

Young peoples' environmentally sustainable tourism attitude and responsible behavioral intention

Sarah Schönherr and Birgit Pikkemaat

Abstract

Purpose – Environmental tourism impacts are considered to be unbalanced. The implementation of environmental sustainability focuses on restoring a balance through environmentally responsible behavior. As Generation Z was found in recent studies to exhibit divergent levels of environmentally responsible behavior compared to other generations, but also to have intra-generational differences, this study aims to explore the underlying reasons and explanations behind their attitudes and behavioral attempts.

Design/methodology/approach – Four focus group discussions with young people belonging to Generation Z allow to probe deep into their environmental sustainability orientation.

Findings – The results of this study demonstrate that Generation Z's environmental attitude is triggered by social pressure, social media, as well as by the COVID-19 pandemic. For their touristic behavioral intention, they concentrate predominantly on climate-friendly travel and on-site mobility, waste avoidance as well as emphasizing economic and social sustainability. By furthermore highlighting Generation Z's responsibility ascription to the supply and the demand side, in addition to illustrating the demand for framework conditions to be created from governments and destinations, the knowledge scope on environmental sustainability is expanded.

Originality/value – In particular, this study enriches environmentally responsible behavior research by incorporating the perspective of Generation Z, while it deepens Generation Z's behavioral understanding. Furthermore, the results of this study allow to derive implications for tourism policymakers.

Keywords Gen Z tourists, Environmental responsibility, Tourists' attitudes, Focus groups, COVID-19, Tourism mobility

Paper type Research paper

Sarah Schönherr and Birgit Pikkemaat are both based at Department of Strategic Management, Marketing and Tourism, SME & Tourism, University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria.

青年的环境可持续旅游态度和负责任行为意愿

摘要

目的： 环境旅游影响被认为是不平衡的。环境可持续性的实施侧重于通过对环境负责的行为来恢复平衡。由于最近的研究发现Z一代与其他几代人相比表现出不同的环境责任行为水平，且存在代际差异，本研究探讨了他们的态度和行为尝试背后的潜在原因和解释。

设计/方法/方法： 采用四个焦点小组与Z世代年轻人讨论，深入探究他们的环境可持续性导向。

调查结果： 这项研究的结果表明，Z世代的环境态度是由社会压力、社交媒体以及COVID-19大流行引发的。对于他们的旅游行为意向，他们主要关注气候友好型旅行和现场移动性，避免浪费以及强调经济和社会的可持续性。通过进一步强调Z世代对供给侧和需求侧的责任归因，并阐释政府和目的地对框架条件的需求，扩大了环境可持续性的知识范围。

创意/价值： 特别地，本研究通过纳入Z世代的视角，丰富了环境责任行为研究，加深了Z世代的行为理解。此外，本研究的结果可以为旅游政策制定者提供启示。

关键词 Z世代游客，环境责任，游客态度，焦点小组，COVID-19，旅游流动性

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Resumen

Finalidad: Los impactos medioambientales del turismo se consideran desequilibrados. La implementación de la sostenibilidad medioambiental se centra en restablecer el equilibrio mediante un comportamiento responsable con el medio ambiente. Estudios recientes señalan que la Generación Z muestra niveles divergentes de comportamiento responsable con el medio ambiente en comparación con otras generaciones, pero también presenta diferencias intra-generacionales. Este estudio explora las razones y explicaciones subyacentes a sus actitudes e intenciones de comportamiento.

Diseño/metodología/enfoque: Cuatro grupos de discusión con jóvenes de la Generación Z permiten profundizar en su orientación hacia la sostenibilidad medioambiental.

Conclusiones: Los resultados de este estudio evidencian que la actitud medioambiental de la Generación Z está provocada por la presión social, medios sociales, así como por la pandemia del COVID-19. En cuanto a su intención de comportamiento turístico, se concentran predominantemente en los viajes respetuosos con el clima y la movilidad in situ, evitar residuos, así como en hacer hincapié en la sostenibilidad económica y social. Al destacar la responsabilidad que la Generación Z atribuye a la oferta y la demanda, además de inculcar la demanda para la creación de condiciones marco por parte de gobiernos y destinos, se amplía el alcance del conocimiento sobre la sostenibilidad medioambiental.

Originalidad/valor: En particular, este estudio enriquece la investigación sobre el comportamiento responsable con el medio ambiente al incorporar la perspectiva de la Generación Z y profundizar en la comprensión del comportamiento de esta generación. Asimismo, los resultados de este estudio permiten desarrollar implicaciones para los responsables de las políticas turísticas.

