goods, and willing to accept lower salaries to work for SDG-focused companies, indicating generational support for SDGs.
Giachino et al. (2021)	*Land Use Policy*	Italy	Examines Gen Z's perception of nature-based solutions in urban areas as tourism attractions	Quantitative	Gen Z values nature-based solutions for cultural and natural heritage, perceiving it as enhancing tourism and leisure in urban areas.
Parzonko et al. (2021)	*Energies*	Poland	Investigates the pro-environmental behaviors of Gen Z in the context of the concept of homo socio-economicus, comparing them to an older age group.	Quantitative	Gen Z shows lower engagement in pro-environmental behaviors compared to the older group; actions mainly include turning off lights and using public transportation. Economic factors are key motivators.

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Authors	Source	Country	Research focus	Method	Key findings
Robichaud and Yu (2022)	*British Food Journal*	Canada	Analyzes Gen Z's purchase intentions toward fair trade coffee.	Quantitative	knowledge of fair trade and peer influence significantly impact Gen Z's purchase intentions for fair trade products.
Sharpley (2021)	*Tourist Studies*	–	Discusses the need for sustainable tourism consumption and the challenges of reducing tourism demand.	Conceptual	Gen Z strongly advocate environmental sustainability, earning them a reputation for being environmentally aware.
Casalegno et al. (2022)	*Psychology & Marketing*	Italy	Examines whether generational cohort (X, Y, Z) influences green and sustainable product purchasing behaviors.	Quantitative	Age affects green product buying intention; collectivism drives sustainable behavior for Gen Z more than other cohorts.
Sfodera et al. (2024)	*International Hospitality Review*	Pakistan	Explores Gen Z's perceptions of technology in sustainable tourism in developing countries.	Mixed methods	Technology positively influences Gen Z's sustainability perceptions, with city size affecting variation.
Grénman et al. (2024)	*International Journal of Consumer Studies*	Gen Z in US and Finland	Examines Gen Z's perceptions of a 'good life' beyond consumerism in US and Finland.	Qualitative	Post-COVID, Gen Z emphasizes moderation, meaningfulness, and sustainability in their lives.
Homer and Kanagasapapathy (2024)	*Tourism Recreation Research*	Malaysian and UK Gen Z	Developed a scale to measure Gen Z's perceptions of sustainable tourism.	Mixed methods	Gen Z engagement influenced by environmental protection and management.
Pinho and Gomes (2024)	*Journal of Tourism Futures*	Portugal	Examines Portuguese Gen Z's attitudes toward sustainable tourism and SDGs.	Quantitative	Gen Z had interest in SDGs but low engagement in sustainable tourism
Seyfi et al. (2023)	*Journal of Sustainable Tourism*	Iran	Explores how digital media engagement influences sustainability-driven political consumerism among Gen Z tourists.	Qualitative	Digital media facilitates political consumerism through tourism-related boycotting and buycotting behaviors.
Seyfi et al. (2023)	*Journal of Sustainable Tourism*	France	Investigates drivers and barriers affecting tourists' engagement in digitally mediated pro-sustainability boycotts.	Qualitative	Digital media technologies facilitate participation in boycotts through activism; barriers include free-riding and perceived ineffectiveness.

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Authors	Source	Country	Research focus	Method	Key findings
Ruzgys and Pickering (2024)	*Journal of Cleaner Production*	Canada	Examines sustainable dietary behaviors among Gen Z.	Quantitative	Majority of Gen Z is in contemplation or preparation stages for sustainable dietary behavior. Attitude and food literacy predict sustainable dietary behaviors among Gen Z.
Chang et al. (2024)	*International Journal of Tourism Research*	Malaysia	Explores Gen Z's eco-friendly behaviors and emotional responses in tourism.	Quantitative	Positive emotions and eco-travel cravings influence environmentally responsible behavior.
Shen et al. (2024)	*Tourism Review*	China	Studies the impact of experience dimensions on Gen Z's pro-environmental behavior in nature-based tourism.	Quantitative	Positive experiences drive engagement in pro-environmental behavior; satisfaction mediates effects.
Mandić et al. (2024a)	*Journal of Sustainable Tourism*	India	Studies factors influencing pro-environmental travel behavior of Gen Z in India.	Quantitative	Nature connectedness and wellbeing positively influence pro-environmental behavior.
Mandić et al. (2024b)	*Anatolia*	India	Explores the relationship between nature connectedness, wellbeing, and pro-environmental travel behavior among Gen Z in an Eastern society context.	Quantitative	Nature connectedness positively influences pro-environmental behavior; intrinsic values and attitudes are crucial for sustainable decision-making. Hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing mediate the relationship between connectedness and behavior.
Hoang and Nguyen (2024)	*Journal of Global Responsibility*	Vietnam	Investigates determinants of Gen Z's support for sustainable tourism in Vietnam.	Quantitative	Positive influence of sustainable tourism attitude, belief, and destination image on support intentions.

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Authors	Source	Country	Research focus	Method	Key findings
Khan (2024)	*Sustainable Development*	Pakistan	Studies green travel behavior of Gen Z through environmental attitudes and self-efficacy.	Quantitative	Green self-efficacy moderates the relationship between environmental consciousness and green travel behavior.
Pulido-Fernández et al. (2024)	*International Journal of Tourism Research*	Spain	Analyzes Gen Z's behavior toward sustainability in well-established coastal destinations.	Quantitative	Gen Z has high commitment to sustainability but low willingness to pay more for it
Fei et al. (2024)	*International Journal of Hospitality Management*	Multi-national sample	Investigates Gen Z's willingness to pay for sustainable features in economy hotels.	Quantitative	Gen Z willing to pay up to $36 more for sustainable hotel features.
Tse (2024)	*Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*	China	Examines intergenerational knowledge sharing about sustainability using social learning theory.	Qualitative	Intergenerational sharing leads to different perspectives on sustainability responsibilities.

