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Generation Z consumer behaviour and hotel branding: exploring the role of values, corporate identity and trust

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the evolving role of hotels as spaces for social interaction and meaningful engagement, extending beyond their traditional function of accommodation. Specifically focusing on Generation Z, it investigates how the values, beliefs and responsible corporate identity of hotel brands significantly influence consumer behaviour. The study employs a quantitative, descriptive methodology, utilising an online survey with Likert-scale questions. A sample of 151 Dutch respondents was analysed to gain insights into the preferences and expectations of Generation Z consumers. The findings underscore the importance of aligning hotel branding with the brand's value proposition to foster trust, ultimately influencing the choice of hotels. Values that encompass environmental and community policies hold significant importance for this cohort. Authenticity and personalisation are crucial for creating the unique experiences that Generation Z desires. It is essential that these elements are reflected in all aspects of branding, communication and operations. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of Generation Z's impact on the hospitality industry and provides valuable insights for effective hotel branding strategies.

KEYWORDS: ESG, Gen Z, hotel trends, marketing, post millenials

Introduction

Shifts in demographics have the potential to impact tourism in a direct or indirect manner (Robinson & Schänzel, 2019). The whole idea of tourism adapts and evolves in response to prevailing cultural norms (Monaco, 2018). Given the varying impacts of history on individuals of different age groups, scholars have adopted an "age-location" perspective. This shared experience gives rise to social cohorts, which in turn determine events and, ultimately, social movements (Alwin & McCammon, 2003). According to Auguste Comte, the generational shift that occurs when each succeeding generation replaces the previous one with a fresh set of ideas and perspectives is what drives society's growth (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020). In addition, Huijsmans et al. (2014) further emphasised this perspective, stating that the actions of young individuals are recognised as a possible catalyst for change. Therefore, the future growth of the hospitality sector is contingent upon the industry's ability to comprehend the social and demographic trends that impact the behaviour of travellers (Moscardo et al., 2010).

Individuals born from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s are referred to as Generation Z and are expected to bring the most significant generational shift, which is partly attributed to the technological developments that they have experienced since their youth. As the world is heading towards a "demographic metabolism", with Generation Z making up 32% of the world's population (Stylos et al., 2021), this group will gradually move up

the population pyramid and eventually take the place of the older generation (Vieira et al., 2020). Hence, their purchasing power is constantly increasing and, for example, they already contribute $44 billion to the US economy (Dimitriou & AbouElgheit, 2019). Although this demographic cohort is poised to become a powerful and influential consumer, marketers and online advertisers face a significant challenge in creating tailored campaigns to attract and engage them (Munsch, 2021). A company's marketing strategy is heavily influenced by demographic and social trends, as well as shifts in the values, perceptions and consumption patterns of each cohort (Yeoman et al., 2012).

Generation Z exhibits unique consumer preferences and values when compared to previous generations, as evidenced by studies conducted by Puiu (2016) and Desai and Lele (2017). The first generation of the 21st century, Generation Z, grew up in a world of social media and mobile devices, influenced by important issues such as globalisation, the 2008 financial crisis, climate change and technology (European Travel Commission, 2020). They are distinguished by their commitment to moral and ethical principles, with a high sense of responsibility towards the global community and the environment (Vieira et al., 2020). In comparison to other generations, Generation Z is considered the most financially sophisticated and budget-conscious travellers, always on the lookout for packaged deals and promotions (Huijsmans et al., 2014; Robinson & Schänzel, 2019), which explains their extensive research to identify the best value-for-money options. According to the Pew Research Center's (2020) survey, Gen Z is more diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, has

a high proportion of non-heterosexual orientation, and accepts gender fluid identities. Furthermore, Talbot (2021) highlights the importance of authenticity in Generation Z consumers' evaluation of products and services, as they seek a sense of trust from the brands and understand what it stands for.