Palabras clave Turistas de la Generación Z, responsabilidad medioambiental, actitudes de los turistas, grupos de discusión, COVID-19, movilidad turística

Tipo de papel Trabajo de investigación

1. Introduction

Prior research has largely concentrated on developing an understanding of tourists' contribution to environmental sustainability via their behavior (Loureiro *et al.*, 2022). Previous studies found that age has a significant influence on environmental behavior and attitudes, although no consensus was reached on the influence of generational cohorts (Prayag *et al.*, 2022). However, young people belonging to Generation Z are described as particularly receptive for environmentally responsible behavior, mainly due to their engagement in social networks (Haddouche and Salomone, 2018). Generation Z succeeds Millennials, and according to Dwivedula *et al.* (2019), Generation Z are those born between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s.

Recently, tourism research has begun to explore Generation Z, as evidenced by the special issue of the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* on the topic of "Generation Z: The sustainable tourism generation?". Corresponding with the need to explore Generation Z (Kaplan, 2020), these studies focused on examining influences on Generation Z's environmentally responsible tourist behavior (D'Arco *et al.*, 2023; Salinero *et al.*, 2022; Seyfi *et al.*, 2022), their motivations (Lin *et al.*, 2022; Pinho and Gomes, 2023), and further compared Generation Z to other generations (Prayag *et al.*, 2022). While D'Arco *et al.* (2023) classified solely two selected proenvironmental behaviors, namely, booking an environmentally friendly hotel and choosing sustainable transport, Salinero *et al.* (2022) examined four dimensions of environmentally friendly tourism behavior but did not link them to Generation Z's environmentally responsible attitudes. Regarding the differences between Generation Z and other generations, Qiu *et al.* (2022) showed that tourists from Generation Z exhibit significantly less environmentally responsible behaviors compared to older generations, while in contrast, Sharma *et al.* (2023) showed that Generation Z tourists exhibit higher levels of food waste avoidance compared to older generations. Prayag *et al.* (2022) emphasized both environmental attitudes and sustainability practices of Generation Z tourists, and not only differences to other generations were shown, but also differences within Generation Z. These different results within Generation Z, but also in comparison to other generations, call for further studies on the backgrounds and underlying reasons of

Generation Z's environmentally responsible attitudes and behavioral intentions. Therefore, we propose the following two research questions:

RQ1. How are the environmentally sustainable attitudes of Generation Z tourists determined?

RQ2. What shapes the environmentally responsible behavioral intentions of Generation Z tourists?

The main objective of this study is to understand responsible tourism holistically from a bottom-up approach by identifying and explaining Generation Z tourists' environmental responsible behavior.

2. Literature review

2.1 Tourists' environmentally responsible behavior intention

Tourists have the greatest potential to improve environmental sustainability, especially through environmentally responsible behavior (Loureiro *et al.*, 2022). The relationship between attitude and behavior has often been studied in research based on the theory of planned behavior or the theory of reasoned action (Lee and Jan, 2015). Following Loureiro *et al.* (2022) environmentally responsible behavior research largely concentrated on studying its characteristics: individual, social and subjective values, behavioral control perception, attitude, place attachment, as well as anticipated emotions. Recent research shows that tourists' environmental attitudes are influenced by user-generated content (Sultan *et al.*, 2021), and user-generated content on social media has been shown to create environmental awareness (Han *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, Wu *et al.* (2021) have recently demonstrated the important role of social influence in regulating the impact of moral variables on environmental behavior.

Although Saleem *et al.* (2021) suggest that tourists' behavioral intention and their self-reported actual behaviors might differ, they found in their study that intention serves as a verified direct predictor of tourists' self-reported environmentally responsible behavior. Lee and Lin (2001) define environmentally responsible behavior as actions to protect the natural environment, respect the local culture and reduce environmental degradation. Research differentiates between site-specific and general environmentally responsible behavior, which suggests that individuals are more likely to behave environmentally responsible at home than on vacation (Barr *et al.*, 2011; Carneiro *et al.*, 2022). General environmentally responsible behavior is manifested in transportation and mobility, recycling, waste avoidance and energy conservation, as well as social behavior with environmental protection, victimism and consumption behavior (Kaiser and Wilson, 2004). Tourists' environmentally responsible behavior comprises of energy conservation and recycling activities (Iwata, 2001; Lee and Jan, 2015).

2.2 Generation Z: the responsible generation?

Today's Generation Z was born and raised in the "digital age" caused by the technological revolution (Caliskan, 2021) and is therefore characterized by a tendency toward technologically mediated services (Chen *et al.*, 2022). According to the stage development theory, human beings develop by being embedded in a particular environment (which includes both education and the individuals who make up that environment) (Holaday, 2002). Generation Z is described as well-educated, technologically equipped, innovative and creative, open-minded, as well as sensitive to social issues (Priporas *et al.*, 2020). However, it is also argued that they do not want to take responsibility and make arrangements when confronted with difficult situations (Gabrielova and Buchko, 2021).