Digital platforms are also seen as shaping sustainable behavior. Seyfi et al. (2023) and Casalegno et al. (2022) argue that online activism – such as brand boycotts or ethical consumption campaigns – can mobilize Gen Z toward sustainability-oriented choices. Similarly, positive experiences in eco-tourism settings appear to reinforce collectivist and pro-environmental attitudes (Shen et al., 2024; Chang et al., 2024). However, the assumption that digital engagement translates into consistent offline behavior remains questionable. Much of this activism is episodic and performative, with limited evidence of long-term commitment. In the context of waste reduction, Zepeda and Balaine (2017) report that Gen Z expresses heightened concern over food waste, particularly its environmental and economic implications. Goh and Jie (2019) further note that Gen Z is more likely to support hospitality businesses with clear sustainability practices and align with brands that signal environmental responsibility. Although research as to whether some types of hospitality and tourism businesses are perceived more favorably than others remains lacking. Nevertheless, taken together, this strand of literature paints a picture of a generation whose environmental attitudes – shaped by peer influence, personal experience, and digital engagement – may influence sustainable tourism and consumption. Yet, the durability, depth, and focus of this influence remain open to further examination.

Caution about the consistency of Gen Z's sustainable actions

While some studies portray Gen Z as sustainability-minded, a growing body of research raises doubts about the consistency between their stated values and actual behaviors.

This intention–behavior gap is a recurring theme. For instance, Pinho and Gomes (2024) found that although Portuguese Gen Z expressed interest in the SDGs, their engagement in sustainable tourism practices was limited. Pulido-Fernández et al. (2024) report a similar pattern among Spanish Gen Z tourists – strong pro-sustainability attitudes coupled with a low willingness to pay for environmentally friendly options. Fei et al. (2024) also note that while Gen Z may express intent to support sustainable hotels, financial constraints often override these preferences. Economic motivations appear to play a larger role than environmental concern in some cases. In Poland, Parzonko et al. (2021) found that Gen Z's behaviors – such as turning off lights or using public transport – were driven more by cost-saving than ecological awareness. Similarly, Khan (2024) observed that among Pakistani Gen Z, environmental concern did not consistently translate into sustainable travel behaviors, due to both economic pressures and limited access.

This inconsistency extends into dietary choices. Ruzgys and Pickering (2024) note that most Gen Z consumers remain in the preparatory stages of adopting sustainable diets, often hindered by cost and ingrained habits. Karunasena et al. (2021) and Kymäläinen et al. (2021) found that although Gen Z expresses a preference for local and organic products, this does not necessarily lead to reductions in food waste. In fact, impulsive consumption patterns may contribute to higher levels of waste, particularly in contexts where eating out, takeaway, and food delivery have become increasingly common (Gössling & Hall, 2022).

Overall, these studies point to the limits of Gen Z's sustainability engagement. They suggest that while concern for environmental issues is widespread, actual behavior is often shaped by affordability, convenience, and lifestyle habits. Bridging this gap will require more than awareness campaigns – it demands targeted strategies that address structural constraints and better account for the realities shaping Gen Z's tourism and consumption choices.

Methodological approaches in Gen Z and sustainability studies

The studies summarized in Table 2 employ a range of methodological approaches, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of research on Gen Z and sustainability. These approaches can be broadly grouped into quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, each offering distinct advantages and limitations in capturing Gen Z's sustainability-related attitudes and behaviors.

Quantitative methods dominate the field, with many studies relying on surveys to collect self-reported data on intentions, attitudes, and behaviors. Common instruments include Likert scales and psychometric tools that measure constructs such as willingness to pay for sustainable products, engagement in eco-friendly practices, and the influence of social or emotional drivers (Chang et al., 2024; Yamane & Kaneko, 2021). Some studies use statistical modeling to explore relationships between environmental concern and specific consumption choices, while a smaller number adopt experimental designs to test causal effects, such as the impact of positive emotions on pro-environmental behavior (Shen et al., 2024). However, this reliance on self-report

introduces concerns about validity, particularly social desirability bias, which may inflate reports of sustainable actions (Zhu et al., 2024). Moreover, the dominance of cross-sectional designs limits the capacity to track changes in attitudes and behaviors over time (Greene & Dolnicar, 2024; Khater et al., 2024; MacInnes & Dolnicar, 2024; Viglia et al., 2024).

Mixed methods research addresses some of these limitations by combining quantitative breadth with qualitative depth. This approach typically pairs surveys with interviews or focus groups to allow for triangulation and improved robustness (Homer & Kanagasapapathy, 2024). For example, mixed methods have been useful in examining how technological change influences Gen Z's sustainability perspectives across different regional and socioeconomic contexts. By linking statistical patterns to lived experiences, these studies provide more grounded insights. However, mixed methods research is resource-intensive and requires careful coordination to integrate different data types. Inconsistent alignment between quantitative and qualitative findings can also create challenges in drawing coherent conclusions.