Hence, it is undeniable that companies need to gain better insight into the needs and desires of future guests so that hotel brands can tailor their offerings to meet the preferences of this demographic. The main purpose of this research is to shed light on the attitudes and beliefs of Generation Z towards the hospitality industry and explore their impact on the travel sector. This study will explore the criteria that influence the younger generation in choosing a hotel brand and will investigate whether there is a correlation between Generation Z values and hotel choice. In parallel, the study attempts to explore the marketing factors that influence the purchasing behaviour of this age group. It is apparent that the preferences of Generation Z have played a significant role in shaping some of the most prevailing trends and innovations observed in this sector and this will be reviewed in this study.

Literature review

Developments/innovations in the hospitality industry
The hotel industry is constantly evolving due to the emergence of new trends and technologies and shifts in social and demographic factors. The unprecedented effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the hotel industry is widely recognised. Unexpectedly though, the pandemic has prompted people to become more environmentally conscious and has impacted individual behaviour towards sustainable consumption (Valenzuela-Fernández et al., 2022). In response to these concerns, the industry has undertaken a variety of initiatives, including the adoption of eco-labels, the implementation of sustainable practices, the establishment of ecological management systems and the incorporation of sustainability into strategic plans (Abdou et al., 2020).

There are many certification programmes for the hospitality industry, and one of them is the environmental, social and governance (ESG) certification, which provides sustainability criteria for hotels to evaluate and benchmark performance while gaining industry-wide recognition for their efforts. The term "sustainability" is often used by hotels to publicise their corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives emphasising the environment, although the concept of CSR encompasses a broader range of dimensions, such as economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic considerations (Carroll, 1979). The emerging idea is that corporations have responsibilities beyond mere profitability as their social role in the community expands. They are expected to care for their employees, the greater society and the environment along with their investors and consumers, which led to the concept of CSR (Martínez et al., 2013). CSR initiatives have the potential to enhance a company's brand image and reputation, thereby differentiating it from competitors in a highly competitive market (Serra-Cantallops et al., 2017).

Technological advancements have radically altered the hotel sector, providing unprecedented opportunities. The rise of information technologies (IT) — a variety of digital technologies that facilitate the acquisition, transmission, storage and manipulation of data across computer networks (Ezzaouia & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2020) — has enabled companies to gather meaningful customer data and improve communication and social interaction with consumers. Hence, these developments in digital and smart technologies play an integral role in significantly differentiating and improving services and products, leading to a personalised consumer experience. Contactless features, augmented reality (AR), the Internet of Things (IoT) and location-based services are some examples of the current applications in the hospitality industry that have reshaped day-to-day operations (Skift & Oracle Hospitality, n.d.). According to the Skift & Oracle Hospitality report (n.d.), comfort and convenience are the key elements that guests continue to seek during their stay in a hotel. This has escalated due to digital transformation. Generation Z is characterised by interests in innovation and convenience (Stylos et al., 2021), thereby forcing hotel businesses to adapt to maintain competitiveness.

In recent years, the idea of tourism and travel has not been associated solely with leisure time, or an escape from everyday life. Instead, as Monaco (2018) argued, travel has taken on a more holistic and purposeful approach for younger generations. Specifically, they see travel as a means of personal development while interacting with new environments, engaging with new cultures and socialising. This is demonstrated by their preferences in terms of accommodation and travel, which deviate from traditional tourism (Băltescu, 2019). There has been an increase in the diversity of hotel categories, such as the emergence of "lifestyle" hotels. These hotels are distinguished by their contemporary design and architecture, along with additional auxiliary services that prioritise health and life enrichment (Fawaz, 2015). Key features that are notable in these hotels are the transformation of the lobby into a social and work space with the presence of a bar. Terraces, rooftops and poolside bars are other beverage outlets guests can find in a lifestyle hotel. Often, events will take place in the facilities of the hotel, encouraging guests to join in and socialise with each other, creating a vibrant and lively atmosphere (Fawaz, 2015). Wellness amenities such as yoga rooms, spa services and 24-hour fitness centres have also burgeoned. These additions aim to create an environment that fosters interpersonal connections and favours life enrichment, revitalisation and creativity (Fawaz, 2015). A perspective supported by Stylos et al. (2021) states that Generation Z is known to be eager for unique and authentic experiences.