Haddouche and Salomone's (2018) study illustrates that Generation Z respondents talk about environmental concerns affecting their tourism experiences and emphasize cultural discoveries when meeting residents. Research moreover indicates that they perceive

sustainability orientations as favorable, focusing on environmental protection, resource conservation, employee well-being and community engagement (Kaplan, 2020). Generation Z is thus thought of having a stronger contribution to the environment (Lin *et al.*, 2022), although previous research has shown mixed results in terms of generational differences on their impact on sustainability. Carneiro *et al.* (2022) demonstrate that older generations behave more environmentally friendly on holiday in comparison to younger generations. However, Caliskan (2021) show that Generation Z already has a prosustainable lifestyle. They should receive more support as they can contribute to the establishment of a more sustainable lifestyle in general and, in particular, help raise social awareness and understanding of sustainable tourism, which seems to be without alternative in terms of future tourism development.

Focusing on Generation Z's environmentally responsible tourist behavior, studies concentrated on examining influences. However, Salinero *et al.* (2022) were unable to demonstrate a direct effect of subjective norms, while D'Arco *et al.* (2023) identified a significant positive effect of social norms on Generation Z's intention to use sustainable transportation. Nonetheless, D'Arco *et al.* (2023) recognize only one very specific form of responsible tourism behavior (opting for sustainable transportation modes), in contrast to Salinero *et al.* (2022), who follow the more general definition of sustainable tourism at all levels, highlighting proecological, proeconomic, prosocial and procultural sustainable behaviors. Studies have also emphasized very specific influences, and in line with Generation Z's digital focus (Caliskan, 2021; Chen *et al.*, 2022), Seyfi *et al.* (2022) found that Generation Z's political and ethical consumerism is driven by digital media engagement and reflected in their sustainable behavior.

Other studies have centered around exploring Generation Z's motivation for environmental sustainability, with Lin *et al.* (2022) highlighting eudaimonic environmental motivation. In opposition to these findings, Pinho and Gomes (2023) demonstrated a lower interest of Generation Z tourists in sustainable tourism, indicating that they are neither concerned about choosing sustainable destinations nor about practicing environmentally friendly behavior.

Focusing on generational differences, according to Prayag *et al.* (2022), Generation Z tourists differ from Generation Y, X and Baby Boomers in their environmental attitudes and travel behavior, but there are differences within Generation Z as well. While Generation Z tourists focus more on resource conservation, community-building activities and buying local food and environmentally friendly products when traveling, the use of public transport, bicycles and electric vehicles is still low compared to other generations (Prayag *et al.*, 2022). In line, Qiu *et al.* (2022) show that Generation Z has significantly less environmentally responsible behavioral intentions, especially in terms of environmental protection issues, social contact, damage reporting and waste recycling, while in contrast, Sharma *et al.* (2023) found that food waste avoidance behaviors tend to be high among Generation Z tourists compared to older generations. To conclude, recent research on Generations Z's responsible tourism behavior comes up with diverse findings which call for further studies.

3. Methodology

In attempting to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of environmental sustainability among Generation Z tourists, qualitative research is particularly helpful (Nelson, 2017). This study approaches a critical realist paradigm to study the realities and opinions of Generation Z by observing, explaining and interpreting their perceptions (Easton, 2010).

To probe deeply into the attitudes and behavioral intentions of Generation Z, four focus group discussions were conducted (with seven to eight participants) (Wilkinson, 2008; Hennink, 2013). A trained moderator led the discussions, who intended to stimulate discussions between participants, as well as ensured a nonthreatening and permissive group environment to make the focus group participants feel comfortable (Hennink, 2013).

A focus group schedule with questions designed to stimulate in-depth discussions (Hennink, 2013) (see Appendix 1 for the focus group schedule) was prepared. After conducting three focus groups, theoretical saturation was considered to have been reached, which was confirmed with the fourth focus group (Nelson, 2017).

Austrian Generation Z members (for reasons of conductivity) were selected using judgmental sampling based on the following categories: (i) year of birth (Dwivedula *et al.*, 2019) with individuals born between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s; (ii) balanced gender distribution and (iii) different occupations (see Appendix 2 for detailed information about the focus group participants). Approaching Generation Z for participation in the focus groups implies an interest in environmental sustainability, even though no control over the knowledge level about sustainability due to the intention to cover divergent perspectives was pursued (Hennink, 2013; Wilkinson, 2008). Focus groups were conducted online via Zoom due to prevailing COVID-19 regulations and lasted on average 94 min.