Several broader methodological challenges persist across this body of work. The near-universal reliance on self-reported data is a major limitation, as it does not reliably capture actual behavior (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2016). Studies that directly compare observed and reported behaviors are rare. Longitudinal studies are also notably lacking, yet they are essential for understanding how Gen Z's sustainability orientations develop over time (Chakraborty et al., 2024). Furthermore, cross-cultural variation is often overlooked. The majority of existing research is geographically concentrated, limiting its relevance for global analyses. There is a clear need for comparative studies that consider regional, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity to build a more comprehensive and globally relevant understanding of Gen Z's sustainability engagement (Juma-Michilena et al., 2024).

Overview of the contributions in this special issue

This special issue examines how Gen Z's sustainability attitudes and awareness translate into tourism behaviors, with particular attention to their motivations, constraints, and the broader implications of their engagement with sustainability. The contributing articles draw on a range of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches, offering a varied yet complementary analysis of Gen Z's role in shaping sustainable tourism practices (Table 3).

Themes, issues, and implications of studies in the special issue

The studies in this special issue advance understanding of how Gen Z engages with environmental and social responsibility in tourism. Three thematic clusters emerge: (1) motivational and psychological drivers of sustainability, (2) external influences and social contexts, and (3) barriers to sustainable behavior.

Table 3. Overview of articles in this special issue.

Authors	Research focus	Country	Theoretical framework	Method	Key findings
Lin et al. (2022)	Explores the eudaimonic environmental goals of Gen Z and how environmental motivation influences green travel and citizenship behavior.	China	Self-determination theory and self-efficacy theory	Mixed methods (survey and semi-structured interviews)	Eudaimonic environmental motivation leads to green travel involvement and environmental citizenship, moderated by self-efficacy.
Prayag et al. (2022)	Evaluates inter- and intra-generational differences in environmental attitudes and sustainability practices among Gen Z and other generations.	New Zealand	New environmental paradigm	Quantitative (Survey)	Gen Z tourists belong to "Environmental" and "Mixed-Bag Environmental" segments, showing more sustainable practices in resource saving and local food consumption.
Qiu et al. (2022)	Examines the role of destination psychological ownership in promoting environmentally responsible behavioral intentions among Gen Z tourists.	China	Theory of planned behavior	Quantitative (Survey)	Place attachment and perceived environmental responsibility mediate the relationship between psychological ownership and environmentally responsible behavior; Gen Z has lower TERBI compared to older generations.
Salinero et al. (2022)	Investigates internal and external drivers of pro-sustainable tourism behaviors among Gen Z tourists.	UK	Norm activation theory and social norm theory	Quantitative (Survey)	Internal drivers (personal norms, awareness of consequences) and external drivers (social media engagement) influence pro-sustainable behaviors; subjective norms influence indirectly.
Huang et al. (2022)	Examines Gen Z diners' moral judgments and perceptions related to food waste in restaurants.	United States	Norm activation model; Moral disengagement theory	Qualitative (online focus groups)	Gen Z diners' food waste behavior is influenced by moral obligation, moral disengagement, and situational, cultural, and restaurant-specific factors.
D'Arco et al. (2023)	Analyzes Gen Z's pro-environmental behavioral intentions, focusing on sustainable transportation and eco-friendly hotels.	Italy	Norm activation model and social norm theory	Quantitative (Survey)	Personal norms are the strongest predictor of sustainable travel choices; injunctive social norms influence sustainable transportation choices indirectly *via* personal norms.
Ribeiro et al. (2023)	Examines how values, ascribed responsibility, and green consumption values influence pro-environmental travel behavior among Gen Z tourists.	UK	Value-belief-norm theory	Quantitative (Survey)	Values, ascribed responsibility, and environmental concerns drive pro-environmental travel behavior; green consumption values moderate behavior.
Seyfi et al. (2023)	Explores the drivers of Gen Z tourists' buycotting behavior, including individual and prosocial motivations.	Iran	Lifestyle politics theory	Qualitative (Interviews)	Gen Z's buycotting is driven by self-identity, altruism, social justice, and peer influence, highlighting political and ethical consumerism.

(*Continued*)

Table 3. Continued.

Authors	Research focus	Country	Theoretical framework	Method	Key findings
Sharma et al. (2023)	Investigates the relationship between generativity, prosocial attitudes, consumption values, and food waste avoidance behavior among Gen Z.	India	Motivation-opportunity-ability theory	Quantitative (Survey)	Generativity and prosocial attitudes are significant predictors of food waste avoidance behavior among Gen Z; consumption values also influence behavior.
Liu et al. (2025)	Explores the effect of green organizational climate on green creativity among Gen Z hotel employees.	China	Social information processing theory and componential model of creativity	Quantitative (Survey)	Green organizational climate positively influences green creativity through prosocial motivation; ecological reflexivity moderates green creativity.
Seyfi et al. (2024)	Identifies constraints related to ethical tourism consumption and travel practices among Gen Z.	France	Theory of constraints	Qualitative (Interviews)	Gen Z faces multiple interrelated constraints, such as cognitive dissonance, risk aversion, and family dynamics, which affect ethical travel behavior.
Liu-Lastres et al. (2025)	Investigates discrepancies in sustainable travel behavior among Generations Y and Z.	United States	Extended theory of planned behavior	Mixed methods	Found a significant gap between intentions and actions regarding sustainable travel among Generations Y and Z. Key barriers include limited resources, high costs, and a lack of knowledge.

