



# Travel Trends Among Generation Z: A Focus on Knowledge-Based Sustainable Development

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the impact of tourism on environmental degradation has intensified the focus on knowledge-based sustainable development, as research increasingly identifies tourism as a major contributor to environmental pollution and damage. This study explores Generation Z's preference for nature-based tourism, a group known for their environmental consciousness. The present study aims to identify the travel trends of Generation Z youth in the context of sustainable knowledge-based development. Questionnaires were administered to students and masters from tourism-specialized higher education institutions, and structured interviews were conducted with representatives of institutions and organizations in the tourism sector. The research area is the North-East Region of Romania. Findings indicate a relationship between the travel preferences of young people towards natural settings and their awareness of environmental quality. Therefore, there is an increase in the awareness of natural values among young tourists of this generation and a growing involvement from institutions and organizations in the tourism sector. The study contributes to existing literature by identifying sustainable travel trends among Generation Z, analyzed from both the perspectives of young people, and representatives of institutions and organizations within the tourism sector.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The World Tourism Organization (UNTWO, 2019) has published consumer trends in tourism services, among which the most relevant is the trend towards a healthy lifestyle, reflected in the tourism industry through wellness tourism, sports tourism, and nature walking tourism. The tourism sector has grown significantly, and tourists' preferences are changing. They are becoming increasingly interested in protecting the environment (Brînză & Butnaru, 2020), and raising awareness about sustainable tourism (Melinte et al., 2023). Therefore, as shown by researchers, the ecological aspect of studying tourism as a system has great relevance (Baloch et al., 2023).

Tourism is also a knowledge-based industry that provides, manages, and shares a large amount of information, generating new knowledge (Fan, 2024). In this context, knowledge-based management can help tourism organizations face various challenges by promoting sustainable tourism development. The behavior of tourists during their travel experiences is a process of creating and sharing knowledge. Thus, increased attention is being paid to sustainable development based on knowledge, especially since studies have shown that tourism is one of the main contributors to environmental pollution and damage (Butnaru et al., 2022; Ștefănică et al., 2021). The challenge of managing tourism lies in determining the threshold of tolerability, which is defined as the maximum number of tourists that can visit an area without causing harm to the natural environment. A high frequency

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of tourism can lead to the degradation of the natural environment, potentially causing irreversible damage (Jarolímková & MIENAT project team, 2023). Thus, tourism development actions in certain regions should be implemented with consideration for the future of tourism and the local conditions and particularities that determine its current and potential state (Ianioglo & Rissanen, 2020).

Moreover, it has been observed that tourists are increasingly interested in the concept of nature-based tourism; they tend to travel to quiet, natural places where they can have new experiences and emotions (Niță et al., 2023). At the same time, specialists in sustainable development have analyzed the impact of tourist activities that adopt responsible behavior towards the natural environment, thus promoting forms of travel with reduced environmental impact (Chenoweth, 2009; Otero & Ringertz, 2022). Related to this concern, studies conducted globally have also shown a good understanding and receptivity regarding sustainable travel among young tourists (Buffa, 2015; Cavagnaro et al., 2021; Melinte et al., 2023).

The objectives are the analysis of Generation Z's preferences for nature-based tourism and the study of gender differences in relation to tourist destinations. The novelty of this study lies in its use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods to identify the travel trends of the young Generation Z in the context of knowledge-based sustainable development.

The article is organised into the following sections: introduction, analysis of the literature, research methodology, results, discussions, and conclusion. The results obtained are of particular interest regarding nature-based tourism, especially because a study of this research subject has not yet been conducted in the context of Romania.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable tourism has been an increasingly popular field of research since the 1980s (Liu, 2003). Streimikiene et al. (2021) showed that the management of sustainable tourism development must focus on meeting tourists' needs at the highest possible level. Therefore, it is essential to ensure a unique experience for tourists, aiming to raise their awareness of sustainability issues and promote sustainable tourism practices.

It is also important to recognize that sustainable development is a process aimed at envisioning a favorable future for human societies. This involves creating living conditions and managing resource use in a way that meets human needs while preserving the integrity, beauty, and stability of vital ecological systems (Darvishi et al., 2023). Sustainable development involves the relationship between humans and the environment and the responsibilities of the current generation toward future generations, with tourism being a system that has social, environmental, and economic impacts on a global scale (Çalışkan, 2021). Therefore, the role of sustainable tourism is defined by the adoption of sustainable practices in the tourism industry.

