

Is Gen Z on the path to sustainable tourism? An exploratory study of Portuguese youth

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Abstract

Purpose: Achieving sustainable development is a large and pressing challenge facing policymakers around the world. The ongoing dilapidation and depleting of the natural capital will have serious negative consequences for human well-being. Today, more than ever, the harmful relationship that an intense economic activity has on a finite Earth is evident. Everyday reports show environmental changes, on a global scale, from climate change to species extinction. The core question at the heart of sustainable development is how to allocate the finite resources of the planet to meet the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987). However, sustainable development goes beyond economic concerns and also encompasses social and human dimensions. All these concerns were reflected in the United Nations resolution entitled “Transforming our world: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” comprising 17 goals (United Nations, 2015). This agenda is ambitious as it seeks to eradicate poverty and hunger at the same time as it seeks to achieve gender equality, reduce inequalities and even achieve peace, justice, and effective institutions. Notwithstanding the commitment of the United Nations and all theoretical advances that have been made, in this matter, by economists, natural scientists, and other social sciences, the path to achieving sustainable development require a mindset change. Unlike previous generations, today’s young people, born after 1996, christened Generation Z seems more aware and concerned about the depletion of natural resources, often claiming that there is no planet B. Gen Zer’s attitudes, beliefs and behaviours have been shaped by issues such as globalization, terrorism, the 2008 financial crises, technology, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Understanding this generation is paramount since, in 2020, it has

become dominant in the world, representing 32% of the world's population, greatly surpassing the Millennials or Baby Boomer generation (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2018). Furthermore, generation Z enters the group of youth travel that, in 2017, accounted for 23% of all international tourist arrivals, generating more than €250 billion (World Tourism Organization [WTO], 2016) and is expected to grow at unprecedented levels. The generational shift represents a major force that will shape the future of tourism (Corbisiero & Ruspini, 2018). This fact is particularly important insofar as tourism has the potential to contribute, directly or indirectly, to all of the 17 goals contemplated in the United Nations Sustainable Development agenda. Sustainable tourism is firmly positioned in the 2030 Agenda. Actually, it has been included as target in the eighth (inclusive and sustainable economic growth), twelfth (sustainable consumption and production), and fourteenth goal (sustainable use of oceans and marine resources).

In this context, the main purpose of this exploratory paper is to analyse the support of the sustainable tourism segment through generational lenses. The present study intends to explore Generation Z behaviours and beliefs concerning sustainable development, in general, and how this affects their choices of a sustainable travel destination, in particular.

Methodology: Data from a sample of 305 Portuguese college students was collected through an online questionnaire comprising three sections. Section A collected information about respondents' level of importance assigned to ten sustainable objectives. Section B collected information about participants' daily sustainable habits. Section C collected information about respondents' level of agreement with three parameters of sustainable tourism. The quantitative analysis was performed through the application of the Partial Least Square model.

Results: In general, respondents revealed high support for choosing a sustainable tourism destination. Moreover, we found evidence that general sustainability concerns, daily habits as well as sustainability concerns in destination choice significantly explain their choice of travel destination. These results reinforce the hope that this new generation can contribute to sustainable development through tourism. This research has valuable implications for tourism stakeholders to ensure a future growth prospect of sustainable tourism. It provides the tourism industry with new insights toward Generation Z as sustainability-conscious individuals.

Originality: This study presents the first evidence of the support of young Portuguese tourists for sustainable tourism, in particular, and sustainable development, in general.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism; Generation Z; Sustainable development goals; PLS.

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