The collected data was first transcribed and then analyzed following the flexible pattern matching approach (Bouncken *et al.*, 2021; Sinkovics, 2018), which allowed to match the theoretical patterns of studies onto the gathered data (Kaplan, 2020; D'Arco *et al.*, 2023; Salinero *et al.*, 2022; Priporas *et al.*, 2020; Seyfi *et al.*, 2022; Prayag *et al.*, 2022). In this regard, an initial template (consisting of the theoretical patterns) served as an analytical framework for the matching process (King, 2012). Both researchers then revised this coding template when coding the data, which resulted in merging and reformulating the categories (King, 2012; Bouncken *et al.*, 2021; Sinkovics, 2018).

4. Results

The final coding template (see Table 1) presents the “match” of theoretical and empirical patterns observed.

4.1 Generation Z tourists' environmentally sustainable attitude

Generational peculiarities, individual aspirations, leisure mentality and consequence awareness are identified as manifestations of Generation Z attitudes. Focus group participants further explain that they are influenced by societal constraints, social media as well as the COVID-19 crisis. In the course of the generational aspect, they compare themselves with other generations and thus perceive that their generation tends to be more sustainability-oriented. The discussions show that Generation Z participants perceive it as their responsibility to contribute individually to environmental sustainability. They advocate in particular for a consideration of the individual responsibility.

However, the discussions also reveal a miss-match of environmental attitudes and leisure behavior: “I think traveling is mainly related to relaxation, so for the tourist” (FG4_P3), which does not necessarily fit with sustainability. According to the participating Generation Z members, awareness for sustainable development consequences, and in particular for environmental consequences of tourism development, can be raised through the provision of information. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic was highlighted as an amplifier of sustainability awareness, and social pressure was highlighted by the focus group participants as a determinant: “It's kind of embarrassing if you don't pay attention to the environment” (FG1_P2).

In addition, focus group participants discussed social media. They argued that social media motivates and inspires to act sustainably, but also discourages environmental sustainability:

If you look on Instagram, you find a thousand influencers flying all over the place and escaping the lockdown. Then everyone thinks they'd like to do that, too. Awareness of sustainability gets completely lost in this case. That's why it's sometimes hard to motivate friends to be sustainable because it's actually about the experience. (FG3_P4)

Table 1 Final coding template

Category	Codes	Exemplary quotes
Generation Z tourists' environmentally sustainable attitude	Generational peculiarities (Kaplan, 2020; Kamenidou <i>et al.</i> , 2020)	"I also have the feeling that there are actually quite different generations that have different opinions. We, our young generation, for example, pay more and more attention to sustainability." (FG1_P5)
	Individual contribution	"I think that if you see the whole thing a bit as a mosaic theory, that you say if everyone contributes individually, that is, if everyone does a little bit, and that it doesn't all have to be totally radical, then a lot would have been achieved." (FG3_P2)
	Leisure mentality	"But I think it's much more about what you might do differently or what you might do in your everyday life because I think that at some point holidays no longer have anything to do with holidays if it causes more effort than anything else. I think that this recreation factor or this factor that you experience something should not be completely diminished in some way." (FG3_P1)
	Consequence awareness (D'Arco <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Salinero <i>et al.</i> , 2022)	"I think that this definitely has a lot to do with awareness, especially with informing the population." (FG1_P5)
	COVID-19 pandemic	"I think that the crisis has made many people more aware that it is very important to consider the environment." (FG3_P4)
	Social pressure (Priporas <i>et al.</i> , 2020)	"There is a certain social pressure involved." (FG1_P1)
	Social media (Salinero <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Seyfi <i>et al.</i> , 2022)	"At the same time, there is also intrinsic motivation. But for me personally, for example, I am in a social media bubble, I would almost call it a bubble. I follow a lot of travel bloggers. You just notice that they are starting to pick up this sustainability thing more and more. When you see these "best practice" examples, so to speak, of how you could do it, then I think you are motivated even more and you see that you now simply have to act a little differently." (FG1_P5)
Generation Z tourists' environmentally responsible behavioral intention	Mobility (D'Arco <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Prayag <i>et al.</i> , 2022)	"I avoid travelling by plane in order to be sustainable in some way. When I think that I could go to Salzburg by car or by train, then I make sure that I take the train and so on." (FG3_P3)
	Travel mobility	"I have also done quite a lot of long-distance travel. It is always said that travelling by plane is not as responsible [...]. I have personally tried to compensate for this by, for example, only using public transport on-site, i.e. by taking the bus." (FG1_P5)
	On-site mobility	
	Environmental responsibility (Salinero <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Prayag <i>et al.</i> , 2022)	"From my point of view, I do not travel one hundred percent sustainably. But on-site, for example, I make sure that I don't leave any rubbish behind, which means that I tend to look at the more environmentally responsible." (FG3_P4)
	Economic responsibility (Salinero <i>et al.</i> , 2022)	"For me, it is that on the one hand, you support something economically where it makes sense or is 'right', but on the other hand you also consider your own." (FG3_P1)
	Sociocultural responsibility (Salinero <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Prayag <i>et al.</i> , 2022)	"I think that you can act quite responsibly, especially locally, towards the residents, towards the businesses and also towards other stakeholders." (FG4_P3)
Responsibility ascription	Tourists (D'Arco <i>et al.</i> , 2023; Salinero <i>et al.</i> , 2022)	"Of course, it is also up to the tourists to adapt and to change the demand through small actions." (FG3_P7)
	Providers	"Well, you are always a bit dependent on what is offered." (FG2_P3)
	Destinations	"The DMO is responsible here, they have the role of providing information, so they have to give information to the tourists and create awareness, but they can't really implement sustainability. Of course, they can create awareness or strengthen sustainability and set incentives, but it is up to the stakeholders to ensure that it is really implemented in the long term." (FG2_P1)
	Governments	"I would like to see more responsibility on the part of the government because it should be up to them to create the framework conditions and to promote and advance sustainability." (FG3_P2)