Motivational and psychological drivers of sustainability

Existing research highlights the role of environmental values, ethical norms, and eco-conscious attitudes in shaping Gen Z's pro-environmental behavior (Djafarova & Foots, 2022). Building on this, several contributions explore how individual motivations and psychological frameworks inform sustainable tourism choices. Lin et al. (2022) examine Gen Z's environmental motivations in China, showing that eudaimonic drivers – grounded in personal growth and fulfillment – underpin consistent pro-sustainability behaviors. Using a mixed-methods design and drawing on self-determination and self-efficacy theories, the study highlights environmental citizenship as a central component of Gen Z's engagement, with sustainability perceived not only as a collective responsibility but also as a path to self-actualization.

Prayag et al. (2022) use the New Environmental Paradigm (NEP) to compare generational differences among international visitors to Canterbury, New Zealand. Their survey of 615 tourists shows that Gen Z and Gen X are more likely to belong to segments with stronger eco-centric values, in contrast to Baby Boomers. However, across all groups, a common attitude–behavior gap remains, particularly regarding sustainable transport use – often limited by structural constraints. Ribeiro et al. (2023), applying the value-belief-norm framework, analyze Gen Z's pro-environmental travel behavior in the UK. Their findings suggest that biospheric and altruistic values, along with a willingness to make personal sacrifices, are key drivers. Notably, green consumption values strengthen the link between concern, sacrifice, and behavior, indicating that appeals to these values may enhance Gen Z's adoption of sustainable travel practices.

In the context of Iran, Seyfi et al. (2023) use lifestyle politics theory to investigate Gen Z's "buycotting" behaviors. The study finds that consumer activism is shaped by both individual motivations (e.g. self-identity, frugality, fulfillment) and prosocial concerns (e.g. altruism, trust, social justice). Social media exposure, peer influence, and past experiences further influence participation. The findings reinforce broader claims that Gen Z views consumption as a form of political and ethical expression, where personal identity and values intersect with sustainability goals.

External influences and social contexts

Social norms, peer influence, and psychological connections to place are widely recognized as important factors shaping pro-environmental behavior (Daryanto & Song, 2021; Ramkissoon et al., 2012). For Gen Z, social media, peer networks, and a sense of ownership over spaces frequently reinforce environmental responsibility (Seyfi et al., 2023). Theoretical models such as the theory of planned behavior and norm activation theory are commonly used to examine these influences. Qiu et al. (2022) explore how psychological ownership of travel destinations influences environmentally responsible behavior in both Gen Z and older cohorts in China. Their study, based on the theory of planned behavior, finds that place attachment and perceived environmental responsibility mediate this relationship. Interestingly, older tourists exhibited stronger pro-environmental actions, while Gen Z's behaviors were more strongly shaped by subjective norms, suggesting peer expectations play a central role in their environmental decisions.

Salinero et al. (2022) examine how internal and external drivers influence Gen Z tourists' sustainable behavior in the UK, using norm activation and social norm theories. They find that personal norms – such as a sense of responsibility and awareness of environmental consequences – are key motivators. External influences, particularly social media engagement and participation in online communities, also support sustainable actions. However, peer influence operates indirectly, shaping behavior through its effect on internal norms. These findings echo broader claims that social influence, particularly through digital media, plays a significant but mediated role in Gen Z's sustainability choices (Robichaud & Yu, 2022; Seyfi, et al., 2023; Seyfi et al., 2023).

In Italy, D'Arco et al. (2023) assess how personal and social norms affect Gen Z's sustainable transport use and hotel choices. Applying the norm activation model and focusing on injunctive social norms, they report that personal responsibility is the most consistent predictor of pro-environmental intentions. Social norms influence behavior indirectly through personal belief systems, particularly for transportation-related decisions. This suggests that Gen Z's eco-friendly travel behaviors are shaped more by internalized norms than direct social pressure. Huang et al. (2022) study Gen Z diners in the US to understand how moral judgments inform food waste behavior in restaurant settings. Using a dual-process model based on norm activation and moral disengagement theory, they identify two pathways: one driven by moral obligation (leading to waste reduction) and another by moral disengagement (enabling waste through justifications like diffused responsibility). The findings also highlight the contradictory role of social media – while it informs and encourages sustainability, it also promotes wasteful consumption through trends such as Foodstagramming and Mukbang. This highlights the need to account for the complex social contexts in which Gen Z makes consumption decisions (Seyfi et al., 2024).

Barriers to Gen Z's sustainable behaviors

Although Gen Z is often described as environmentally conscious, research consistently identifies practical and psychological barriers that hinder the translation of their values into sustainable actions – particularly in tourism contexts, where cost, convenience, and social dynamics often complicate decision-making (Seyfi et al., 2024). The contributions in this issue add depth to this theme by examining the constraints Gen Z faces across different consumption settings.

Seyfi et al. (2024) apply the theory of constraints to categorize the barriers Gen Z encounters in ethical tourism into three interrelated domains: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. Intrapersonal constraints, such as cognitive dissonance and habitual consumption patterns, often trigger a cascade of challenges reinforced by interpersonal factors (e.g. family dynamics, peer comparison) and structural limitations (e.g. affordability, limited availability of ethical options). These layers of constraint interact rather than operate independently, making ethical tourism decisions particularly difficult. The study also notes Gen Z's distinctive skepticism toward corporate ethical claims and their demand for transparency – features less prominent in older cohorts. It finds that while Gen Z may intend to act ethically, their choices are often shaped by habit, convenience, risk aversion, and the influence of others, especially in group travel scenarios.

