

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dominant tourism behaviors of Gen Z as precursor to consumer-driven branding of hospitality enterprises

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ABSTRACT

This study asserts that the tourism behaviors of Generation Z function not only as personal choices but as pivotal indicators of consumer-driven branding trends in the hospitality industry. As the first fully digital-native generation, Gen Z approaches travel as a deeply personal and value-centered experience integrating affordability, emotional connection, and social responsibility in their decision-making. Using a qualitative exploratory design, this research gathered insights from 28 Filipino Gen Z travelers to examine how their tourism behaviors reflect broader consumer expectations, particularly regarding sustainability, inclusivity, digital engagement, and brand authenticity. Findings reveal that Gen Z travelers from Zamboanga Peninsula evaluate hospitality experiences based on emotional resonance, ethical consistency, and peer validation through digital media. Branding efforts must therefore align operational behavior with consumer values, emphasizing participatory engagement and authenticity over traditional loyalty models. In essence, Gen Z's tourism behaviors are not only shaping hospitality choices but also redefining branding frameworks toward co-creation, ethical transparency, and shared identity. This study underscores the need for hospitality enterprises to recalibrate branding strategies to remain socially relevant and competitively sustainable in the Gen Z era.

Keywords: Generation Z; tourism behavior; consumer branding; hospitality; digital platforms; value-driven travel

1. Introduction

Understanding the evolving behaviors of Generation Z in the tourism sector is critical as this cohort emerges as a significant force shaping the future of hospitality. Globally, Generation Z accounts for over 30% of the population and a significant share of global consumer. Recent industry reports estimate that they represent nearly one-fifth of international travelers Marques et al., [1], while in the Philippine context, Gen Z comprises a rapidly growing segment of domestic tourists, particularly students and young professionals with increasing disposable income. This demographic weight underscores their influence as a market force that hospitality enterprises cannot overlook. In the Philippines, while precise Gen Z-specific tourist percentages

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are less frequently detailed, broader Asia-Pacific data suggest Gen Z (aged 18–27) already exert strong travel influence locally. For instance, Filipino Gen Z travelers display highly distinct behaviors: they rely heavily on TikTok (22 %) for travel inspiration and show high intent for multiple trips in 2025. Generation Z is characterized by being digitally native, socially conscious, and diverse. These values influence the way they learn, communicate and relate to the world [2-3]. Born into a digitally integrated world, Gen Z travelers exhibit unique patterns that distinguish them from prior generations, especially in how they choose, experience, and evaluate tourism and hospitality services. Generation Z values personalized, immersive experiences, and their travel decisions are significantly shaped by online reviews, social media influencers, and digital platforms [4]). Their choices are not only shaped by affordability and convenience but also by alignment with personal identity and social values. This behavioral shift presents both a challenge and opportunity for hospitality enterprises aiming to build meaningful connections with a new generation of consumers [5].

Developing successful marketing strategies requires an understanding of how travel decisions are influenced by tourism-seeking behaviors [6]. Tourism, once dominated by standardized experiences, is now increasingly influenced by hyper-personalized, experience-driven decision-making. For Gen Z, travel is not merely a leisure activity but an extension of lifestyle and self-expression [7]. Their tourism behaviors demonstrate a consistent preference for immersive, culturally authentic, and socially shareable experiences [8]. These preferences underscore the importance of reevaluating traditional branding models in the hospitality industry to stay relevant in the eyes of this new consumer segment.

The pervasive role of digital technology in Gen Z's travel behaviors cannot be overstated. From initial inspiration to post-trip feedback, their journey is saturated with digital touchpoints, including social media, peer reviews, and mobile-first booking platforms [9-10]. These tools not only inform their choices but also serve as platforms for self-representation, where brand alignment with personal narratives becomes paramount. As such, hospitality brands must move beyond visibility to cultivate values-based resonance with Gen Z consumers.