Therefore, the evolving hotel industry, prompted by shifts in social and demographic factors, has responded to the growing demand of Generation's Z preferences which are shaping the guest experience. The following section outlines the importance of personalisation and this generation's inclination towards diversified and immersive travel experiences.

Hospitality preferences of Generation Z
Personalisation is a key factor for this generation and heavily shapes their hotel experience (Vieira et al., 2020). The employment of customer relationship management (CRM) and customer experience management (CEM) platforms is on the rise, with the aim of generating tailored experiences (Alexandridou et al., 2019). Knowledge management is an essential component of an effective CRM system. This refers to the conversion of consumer data into knowledge and then building personalised relationships with the guests (Mahmoud et al., 2022). The implementation of these systems allows hotels to customise their offerings and promotions and automatically provide services that meet the individual's specific needs (EHL

Insights, n.d.). This is supported by Vieira et al.'s (2020) assertion that Generation Z pursues the best quality and price deals.

This generation has moved away from conventional mass tourism towards a more diversified and personalised experience, and this is driven by their interest in discovering and getting in touch with new cultures at their travel destinations (Monaco, 2018). Therefore, hotel brands are emphasising the interaction between the visitor, the location and the locals to create memorable experiences since Generation Z desires greater immersion in local cultures (Dimitriou & AbouElgheit, 2019).

The hotel and travel sector have seen a dramatic increase in the demand for wellness products and services, and this is reported as one of the fastest-growing market segments. The adoption of the holistic wellness concept in hospitality has generated an expanded set of services, from sauna and spa services to yoga and longevity classes. Mental and physical health is of great importance for Generation Z since they are considered the "ultimate wellness consumers" (Stylos et al., 2021). According to Stylos et al. (2021), Gen Z individuals reported that the primary factor contributing to their happiness was their physical and mental well-being. According to the findings of the European Travel Commission's (2020) research, 48% of the respondents indicated that they preferred engaging in wellness-related activities during their travels.

Marketing and Generation Z

Websites, social media, online search engine advertising and mobile marketing are some of the channels used to reach the intended target market, and unlike traditional marketing, digital marketing is constantly upgrading and adding new features to improve its effectiveness (Mehmood Dar & Tariq, 2021). Brand authenticity is fundamental to today's marketing and is a reaction to modern hyperreality and globalisation (Pattuglia & Mingione, 2018). Trust is a valuable component for brands to be seen as authentic, and trust is built when brands are true to their values and the customers they serve. Thus, authenticity is a significant part of establishing brand affinity. This refers to the alignment of the core brand principles with the ideology and identity of Generation Z, which is linked to purchase intention (McKeever et al., 2021). Campagna (2022) indicates that a brand's socially responsible activities have an impact on consumers' attitudes and perceptions. Furthermore, Generation Z's values are rooted in equality and inclusion of all people and they expect a corresponding brand commitment and communication, confirming the importance of brand affinity (McKeever et al., 2021).

Generation Z is highly critical and well-informed because of their ability to research information while using multiple sources to find credible information and compare it with other options before arriving at a decision (Vieira et al., 2020). As a result, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is considered a powerful marketing tool that influences consumers' product evaluations and purchase intentions (Leung et al., 2015). Additionally, social media reinforce the power of eWOM while consumers are actively participating and engaging with the brand. This has also facilitated the emergence of "influencer marketing" which describes the practice of social media users promoting goods and services and who have built up an extensive following via their own marketing efforts and the content they share (Stylos et al., 2021). The success of influencer marketing lies in the trust and credibility of social media influencers, which is perceived

as authentic and relevant marketing by Generation Z (Munsch, 2021). Regarding paid advertising on the internet, views among researchers are ambiguous. According to McKee et al. (2023), privacy concerns have the potential to influence individuals' attitudes regarding the way brands collect and employ data for the purpose of tailoring their marketing efforts. On the other hand, Dewi et al. (2022) argue that social media advertising is beneficial if it is tailored to the users' preferences and interests.