Nature-based tourism has emerged as a key component of sustainable tourism. Peter (1992) shows that most tourism activities can be described as nature-based, as nature plays a major role in attracting tourists to holiday destinations. Nature-based tourism has undergone tremendous growth (Balmford et al., 2009; Coghlan & Buckley, 2012; Kuenzi & McNeely, 2008). In recent decades, there has been a growing interest from researchers and international institutions in the sustainable development of natural and cultural tourism resources. This trend underscores the critical need for comprehensive sustainable tourism development plans in natural areas (Niță et al., 2023). According

to Kim et al. (2015), over the last decade, there has been a significant increase in the number of tourists visiting national parks and protected areas. This trend is largely due to the growing global popularity of nature-based tourism. Niță et al. (2023) argue that for many emerging countries, the natural resources that can be leveraged through tourism are extremely valuable. These countries can be positioned to successfully participate in the highly competitive international tourism market, which has traditionally been dominated by developed countries. Developed countries attract the majority of tourists and revenues due to their well-established infrastructure, skilled workforce, and continuous innovations in tourism-related activities. Therefore, nature-based tourism offers a unique travel niche, driven by the desire to enjoy wildlife, explore remote natural areas, or discover places untouched by civilization (World Bank, 2017).

Kim et al. (2015) have shown that nature-based tourism motivation is related to the need to appreciate nature and escape from daily life, explore the unknown and pursue new types of travel, and enjoy new experiences. Considering that, in recent years, the impact of tourism on environmental degradation has intensified the focus on knowledge-based sustainable development, research increasingly identifies tourism as a major contributor to environmental pollution and damage. In this context, it is important to understand what knowledge-based development and knowledge-based sustainable development represent.

Knowledge-based development is a potent strategy for economic growth, enabling nations to actively participate in and benefit from the global knowledge economy (Lever, 2002, cited in Laszlo & Laszlo, 2007). It highlights the intent to enhance the skills and knowledge of individuals, thereby fostering both personal and societal development (Gonzalez, et. al., 2005, cited in Laszlo & Laszlo, 2007). Knowledge-based sustainable development, on the other hand, emphasizes the use of knowledge to promote environmental protection (Mbaiwa et al., 2008).

Therefore, knowledge is essential for the sustainable use and development of tourism resources provided by nature. Considering that, in the coming years, Generation Z will become the main target market of tourism (Setiawan et al., 2018), it is important to understand how young people will use their knowledge about protecting the environment while engaging in nature-based tourism. As young people accumulate their savings, they will have the ability to purchase tourism products and services independently. The social behavior of this generation is relatively different from that of its predecessors, and it must be considered that Generation Z grew up and developed in an era of new technologies.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study aims to identify the travel trends of Generation Z youth in the context of knowledge-based sustainable development. We use two research methods: quantitative and qualitative. The questionnaires were administered to a sample of 388 Generation Z students from tourism-specialized higher education institutions. The qualitative method involved using interviews. For the present study, 11 interviews were conducted with representatives from 11 institutions in the field of tourism. These institutions have been coded, using codes R1 to R11, to protect their data and identity.

The research area is the North-East Region (NE) of Romania. The NE Region of Romania, with a resident population of 3,157,192 inhabitants as of January 1, 2021, is the largest of Romania's eight development regions. It has significant tourist potential, comparable to other international tourist regions (ADR Nord-Est, 2022).

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. The Results of the Sample Statistical Analysis

The quantitative method involved administering questionnaires to a sample of 388 Generation Z students from tourism-specialized higher education institutions. The sample is structured by the gender of the respondents as follows: 61% are young female tourists, and 39% are young male tourists.

To test the reliability (internal consistency) of the research tool, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was calculated. The values of the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the three analyzed questions range from 0.70 to 0.796, indicating that these questions have been validated.

Research hypothesis 1 (H1) was formulated starting from the idea that the importance of choosing a natural tourist attraction depends on each tourist. The Gamma coefficient was used to test hypothesis H1.

**H1:** There is a relationship between the importance of tourist attractions and the gender of the respondents

**Table 1.** Relationship between the importance of tourist attractions and the gender of the respondents

Items - Tourist attractions	Gamma Coefficient	Sig.
Tradition	0.243	0.003
Culture	0.162	0.061
Nature	0.226	0.047
Churches	0.319	< 0.0001
Castles	0.174	0.036
Muzeums	0.101	0.212
Citadels	0.076	0.360
Sports activities	-0.075	0.332

**Source:** Own calculations

The gamma coefficient has positive values for 7 of the 8 analyzed items, and sig. < 0.05 for four out of the 8 analyzed items (Table 1). Based on the results, we can conclude that there is a direct and significant relationship between gender and preferences for the following tourist attractions: tradition, nature, churches, and castles. Therefore, hypothesis H1 is validated for 4 out of the 8 analyzed items.