Sharma et al. (2023) explore food waste avoidance among Gen Z travelers in India using a motivation–opportunity–ability framework. The study finds that Gen Z exhibits stronger generative concern (care for future generations), prosocial values, and green consumption attitudes than older cohorts. These attributes significantly predict their intention to reduce food waste. However, the study also highlights the importance of structural support, suggesting that interventions emphasizing environmental and intergenerational consequences may be more effective in influencing Gen Z behavior.

Liu et al. (2025) examine green creativity among Gen Z hotel employees in China, focusing on how green organizational climates can foster environmentally responsible innovation. The study finds that ecological reflexivity and prosocial motivation drive green creativity, but external pressures – particularly financial insecurity – limit the consistency of these behaviors. Gen Z is motivated both by prosocial concerns ("green for others") and personal identity ("green for myself"), making them responsive to initiatives that align sustainability with self-expression.

Liu-Lastres et al. (2025) use a mixed-methods approach to compare sustainable travel behavior among Generations Y and Z in the United States. The findings confirm a common intention–behavior gap, with barriers including high costs, limited access to sustainable options, and insufficient knowledge. Key behavioral influences include perceived consumer effectiveness, established routines, and awareness of sustainable alternatives. The authors argue for practical interventions – such as financial incentives and improved accessibility – to encourage sustainable travel among younger generations.

Synthesis of theoretical approaches used in the special issue

The studies in this special issue draw on a wide range of theoretical frameworks to examine Gen Z's sustainability-related behaviors and attitudes. These span psychological, sociological, and behavioral theories, reflecting the interdisciplinary character of research at the intersection of tourism and sustainability science.

Psychological theories are prominent across several contributions. Self-determination theory, often combined with self-efficacy models, is used to explain the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations behind Gen Z's environmental actions. Lin et al. (2022) demonstrate how eudaimonic goals – linked to personal growth – interact with self-efficacy to drive green travel and environmental citizenship. Likewise, Sharma et al. (2023) apply the motivation–opportunity–ability framework to explore how generativity and prosocial attitudes influence food waste avoidance, emphasizing motivation as a central mechanism. Norm-based theories are another core category. Norm activation theory, and its extensions, are used to examine how personal and social norms shape sustainability behavior. Salinero et al. (2022) and D'Arco et al. (2023) show how internal drivers – such as responsibility and awareness of consequences – interact with external influences like peer expectations and social media. Huang et al. (2022) extend this framework through moral disengagement theory, proposing a dual-route model that explains Gen Z's food waste behavior in terms of both moral obligation and justifications for inaction.

Behavioral intention and decision-making models also feature prominently. Qiu et al. (2022) apply the theory of planned behavior to explore how psychological

ownership and place attachment influence pro-environmental behavior. Liu-Lastres et al. (2025) adapt this theory by incorporating environmental consciousness, perceived consumer effectiveness, and daily habits to investigate discrepancies in sustainable travel among Generations Y and Z. Ribeiro et al. (2023) employ the value–belief–norm theory to show how environmental values and a willingness to make personal sacrifices shape Gen Z's sustainable tourism practices. Sociological and structural theories provide broader context for understanding constraints and collective action. Seyfi et al. (2023) use lifestyle politics theory to examine how self-identity, altruism, and peer influence drive buycotting behaviors, framing consumption as political expression. Seyfi et al. (2024) adopt the theory of constraints to categorize the barriers Gen Z faces in ethical tourism, including cognitive dissonance, interpersonal pressure, and structural limitations, offering a more systemic perspective on behavior–intention gaps. Finally, organizational behavior theories appear in studies focusing on Gen Z in workplace settings. Liu et al. (2025) combine social information processing theory with the componential model of creativity to examine how green organizational climates foster green creativity among Gen Z employees. Their findings point to ecological reflexivity and prosocial motivation as key drivers of sustainability-related innovation.

Synthesis of methodological approaches used in the special issue

The methodological approaches employed across this special issue reflect the diversity of research aims and contexts, spanning quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods designs. Quantitative methods dominate, particularly large-scale surveys aimed at assessing attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. Studies such as Prayag et al. (2022) and Qiu et al. (2022) use survey data to explore environmental attitudes and the role of psychological ownership in shaping responsible behavior. Both employ statistical modeling to identify mediating effects, such as place attachment and perceived responsibility. Experimental and quasi-experimental designs are also used to test causal relationships. For instance, Liu et al. (2025) apply structural equation modeling to examine how green organizational climates foster green creativity among Gen Z hotel employees, while Ribeiro et al. (2023) use moderation and mediation analysis to assess how values and responsibility influence pro-environmental behavior.

Qualitative methods are used to probe deeper into motivations, constraints, and context-specific dynamics. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups allow researchers to examine less visible drivers of behavior, such as moral disengagement and perceived barriers. Huang et al. (2022) use online focus groups to study how situational and moral factors shape Gen Z's food waste behavior. Seyfi et al. (2024) conduct interviews to examine cognitive and social constraints limiting ethical tourism consumption. Thematic analysis is commonly used to interpret findings, as seen in Seyfi et al. (2023), which unpacks how lifestyle politics and peer networks influence buycotting behaviors. Mixed methods designs are employed to bridge quantitative breadth and qualitative depth, particularly when exploring complex constructs. Lin et al. (2022) combine surveys with semi-structured interviews to explore the interaction between eudaimonic environmental goals and self-efficacy, enabling both general pattern detection and deeper insight. Liu-Lastres et al. (2025) integrate survey data with focus

group interviews to explore discrepancies between sustainability intentions and behaviors among Generations Y and Z.