Source: Authors' own creation

4.2 Generation Z tourists' environmentally responsible behavioral intention

For their behavioral attempts on holidays, focus group participants refer in particular to mobility, where they differentiate between travel and on-site mobility. According to Generation Z tourists, there are often no other options for travel mobility, such as air travel (e.g. for long-distance journeys). Participants, however, like to compensate for this with on-site mobility that focuses on public transportation or other responsible on-site behavior. In terms of traveling by air, very low-price tickets are discussed: "Yeah, to be honest, it's just attractive when there are cheap flights" (FG2_P1), and inconvenience, longer durations, and higher cost of air travel alternatives. For their on-site mobility, Generation Z tourists indicate that they avoid flights within destinations.

Focusing on environmental responsibility, there was widespread agreement in the focus group discussions about waste prevention:

Of course, as always, I will make sure that I don't leave a lot of trash behind. That's actually quite important to me. I think you can also do your part very well. (FG3_P4)

In terms of economic considerations, sustainable behavior is perceived as more expensive, as the following quote shows:

I think it's very difficult to have a really sustainable holiday because it often gets more expensive, etc. I think that's often where a lot of people say they'd rather like a cheaper holiday. That makes it harder to convince people of the concept and get them to really be conscious about sustainability, in particular in their travel behavior. (FG3_P4)

Also, purchases of local products were discussed.

Following their sociocultural responsibility, the focus group discussions demonstrated a focus on respecting the culture and residents, and avoiding overtourism as well as supporting small family firms:

Basically, I often stay with host families because I think that's the best way to learn about the culture. If it's a completely different culture, you also learn how to behave and how to treat nature and people with respect. (FG4_P1)

4.3 Responsibility ascription

The focus group participants ascribe levels of responsibility to themselves, by also illustrating shared responsibility with tourism businesses. Furthermore, it is argued that it is an interplay of multiple stakeholders, thus ascribing responsibility also to destinations:

If destinations simply don't manage to create a sustainable offer, in the sense that they don't manage to make the whole supply chain at least partially sustainable, for example, arrival by public transport, accommodation in any new concepts with sustainable hotels, local food, local staff, etc., so if the supply side is not sustainable, then it is simply difficult to act really sustainably as a tourist. (FG1_P3)

However, also contradictory opinions were discussed:

I don't see that the destination management organization (DMO) has any real potential to make a difference other than providing information. (FG2_P1)

In addition, responsibility was allocated to governments in the focus groups:

But I think a lot of it is attributed to government policy. We shouldn't just have a simple market regulation. We even have the EU. I think it is not that difficult, because the problem has been here forever. How can it be that the idea of taxes doesn't work or that certain other regulations don't work either, at least in Europe? (FG3_P7)