We assumed that there is a relationship between the attractiveness of a nature-based tourist destination and the gender of the respondents, leading to the formulation of research hypothesis 2. The Gamma coefficient was used to test hypothesis H2.

**H2:** There is a relationship between the attractiveness of tourist destinations and the gender of the respondents.

Gamma coefficient has negative values for all 8 analyzed items and sig. < 0.05 for four out of the 8 analyzed items (Table 2). The results show that there is an inverse and significant relationship between the attractiveness of natural tourist destinations and the gender of Generation Z respondents,

indicating that male individuals are more focused on sports activities while on vacation. Therefore, hypothesis H2 is validated for 4 out of the 8 analyzed items.

**Table 2** The relationship between the attractiveness of natural tourist destinations and the gender of the respondents

Items - the attractiveness of natural tourist destinations	Gamma Coefficient	Sig.
Tradition	-0.265	0.002
Culture	-0.185	0.040
Nature	-0.146	0.220
Churches	-0.283	< 0.0001
Castles	-0.179	0.039
Muzeums	-0.085	0.310
Citadels	-0.132	0.128
Sports activities	-0.111	0.164

**Source:** Own calculations

We also aimed to identify the link between the factors influencing the choice of a nature-based tourist destination and the gender of the respondents, leading to the formulation of research hypothesis 3. The Gamma coefficient was used to test hypothesis H3.

**H3:** There is a relationship between the factors influencing the choice of a tourist destination and the gender of the respondents.

**Table 3.** The relationship between the factors influencing the choice of a tourist destination and the gender of the respondents

Items – factors influencing the choice of a young tourist destination	Gamma Coefficient	Sig.
Family	0.208	0.008
Friends	0.111	0.186
Co-workers	0.003	0.966
Mass-media	0.377	< 0.0001
Social networks	0.230	0.002
Travel agencies	0.245	0.001

**Source:** Own calculations

The gamma coefficient has positive values for all 6 analyzed items and sig. < 0.05 for four out of the 6 analyzed items (Table 3). The results show that there is a direct and significant relationship between the gender and the following factors influencing the choice of a tourist destination by young people: family, mass-media, social networks, and travel agencies. Therefore, hypothesis H3 is validated for 4 out of the 6 analyzed items.

Based on our quantitative analysis, we've identified a significant relationship between gender and tourism preferences among Generation Z in the analyzed region. This demographic shows distinct preferences for traditional, natural, and historical attractions, such as churches and castles. Their vacation choices are primarily influenced by family, mass media, social networks, and travel agencies. Moreover, there's a strong awareness of the need for sustainable tourism development; students recognize that tourism must be developed in harmony with nature. Overall, there is a marked preference for ecological tourism among the students, with natural destinations considered particularly appealing for their travel choices.



## 4.2. The Results of the Qualitative Method

As a result of the interviews conducted, we summarize the responses obtained from the 11 participants. Regarding the involvement of institutions in environmental protection activities, some measures were taken into account concerning the importance of tourism in the North East Region of Romania. The respondents agreed that tourism in the North East Region is very important, especially since this area has underutilized natural and human potential (R1, R6, R7, R9). Tourism is seen as an activity through which European funds can be attracted for the rehabilitation of tourist attractions in the region (R11). The North East Region is rich in history, traditions, natural beauty, and cultural and spiritual monuments (R8). These aspects indicate that the North East Region is attractive to both locals and tourists visiting this area.

The positive aspects of tourism in the North East Region of Romania were identified. Respondents R1 and R4 emphasized the creation of new jobs, the potential to capitalize on products from local farms, and the increase in income for residents through the sale of local products.

The interviews also identified the negative effects of tourism in the North East Region of Romania. Respondent R2 believes that inadequate tourism development, especially in communities adjacent to protected areas and beyond, can pose a potential threat to the quality of the landscape and the preservation of natural quality. Emphasis was also placed on issues such as increased environmental pollution, rising waste levels, damage caused by tourists, changes to rural landscapes, and congestion in the area and on the roads (R1, R4, R7, R11). Respondent R10 noted a growing demand for visiting natural protected areas by people who lack a strong connection to or understanding of the mountain as a natural asset.