Moving forward: setting an agenda for future research

Over the past decade, research on Gen Z's relationship with sustainability – particularly within tourism – has expanded. As this cohort enters adulthood, their values-based orientation and perceived environmental consciousness have attracted growing academic and industry interest. Gen Z is frequently positioned as a potential driver of sustainable tourism, yet current evidence remains inconclusive. While existing studies have offered useful insights into Gen Z's attitudes, motivations, and consumption behaviors, several gaps persist that are summarized in Figure 1 and explained below which offers directions for future research.

The intention-behavior gap in sustainable tourism practices

One of the most recurring findings in research on Gen Z and sustainable tourism is the gap between pro-environmental intentions and actual behaviors. While many studies report high levels of expressed concern for environmental issues among Gen Z, this concern does not consistently translate into sustainable travel practices. This disconnect has prompted increasing critique of research designs that rely heavily on self-reported intentions. As intentions alone are poor predictors of behavior, scholars have called for a methodological shift toward approaches that measure observed or enacted behavior (Greene & Dolnicar, 2024; Seyfi & Hall, 2024; Viglia et al., 2024). Addressing these limitations is essential for understanding how Gen Z's environmental values operate in real-world tourism settings. Without more accurate behavioral data, it remains unclear whether Gen Z's sustainability claims reflect genuine commitment or normative performance. Furthermore, structural constraints such as rising living costs and job insecurity continue to shape Gen Z's decision-making, often undermining their ability to act in accordance with their values (Deloitte, 2024).

Future research should prioritize longitudinal and observational studies that capture how Gen Z's travel behaviors shift over time and in response to changing economic and social conditions. Tracking behavior rather than intention will allow for a more reliable assessment of Gen Z's role in sustainable tourism and provide clearer insights for policy and industry. This approach is also necessary to identify the conditions under which sustainability intentions are most likely to result in action.

Rethinking generational homogeneity and intragenerational diversity in gen Z

A recurring limitation in current scholarship is the tendency to treat Gen Z as a unified, coherent group. This assumption overlooks the substantial internal variation shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, political orientation, geographic location, and digital access (see Table 1). These dimensions critically influence how sustainability is understood, valued, and enacted within the cohort. For instance, the sustainability priorities of Gen Z in high-income, urban settings are unlikely to mirror those of peers in rural or economically constrained

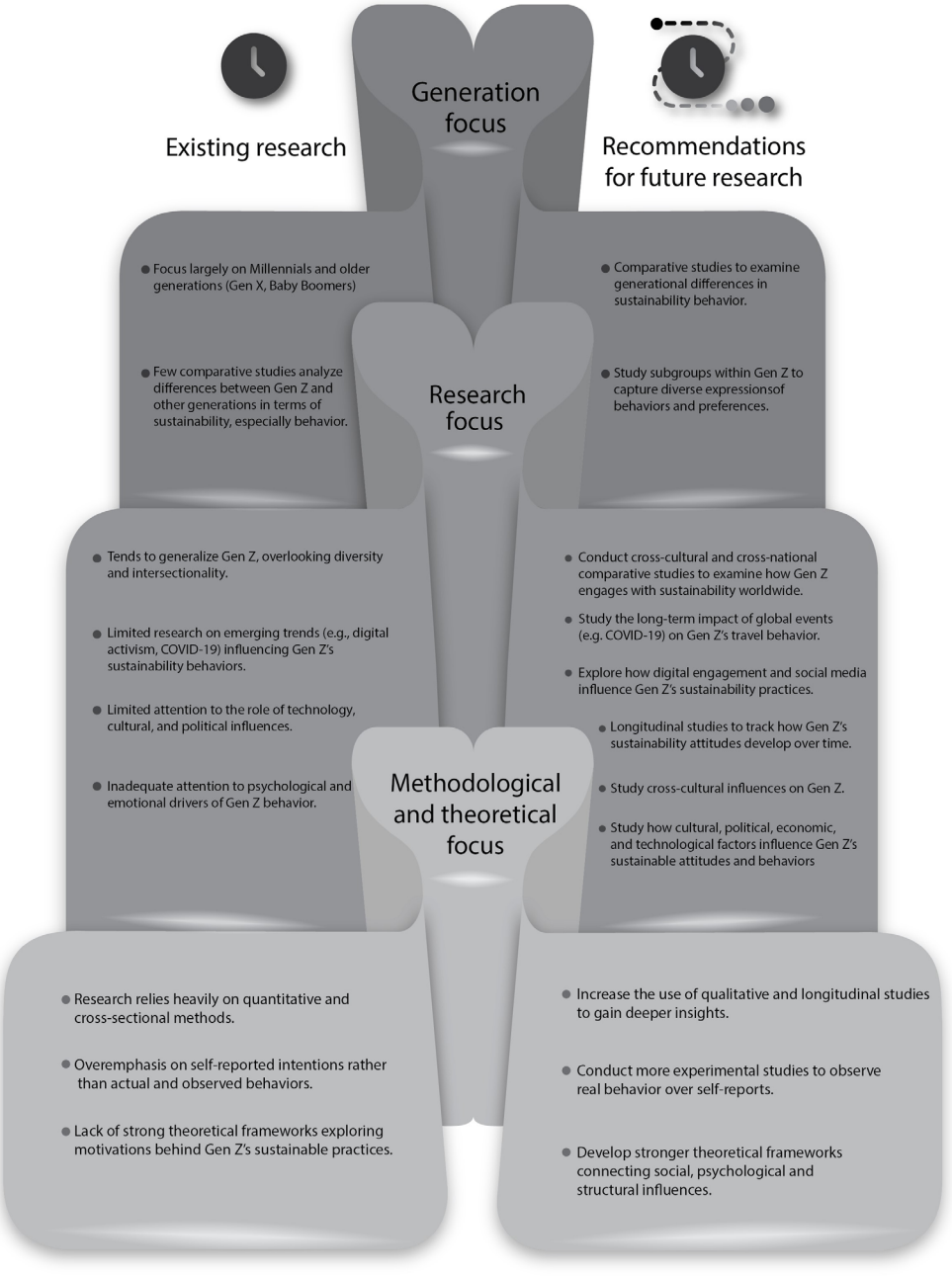


Figure 1. A research agenda for future research.