Generation Z has several distinct characteristics that arise from the socio-economic era of their formative years (European Travel Commission, 2020). In addition, their exposure to technology has drastically altered their consumer behaviour and marks a profound shift across generations (Fromm & Read, 2018). These changes have affected the hospitality industry, necessitating its adaption to meet the preferences of future customers. The objective of the research is to understand how Generation Z influences the future of hotels based on their values and preferences. This study seeks to provide insights into the consumer culture of this demographic and to guide marketers in adapting their goals and marketing approach accordingly.

Project definition and research questions

The problem statement has been composed as follows: To what extent does the consumer behaviour of Generation Z contribute to the shaping of hotel branding strategies?

To resolve the underlying issue, the following research questions are posed:
1. To what degree do the brand values of hotels influence the consumer decision-making process of Generation Z?;
2. What are the prominent hotel trends that significantly impact the consumer decision-making process of Generation Z?; and
3. What crucial factors must be considered when formulating marketing strategies targeting Generation Z?

Methodology

In this study, a descriptive quantitative approach was utilised to address the impact of Generation Z on the hospitality industry. The quantitative method emphasises collecting and then analysing numerical data using mathematical methods. Furthermore, neither the surroundings nor feelings are taken into consideration in this method (Rahi, 2017). By using this type of analysis, the purchase intention preferences of Generation Z towards the hotel sector and the adaptability of the hotels can be determined.

A survey was the chosen instrument for obtaining quantitative data and the responses were gathered through a structured survey to ensure standardisation. The survey was divided into three sections: "Hotel goals", "Hotel trends" and "Marketing". Each category consisted of a set of five questions. Respondents were asked to express their opinions on two types of questions, the closed-end questions (multiple choice) and scale questions that were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("highly unlikely/extremely not important") to 5 ("highly likely/extremely important").

Generation Z is defined in this research as those born between 1996 and 2010 (Monaco, 2018). The survey assesses the subgroup of Generation Z, which includes those 18 to 27 years old, as they are the most likely to independently make purchasing decisions. The chosen sampling technique was non-probability

sampling. Specifically, convenience sampling was used in which respondents were chosen because they were easy to reach. This research was conducted in the library of the city of Alkmaar in The Netherlands. This site was chosen because of the high number of visits and the diversity of people belonging to this group. The questionnaire was designed using the online platform "freeonlinesurveys.com" and the participants were able to access it by scanning the QR code.

To analyse the quantitative data, SPSS was utilised. The research presented the descriptive variable data, including measures of mean and standard deviation, to ascertain the degree of significance or likelihood that certain factors have on the purchase decision. In addition, the results of Pearson correlation analysis are presented.

Results and discussion

A total of 201 individuals participated in the survey, out of which 27 respondents were excluded due to not meeting the age requirements, and 23 failed to complete the survey, resulting in 151 valid responses. The data indicates that 57.6% of the participants are female, 39.7% are male and 2.6% are non-binary. The average age is 21.77 years.

The influence of hotel goals in the consumer decisions of Gen Z
Data revealed that there is a favourable reaction towards hotel brands that implement practices for the greater good and whose values are not solely centred on the company's well-being. The alignment of personal values with those of the hotel brand is evident, as indicated by a mean score of 3.25 and a standard deviation of 0.988. The results of the survey indicate that 34.4% of the participants selected the response option "neutral", whereas 35.8% chose the response option "important" when asked how important it is for a hotel brand's values to be compatible with their own.