5. Discussion and implications

This study highlights Generation Z tourists' role in environmental sustainability. Although [Gabrielova and Buchko \(2021\)](#) pointed out that Generation Z members do not want to take responsibility, as well as [Qiu et al. \(2022\)](#) demonstrated lower tourist environmentally responsible behavioral intentions among Generation Z tourists as compared to other older generations, the results of this study show that the focus group participants perceived their generation as environmentally responsible. In the focus group discussions, they compare themselves in particular to other generations to illustrate their sustainability orientation, which aligns with the findings of [Kaplan \(2020\)](#). However, although [Qiu et al. \(2022\)](#), [Sharma et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Prayag et al. \(2022\)](#) confirmed differences between Generation Z and other generations, [Prayag et al. \(2022\)](#) found differences within Generation Z too. The comparison with other generations could be explained by the stage development theory, where the comparison is with people who determine the environment that normally shapes development ([Holaday, 2002](#)). What is newly highlighted in this study is Generation Z's perception of the importance of individual contributions, even if sustainability did not always coincide with their leisure mentality (known as the gap between behavior at home and during holidays) ([Barr et al., 2011](#); [Carneiro et al., 2022](#)).

Moreover, the focus group discussions reveal that social pressure is a critical factor for their environmental sustainability, which is consistent with the findings of [Priporas et al. \(2020\)](#). They argue that Generation Z tourists are sustainably oriented because of their sensitivity to social issues. However, this contradicts the findings of [Salinero et al. \(2022\)](#) on the lack of support for the influence of subjective norms (involving, i.e. others' expectations). The novelty aspect of this study, however, is that the generation is not only sensitive to social problems but also perceives social pressure for sustainability, which corresponds to the study of [Wu et al. \(2021\)](#) about social influence playing a major role in environmentally responsible behavior. In line with the findings of [Eichelberger et al. \(2021\)](#) about the COVID-19 pandemic triggering tourists' responsible behavior, focus group participants indicated that the crisis triggers their environmental awareness. While in particular environmental awareness was highlighted in this study, other Generation Z studies summarized consequence awareness for sustainable tourism as an internal driver ([Salinero et al., 2022](#); [D'Arco et al., 2023](#)). Moreover, this research shows that social media does not necessarily have an impact on Generation Z's environmentally sustainable attitudes. Opposing to the findings of [Salinero et al. \(2022\)](#), online community memberships did not emerge during the focus groups, while social media was found as an external driver for prosustainable Generation Z tourism behavior, corresponding to digital media engagement highlighted in the study of [Seyfi et al. \(2022\)](#).

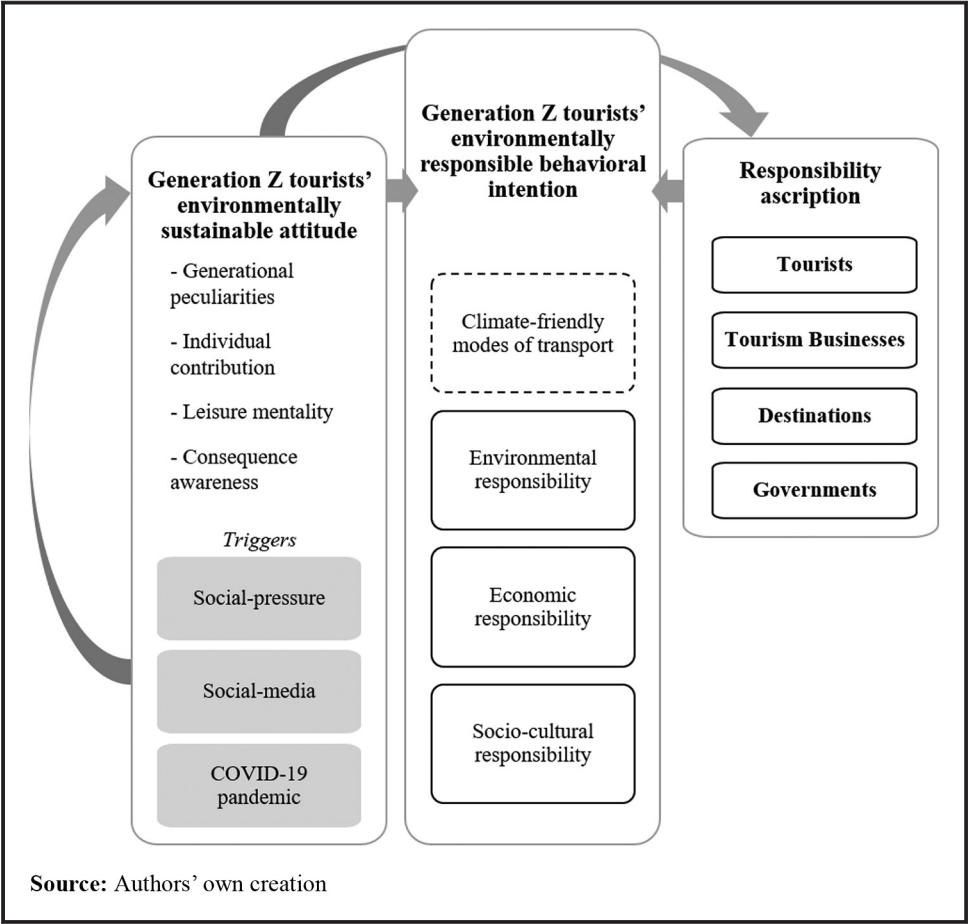
The results of this research show the importance of travel and mobility issues for Generation Z and thus contradict [Prayag's \(2022\)](#) findings that the usage of environmentally friendly transportation is low in Generation Z compared to other generations. In line with [Gühnemann et al. \(2021\)](#) rail and public transport were highlighted. For on-site mobility in particular, the focus groups exhibit that Generation Z tourists avoid air travel to contribute to environmental sustainability ([Gühnemann et al., 2021](#)). However, when tourists cannot avoid flights, for example, because they have to travel long distances, they try to compensate by traveling on-site in a climate-friendly way, in line with the transportation and mobility considerations proposed by [Kaiser and Wilson \(2004\)](#). In contrast, the results also showed that some Generation Z members refuse trains and public transportation because of their inconvenience, which is, however, related to the likelihood that one behaves more environmentally responsible at home than on vacation ([Barr et al., 2011](#); [Carneiro et al., 2022](#)).