environments (Seyfi et al., 2024). A more differentiated approach is needed – one that attends to how material conditions, cultural norms, and structural constraints shape both opportunities and limitations for sustainable action. Digital access and media literacy, in particular, introduce further disparities in how Gen Z individuals encounter and interpret sustainability narratives, especially within tourism marketing and online travel platforms.

We argue that future research should move beyond monolithic framings of Gen Z. Comparative studies across regional, class, and cultural contexts are necessary to identify the diversity of experiences and constraints within the generation. Moreover, there is a need to interrogate how the idea of Gen Z as inherently sustainability-oriented has gained traction, often without sufficient empirical grounding. This narrative tends to obscure the unevenness of sustainability engagement and the structural barriers many face.

Engaging with alternative theoretical perspectives – such as practice theory, political economy, or critical media studies – may also provide the tools to challenge essentialist assumptions and uncover the broader systems shaping Gen Z's sustainability behaviors. Such approaches would enable more grounded, context-sensitive analyses, and support more targeted interventions within tourism research and practice.

Contextualizing sustainability across diverse Gen Z settings beyond the Global North

Much of the existing research on Gen Z and sustainable tourism is concentrated in Western or high-income contexts. This geographic and cultural bias limits understanding of how sustainability is approached by Gen Z in the Global South, where economic conditions, cultural norms, and institutional settings differ markedly. Research in English on Gen Z's tourism behavior in Asia, Africa, and Latin America remains scarce, even though sustainability practices and perceptions are shaped by context (Baum et al., 2024). In some settings, sustainable tourism may be perceived as aspirational or inaccessible due to financial constraints or limited awareness (Seyfi et al., 2023). In others, cultural orientations – such as collectivism – may lead to greater emphasis on social or economic sustainability (Davari et al., 2024) through community-based tourism, rather than environmental concerns.

Future research should prioritize cross-cultural comparative studies to better understand how Gen Z tourists from diverse backgrounds engage with sustainability. Such work should avoid importing assumptions from Global North contexts and instead attend to local values, infrastructures, and constraints that shape behavior. In addition, there is a need to confront the contradictions between Gen Z's stated sustainability concerns and the structural barriers that inhibit action. Economic limitations – such as low income, precarious employment, and the high cost of sustainable options – are frequently cited but often treated as personal shortcomings rather than systemic challenges. Future studies should move beyond individual-level explanations and examine how these barriers are embedded in broader economic, policy, and market environments. This shift would allow for a more realistic understanding of Gen Z's capacity to engage with sustainable tourism, especially in regions where structural constraints are more pronounced.

Political consumerism and ethical decision-making

Political consumerism – where individuals make purchasing and travel decisions based on ethical, environmental, or social justice concerns—is often cited as a defining feature of Gen Z's consumption habits (Seyfi et al., 2023). Within tourism,

this includes practices such as boycotting companies perceived as unethical or supporting destinations and businesses aligned with specific values. However, empirical research on political consumerism in tourism remains limited in both scope and depth. While studies such as Seyfi et al. (2023) have begun to examine the motivations behind buycotting behaviors, there is a need for broader analyses that situate these actions within larger political and economic frameworks. Factors such as globalization, corporate social responsibility discourse, and the influence of social justice movements remain underexplored in this context. Ethical decision-making in tourism is also more complicated than often assumed (Huang et al., 2023; Hudson, 2007). Tourists, including Gen Z, frequently deal with competing priorities. A traveler may wish to support environmentally sustainable destinations, for example, but be deterred by higher costs or limited accessibility. Much of the current literature assumes a linear relationship between values and behavior, yet decisions are shaped by a mix of cognitive, emotional, and social factors (Seyfi et al., 2024). These include perceived trade-offs, normative pressure, and the framing of sustainability within marketing and peer discourse.

To better understand how Gen Z navigates ethical dilemmas in tourism, future research should incorporate insights from behavioral economics, psychology, and critical social and political theory. Such interdisciplinary approaches could help unpack the tensions, contradictions, and cognitive dissonance that often characterize sustainability-related decision-making. This shift would allow researchers to move beyond overly simplified models and toward a more realistic understanding of how ethical considerations are weighed in practice. Finally, there is scope to investigate the influence of contemporary justice movements – such as climate activism, decolonial tourism, and anti-extraction campaigns – as well as contemporary trade and geo-political disputes, on Gen Z's travel preferences and brand choices. Understanding how these movements shape political consumerism could offer deeper insight into the evolving relationship between ethics, identity, and tourism consumption in this generation.