Additionally, this outcome is moderately reflected in the response to the question of whether customers would consider booking a hotel brand because of its CSR programmes and principles, where 31.8% of the participants responded "likely" and 37.7% "neutral". When questioned regarding their willingness to pay higher rates for a hotel brand that reflects their principles, a considerable proportion of 36.4% opted for an amount of "€20". However, 26.5% chose "none", while 23.2% chose "€50". These results indicate that despite being budget-conscious travellers, this generation is mindful of the representation of their principles and greatly prioritises them over finances (Huijsmans et al., 2014). The findings of the Pearson correlation indicate a moderate relationship between the importance of brand values and booking consideration with a significant correlation ($N = 151$, $r = 0.531$, $p < 0.001$). This highlights the crucial role of brand values in the hotel brand selection and confirms Thomas's (2022) assertion that customers are willing to pay higher prices for their accommodation when the hotel adopts CSR policies. On the other hand, a weak correlation is illustrated between the inclination to pay a higher price and the brand values of the hotel ($N = 151$, $r = 0.319$, $p < 0.001$).

The findings indicate that Generation Z respondents prioritise "environment" as the most crucial factor when selecting a hotel brand, with a percentage of 44.8%. "Community" follows with 23.2%, while "diversity' ranks third with a percentage of 17%. As depicted by nearly 50% of the participants, it is evident that this

generation is incredibly concerned about the environment and society, leaving "technology" fourth and last.

Despite the evidence indicating a strong inclination towards environmental consciousness and CSR policies, the majority of respondents expressed a low likelihood of conducting research to assess the implementation of CSR strategies prior to making a hotel reservation, with 27.8% selecting "unlikely" and 25.2% selecting "highly unlikely". Even though this generation is critical and well-informed, according to Vieira et al. (2020), the outcome is inconsistent with the literature. The findings suggest that despite Generation Z's interest in brand values and CSR initiatives, their research skills are primarily geared towards recommendations, reviews and best value-for-money options before completing a purchase (Huijsmans et al., 2014; Leung et al., 2015; Robinson & Schänzel, 2019). The following section examines the factors that influence Generation Z's hotel brand selection. The significance of environmental concerns and social impact is emphasised, along with the significance of socialisation and engagement, in combination with digital technologies that influence the decision-making process.

Key hotel trends that affect the consumer decision of Gen Z
The primary hotel trends that significantly influence the choice of a hotel brand were investigated. The results revealed that the factor with the highest mean score was "socialisation and engagement", with 41.7% of the participants considering it to be "important" for their decision and 27.8% saw it as "highly important". Fawaz (2015) noted that the development of "lifestyle" hotel brands is intended to create a setting that fosters socialisation and connection. This rising number of "lifestyle" hotel brands can be attributed to the desire of the current generation to engage with new cultures and socialise during their travels, thus contributing to an authentic and purposeful experience that is particularly meaningful.

However, when the hotel's key factor "socialisation and engagement" is analysed alongside the consideration of booking a hotel brand that aligns with participants' values, the strength of the relationship is weak. The correlation with the attribute "environmentally friendly" exhibits the highest degree of strength in comparison to other key hotel factors, although still weak. This finding is reasonable, given that the category of "environment" received the highest rating among the criteria for hotel booking. Furthermore, there is a relatively weak correlation between the implementation of "digital/smart technologies" and the inclination to select a hotel brand based on its values and CSR policies. This emphasises the intricate relationship between technology and hotel selection, which takes into account values and corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies. The incorporation of digital technologies holds immense potential for enhancing the comprehensive guest experience, as indicated in a report for 2025 by Skift and Oracle Hospitality, a commercial enterprise examining the hospitality industry (Skift & Oracle Hospitality, n.d.). Additionally, the variable "personalisation" showed a moderately weaker correlation with booking a hotel due to its values and CSR initiatives. Nevertheless, this finding still indicates an interaction between these two variables, which underlines the importance of customisation to meet the needs of the customer and provide tailored promotions. In the category of "wellness services", no significant association was observed between the decision to book a hotel brand and its values and CSR initiatives. Nonetheless, the mean score was moderate with

3.22 and a high standard deviation of 1.089. This suggests that the inclination of participants towards wellness is highly varied.