Next, the travel trends of Generation Z tourists were analyzed. A trend among young people towards sustainable development practices was observed; they are concerned with ecological practices and knowledge-based sustainable development through awareness of the value of these practices. Young people are involved in waste recycling efforts, exhibit caring behavior towards nature, voluntarily participate in clean-up actions in tourist areas, and advocate for keeping the environment as clean as possible (R1-R11). There is an increasing number of young “eco-tourists” (R2).

Respondents R3, R5, and R7 noticed that Generation Z is more interested in ecological practices, as young people are more environmentally responsible. They use mobile applications instead of paper maps and scan virtual codes for transportation. However, the R11 representative believes that many young tourists lack early education in the spirit of respecting nature, which still prevents most of them from fully appreciating the importance and beauty of practicing nature-based tourism.

The attitude of young tourists towards the environment indicates that those who engaged in mountain tourism were more environmentally conscious (R1). Respondents R4 and R10 observed that tourists no longer leave waste in nature, as they prefer to practice nature-based tourism in an environment that is as clean as possible.

However, there are different opinions regarding the behavior of tourists toward the environment. Respondents R2, R8, and R11 did not notice significant improvements or major changes in the behavior of tourists. They believe that, for many tourists, comfort at the destination is more important than spending time in nature.

There is a growing trend of nature-based travel (R3, R5, R7), particularly if, in the future, influencers promote tourism that is practiced as much as possible in natural settings, if comfortable conditions are provided at tourist destinations, and if these destinations are well-advertised. There is also a tendency for young tourists, especially those living in big cities, to seek out nature-based tourism experiences (R8). The development of nature-based tourism in the North East Region of Romania will provide development opportunities for the local population (R9). However, to achieve this, the foundations of education in this area must be established (R10).

Young tourists are eager for knowledge and appreciate traditions, crafts, folk wear and costumes, and traditional culinary products (R1-R8). There is a noticeable inclination among young people towards local culinary authenticity. Young tourists are also interested in activities specific to the area, enjoy spending time in adventure parks, and are willing to stay in tents (R3).

Based on the 11 interviews conducted with representatives of tourism institutions and organizations from the North East Region of Romania, we identified several opinions of specialists regarding the connection between the travel trends of the young generation and the focus on knowledge-based sustainable development in this region:

- There is a nexus between the travel trends of the young generation and knowledge-based sustainable development in the North East Region of Romania.
- Even though the literature does not provide a standard typology for the profile of sustainable tourists (Butnaru et al., 2022), the results of this study indicate that tourists from the younger generation tend to prioritize options for engaging in ecotourism and protecting the environment.
- Young tourists show a growing tendency to engage in tourism that reflects a responsible attitude toward the natural values of the area. Additionally, there is an increasing trend among them to purchase ecological services and products.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The present study provided an overview of Generation Z tourists' opinions towards nature and their motivation to travel to nature tourism areas. Generation Z's preference for nature-based tourism was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

The analysis of gender differences in relation to tourist destinations - specifically regarding the importance of tourist attractions (H1), the attractiveness of tourist destinations (H2), and the factors influencing the choice of a tourist destination (H3) - was conducted using statistical methods. The research hypotheses were partially validated.

The results indicate that there is a direct and significant relationship between gender and the preferences of Generation Z from the North East region for the following tourist attractions: tradition, nature, churches, and castles. Conversely, there is an inverse and significant relationship between the attractiveness of natural tourist destinations and the gender of Generation Z respondents. Additionally, there is a significant relationship between gender and the following factors influencing the choice of a tourist destination among young people: family, mass media, social networks, and travel agencies.

Findings indicate a relationship between young people's travel preferences for natural settings and their awareness of environmental quality. Therefore, there is an increase in the awareness of

natural values among young tourists of this generation and a growing involvement from institutions and organizations in the tourism sector.

Achieving sustainability in tourism necessitates the development of tourism models that contribute to preserving the natural environment and biodiversity, vital for both present and future generations. It is crucial to promote sustainable and responsible tourism practices that prevent environmental degradation. This trend towards sustainability is also becoming increasingly evident on a global scale.

The study contributes to the existing literature by identifying sustainable travel trends among Generation Z, analyzed from the perspectives of both young people and representatives of institutions and organizations within the tourism sector.

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