Consistent with the environmentally responsible behavior definition of [Iwata \(2001\)](#), the results show that members of Generation Z consider avoiding waste on holidays. In

particular, they emphasize resource saving practices (Prayag *et al.*, 2022), which corresponds to Generation Z tourists being more likely to adapt food waste avoidance behavior than older generations (Sharma *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, sociocultural aspects are mentioned as part of their behavioral intentions. This corresponds to the findings of Kaiser and Wilson (2004), who emphasize social behaviors, as well as to the studies of Lee and Lin (2001) and Prayag *et al.* (2022) who focus on respect for local culture as part of environmentally responsible behavior. The focus group results show that Generation Z considers their own financial capabilities in their environmentally responsible behavior and prefers sustainable businesses as part of their economic responsibility. In summary, these findings correspond to the results of Salinero *et al.* (2022) about prosustainable tourism behavior of Generation Z being present on economic, environmental, social and cultural levels, while contradicting the findings of Pinho and Gomes (2023) about Generation Z not having proenvironmental habits. While the studies by Salinero *et al.* (2022) and D'Arco *et al.* (2023) focus exclusively on the ascription of responsibility to Generation Z tourists themselves, the present study sheds light on perceptions about divergent stakeholders among providers, destinations and governments.

Overall, comparing the research findings with subsequent studies allows us to explain the reasons behind Generation Z's environmentally responsible behavioral intention (see Figure 1), suggesting theoretical implications. Specifically, this study shows that Generation Z's environmentally responsible attitude is expressed by perceiving themselves (compared to other generations) as focused on environmental sustainability (Kaplan, 2020),

Figure 1 Generation Z tourists' environmentally responsible behavioral intention



emphasizing their individual contribution and being aware of the consequences (D'Arco *et al.*, 2023; Salinero *et al.*, 2022). This, however, is not always in line with their leisure mentality. Social pressure (Priporas *et al.*, 2020), social media (Salinero *et al.*, 2022; Seyfi *et al.*, 2022) and the COVID-19 pandemic are triggers for Generation Z's environmentally responsible attitudes and in turn contribute to their environmentally responsible behavioral intentions. They emphasize climate-friendly transportation (Prayag *et al.*, 2022; D'Arco *et al.*, 2023) as part of their environmentally responsible behavioral intention and focus on all levels of sustainable tourism development (Salinero *et al.*, 2022; Prayag *et al.*, 2022). They attribute responsibility not only to themselves (Salinero *et al.*, 2022; D'Arco *et al.*, 2023), but also to tourism companies, governments and destinations, which in turn strengthens their intention to behave in an environmentally responsible manner.

Focusing on responsibility ascriptions, tourism policymakers and DMOs are particularly challenged by Generation Z members. It can be concluded that by providing information about tourism impacts, environmental conditions or resources, destinations can improve the sustainability awareness of Generation Z and thus trigger environmentally responsible behavior. Therefore, by supporting tourism businesses, DMOs can ensure that environmental sustainability is implemented. In this way, they can create framework conditions that support environmental sustainability in a similar way to governments. Regarding governmental responsibility, it can be concluded that governments can contribute to environmental sustainability by developing taxation, regulations and rewards for environmentally responsible behavior.