Guidelines for marketing to Generation Z

Personalised advertising was evaluated, with 43% choosing "likely" regarding its influence on their choice of hotel. This finding reinforces McKee et al.'s (2023) assertion that Generation Z employs various marketing avoidance methods such as utilising digital blocking software when the brand messaging fails to align with their personal feelings and lifestyle. Personalisation, however, is highly valued by members of this group due to the effectiveness of services that are tailored to an individual's specific needs. As a budget-conscious generation, Generation Z is very interested in promotions and packaged deals (Huijsmans et al., 2014; Robinson & Schänzel, 2019). Therefore, personalised advertising is arguably a valuable tool as it enables the delivery of tailored promotions that are aligned with the preferences and interests of Generation Z.

Regarding the effect of influencers on hotel selection, the results reveal a predominantly unfavourable outcome, with 27.8% selecting "unlikely" and 22.5% selecting "highly unlikely". However, it is important to note that there was a fluctuation in opinions, as indicated by the standard deviation. For instance, 20.5% of participants held a different viewpoint by selecting the option "likely". When examining the correlation of the age group "18 to 22" and "23 to 27" and recommendations provided by influencers, this is the only outcome where both groups do not fully concur. The individuals belonging to the age group "23 to 27" thought it was of "highly unlikely" (32.7%). The reason for this outcome could be attributed to the comparatively lower probability of establishing a relationship with influencers among people belonging to this age group (Bakker, 2018).

The "marketing strategy match the brand value" and "authentic marketing approach" both scored a mean of 3.42, which means that 44.7% and 42.1% selected "important" respectively. The category "influencers" displays the lowest mean score of 2.30, while having the highest standard deviation score of 1.119, indicating that 27.6% of the respondents expressed that is "unlikely" to base their hotel booking choices on influencers whom they trust.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings reveal that Generation Z exhibits a significant inclination towards the values and principles that a hotel brand embodies, as well as its objectives and its overall purpose. Nonetheless, it is imperative that such values and the actions taken to achieve them are accompanied by authenticity rather than solely used as a means to attract customer. Establishing trust with this demographic is of major importance and is achieved when the hotel brand remains true to its values. The environment and community are two criteria on which individuals belonging to this age category place a significant emphasis. Hotel businesses should implement environmentally friendly practices in their hotel operations which could potentially have a greater impact on the environment and are consistent with their brand's value proposition. It is essential to implement a transparent communication approach since authenticity and being genuine are particularly important to Generation Z.

In addition to the environmentally friendly practices implemented by the hotel brand, Generation Z seeks social interaction and engagement while travelling and through their accommodation, which will impact their overall experience. This generation values unique experiences and authenticity, which means that hotels need to offer more than just a place to sleep. They want to feel connected to the local culture and community and expect hotels to provide opportunities for this kind of engagement.

Lastly, personalisation is key to this generation, therefore it is recommended that hotel businesses that have developed their own members' platform allocate further resources to these systems, which will facilitate the provision of tailored services and offers and will ensure an effective CRM platform. With respect to the optimal promotional strategy, personalised advertising proves to be the most effective due to its ability to accurately target users based on their preferences or characteristics, thereby generating a higher return on investment.

Limitations

This study shows limitations in terms of gender balance and age distribution, with certain age groups being underrepresented relative to others. As a result, the study lacks equal gender representation, as well as equal representation in the age group intervals of Generation Z. Additionally, the chosen sample method was convenience sampling which may result in a lack of participant diversity and possibly sampling bias. In relation to the respondents' origins, the participants in this study were primarily Dutch, as their nationality was not explicitly verified. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that the study was conducted in Alkmaar, which may not be a representative location in terms of reflecting the broader demographics of the entire population. The limitations of the cultural and economic factors of the sample country should be considered when generalising the findings beyond the specific context of Alkmaar in The Netherlands.

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