Gen Z and the SDGs

Gen Z is frequently associated with the SDGs, often portrayed as a generation aligned with global sustainability efforts (Deloitte, 2024; Yamane & Kaneko, 2021). However, much of this engagement tends to fall within the framework of "weak sustainability" – an approach that endorses sustainability without fundamentally questioning dominant economic models centered on growth and consumption. This limited engagement raises doubts about Gen Z's potential to catalyze the deeper structural transformations required to achieve the SDGs. As Hall (2019) and Hall et al. (2023) argue, Gen Z's approach to sustainability often avoids the more difficult political and economic questions driving environmental degradation. There is little evidence that this cohort, despite its widespread environmental concern, is prepared or positioned to challenge the structural contradictions between economic expansion and ecological limits. Awareness of the SDGs, while widespread, does not necessarily translate into action or meaningful contribution toward their achievement. Furthermore, while many in Gen Z express a desire to work for sustainability-oriented organizations (Deloitte, 2024;

Yamane & Kaneko, 2021), this aspiration often collides with practical constraints. Structural barriers – such as limited job opportunities, economic precarity, and fear of unemployment – undermine their ability to act on these preferences. In many cases, positive attitudes toward the SDGs remain aspirational rather than actionable, including for graduates of tourism and hospitality programs. This disjuncture calls for more critical investigation into how Gen Z understands and operationalizes the SDGs, and whether their actions challenge or reinforce existing systems. Future research should distinguish between symbolic alignment with sustainability goals and substantive contributions to transformative change. It should also examine the structural conditions that shape the possibilities and limits of Gen Z's engagement with the SDG agenda.

Expanding theoretical and methodological approaches

Advancing research on Gen Z and sustainable tourism will require both theoretical innovation and methodological diversification. Current scholarship relies heavily on quantitative, cross-sectional designs that offer limited insight into how sustainability behaviors develop over time or across contexts. While such methods provide useful snapshots, they fail to capture behavioral change or the long-term impact of values and external influences. Longitudinal studies are needed to track the evolution of Gen Z's sustainability practices and assess how they respond to shifting personal, economic, and environmental conditions. In particular, there is scope to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of behavioral interventions – such as gamification, nudging, or social norm framing – as strategies to address the intention–behavior gap. These tools may offer practical applications for destination managers and tourism businesses, but their utility remains underexplored in empirical research. Another priority is to address the geographic and cultural concentration of current studies. Research remains disproportionately focused on the Global North, leaving structural and cultural dynamics in underrepresented regions – particularly in the Global South – largely unexamined. Understanding how local norms, constraints, and institutional settings shape Gen Z's sustainability practices is necessary for building a more globally relevant body of knowledge. Additionally, the intersection between digital technologies and sustainability behaviors remains under-theorized. As AI, blockchain, and platform-based systems increasingly shape tourism experiences, future research should consider how digital infrastructures may enable or constrain sustainable choices. These technologies raise new questions about transparency, behavioral nudging, surveillance, and ethical consumption, especially among digitally fluent Gen Z travelers. Finally, comparative generational studies are needed to place Gen Z's behavior in context. Including preceding and succeeding cohorts would help clarify what, if anything, is distinctive about Gen Z's sustainability practices. Such comparisons could also shed light on continuities and disruptions in environmental engagement as both tourism and planetary conditions evolve. This broader framing would support more robust conclusions and offer relevant insights for policymakers, educators, and industry stakeholders.

Conclusion: Gen Z – pioneers or paradox in sustainable tourism?

This special issue contributes to ongoing debates about Gen Z's role in sustainable tourism by presenting a diverse set of empirical studies that interrogate the gap

between environmental ideals and actual tourism behaviors. While Gen Z is widely regarded as socially and environmentally conscious, the findings across this collection suggest a more complicated picture. Cultural, economic, and technological factors consistently shape the translation of sustainability intentions into meaningful action. As such, Gen Z's role in advancing sustainable tourism remains uncertain – marked as much by promise as by contradiction.

This special issue advances understanding by situating Gen Z's behaviors within broader structural contexts. It highlights that engagement with sustainability is not solely a matter of individual choice, but is mediated by access, affordability, cultural norms, and institutional support. Importantly, the evidence presented suggests that Gen Z's potential to drive transformation cannot be assessed in isolation from the systems and institutions within which they operate. Their ability to influence tourism's sustainability trajectory depends not just on their values, but also on the capacity of policy, education, and industry to support and enable sustainable choices. The question of whether Gen Z can truly become "the sustainable tourism generation" remains open. Their stated commitment is clear, and their digital fluency provides new avenues for activism and engagement. Yet current consumption patterns, economic insecurity, and lifestyle preferences continue to constrain their impact. Growing concerns about employment, housing, and cost of living further complicate their ability to prioritize sustainability.

Nevertheless, if the intention–behavior gap can be narrowed – through structural change, institutional support, and better-designed interventions – Gen Z could yet play a significant role in advancing the sustainability agenda. This special issue provides both a critical foundation and a forward-looking research agenda and calls for sustained academic attention, methodological innovation, and coordinated action across sectors to support Gen Z in shaping a more sustainable tourism future. Whether they will be pioneers or remain a paradox depends on collective efforts to match their aspirations with enabling conditions for change.

Acknowledgment

We would like to sincerely thank the reviewers for their time, availability, and feedback which greatly helped improve the quality of the articles in this special issue. We are also grateful to all the contributing authors to make this special issue possible. This project could not have happened without their excellent work. Additionally, we also thank Mrs. Saeideh Hoveishi for her assistance in creating Figure 1.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Siamak Seyfi**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **C. Michael Hall**: : Conceptualization, Investigation, Validation, Writing – review & editing, Project administration **Marianna Strzelecka**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

None.

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