6. Conclusion

This study sheds light on the underlying reasons behind the environmentally sustainable attitudes of Generation Z based on generational characteristics (Haddouche and Salomone, 2018; Kaplan, 2020), as well as highlights the determinants of the COVID-19 pandemic (Eichelberger *et al.*, 2021), social pressure (Priporas *et al.*, 2020) and social media (Han *et al.*, 2018; Sultan *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, it provides an explanation for Generation Z tourists' environmentally responsible behavioral intention, focusing on environmental, economic and sociocultural responsibility, besides highlighting the importance of on-site and travel mobility. Climate-friendly transportation is seen by the Generation Z tourists as a major contributor to environmental sustainability (Gühnemann *et al.*, 2021).

The generalizability of the research findings is limited due to the qualitative research character, the specificity of the researched group (like the focus on Austrian Generation Z members), as well as the one point in time at which data was collected. Therefore, it is recommended for future research to focus on a quantitative study of Generation Z members to validate these findings. While Samaddar *et al.* (2022) demonstrated that intention to behave environmentally responsible represents a significant predictor of self-reported actual behavior, there may still be a difference between actual behavior and reported behavior. In the focus groups, anonymity is limited, which may also have stimulated this gap. In addition, the focus on Austrian people belonging to Generation Z, with their cultural characteristics, and the COVID-19 crisis presents further research limitations. Thus, further studies with other young people of Generation Z are recommended.

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Appendix 1

Table A1 Overview focus group schedule	
Questions	References
What do you understand by “environmental sustainability”?	Pulido-Fernández <i>et al.</i> (2019)
When you think of environmental responsible holidays, what comes to mind?	
What do you consider to be the good things about being environmentally friendly?	Su <i>et al.</i> (2018); Musavengane (2019)
What do you think are negative things related to practicing environmental sustainability?	
How do you feel about practicing environmentally friendly tourism?	
How do you define environmentally responsible tourist behavior?	
In your opinion, who has the greatest responsibility toward the environment – us as consumers, the government or the producers? Why?	Mazhenova <i>et al.</i> (2016)
What is your contribution to environmental responsible tourism?	
Please describe your generation in terms of your environmental sustainability orientation?	Kaplan (2020); Robinson and Schänzel (2019)
What do you think, how does your generation differ in terms of environmentally responsible tourist behavior?	
Source: Authors own creation	

Appendix 2

Table A2 Overview focus group participants

#	Focus group	Participant	Occupation	Gender	Age
1	Focus group 1	P1	Student	Male	26
2	Focus group 1	P2	Employee	Female	23
3	Focus group 1	P3	Trainee	Male	18
4	Focus group 1	P4	Employee	Female	28
5	Focus group 1	P5	Employee	Male	26
6	Focus group 1	P6	Student	Female	24
7	Focus group 1	P7	Student	Female	26
8	Focus group 1	P8	Student	Male	20
9	Focus group 2	P1	Student	Male	28
10	Focus group 2	P2	Employee	Female	22
11	Focus group 2	P3	Employee	Female	27
12	Focus group 2	P4	Student	Male	28
13	Focus group 2	P5	Trainee	Male	19
14	Focus group 2	P6	Student	Female	21
15	Focus group 2	P7	Employee	Female	23
16	Focus group 2	P8	Employee	Female	23
17	Focus group 3	P1	Employee	Female	23
18	Focus group 3	P2	Student	Female	19
19	Focus group 3	P3	Employee	Female	28
20	Focus group 3	P4	Trainee	Female	18
21	Focus group 3	P5	Student	Female	24
22	Focus group 3	P6	Trainee	Female	23
23	Focus group 3	P7	Employee	Male	26
24	Focus group 3	P8	Employee	Male	22
25	Focus group 4	P1	Student	Female	27
26	Focus group 4	P2	Employee	Female	27
27	Focus group 4	P3	Employee	Male	28
28	Focus group 4	P4	Student	Female	22
29	Focus group 4	P5	Student	Male	19
30	Focus group 4	P6	Employee	Female	21
31	Focus group 4	P7	Trainee	Male	18

Source: Authors' own creation

About the authors

Sarah Schönherr is a Post-Doc University Assistant at the Department of Strategic Management, Marketing and Tourism at the University of Innsbruck. Sarah holds a PhD in Management. Her research interests include residents' attitudes toward tourism, quality of life in tourism, as well as responsible and sustainable tourism. Sarah Schönherr is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: sarah.schoenherr@uibk.ac.at

Birgit Pikkemaat is an Associate Professor at the Department of Strategic Management, Marketing and Tourism at the University of Innsbruck. She worked for several years in the tourism industry. Her research interests involve the area of innovation in tourism, destination management and development and small- and medium-sized businesses.

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