What sets Gen Z apart is their insistence on authenticity, transparency, and value-driven engagement. Unlike previous generations, whose loyalty was often built on price or familiarity, Gen Z evaluates brands through ethical, social, and environmental lenses [11]. Sustainability, inclusivity, and innovation are not optional attributes, they are foundational expectations. These behaviors signal a transformation in consumer-brand dynamics, where branding becomes less about persuasion and more about reflection of shared principles.

In this context, tourism behavior functions as more than a pattern of choices; it is a precursor to consumer loyalty and advocacy. Gen Z's travel decisions reveal their broader consumption logic intentional, discerning, and identity centered [12]. Understanding these behaviors allows hospitality enterprises to craft strategies that are not only market-responsive but also culturally and socially attuned. The translation of behavioral insights into branding mechanisms is thus a crucial step in building lasting consumer relationships.

The current landscape demands that hospitality businesses reconfigure their branding practices by drawing directly from the lived behaviors and articulated preferences of Gen Z tourists. Rather than imposing top-down narratives, brands must emerge organically from the values and experiences of their audiences [13]. This consumer-driven approach marks a departure from legacy branding, requiring deeper empathy, agility, and relevance. Recognizing the influence of Gen Z tourism's behavior as a precursor to effective branding is not just a strategic choice it is a competitive imperative.

2. Literature review

2.1. Local studies

In the Philippine context, recent studies have started to map the distinct travel behaviors of Gen Z, especially their increasing emphasis on meaningful experiences and identity-centered travel ^[14]. Findings suggest that this generation of Filipino travelers' values personalization, cultural immersion, and digital accessibility over conventional tour packages ^[15]. Understanding the travel behavior of Generation Z is increasingly relevant as this cohort emerges as a key driver of global tourism. Representing over 30% of the global population, around 27% of the workforce and 40% of global consumers ^[16], Gen Z is not only shaping current travel trends but is also poised to become the core consumer group in the tourism sector. According to most researchers and media sources ^[17-19], Generation Z includes those born between the mid to late 1990s and the early 2010s, and they are considered the first unique and truly digital natives ^[20], with the internet being omnipresent in their lives ^[21]. University students and young professionals often seek travel experiences that align with their social values and are easily shareable through digital platforms. For example, destinations that promote local heritage, sustainability, and social impact have gained popularity among young Filipino tourists. These preferences signify a departure from mass-market tourism and a more intentional and selective approach to hospitality consumption.

Additionally, local literature emphasizes the role of peer networks and online communities in shaping Gen Z's tourism decisions. Word-of-mouth has evolved into digital credibility via reviews, ratings, and influencers which serves as a powerful tool for building trust in hospitality brands ^[22]. In some studies, social media-driven decision-making surpassed price and promotions as primary factors influencing accommodation choices ^[23]. This shift is especially notable in urban centers like Metro Manila, Cebu, and Davao, where access to digital platforms is widespread. Moreover, research highlights that local Gen Z travelers tend to reward brands that engage in ethical practices and support community-based tourism initiatives ^[24]. These behavioral traits suggest an emerging consumer base that demands both experience and advocacy from the brands they support.

2.2. Foreign studies

Global studies reveal that Gen Z tourists around the world exhibit similar yet context-sensitive patterns. Commonly described as tech-native, socially aware, and experience-driven, this generation does not just consume tourism but co-authors it through digital storytelling and brand engagement ^[25]. In countries like the United States, Australia, and Germany, Gen Z travelers prioritize mobile-first services, frictionless digital experiences, and brand transparency ^[26]. Studies show that their trust in a hospitality brand increases when it visibly aligns with their values such as climate responsibility, inclusivity, and social ^[27]. These findings underscore a major paradigm shift in the hospitality industry: the demand for brands to be more than service providers must be cultural participants.

Moreover, research conducted in East Asian markets, particularly South Korea and Japan, reveals that Gen Z tourists value brand innovation and aesthetic quality, often associating visually compelling design and tech-forward services with brand credibility ^[28]. In these contexts, high-quality digital engagement is not merely a marketing asset but a consumer expectation. Foreign literature also points out that Gen Z's loyalty is often contingent on how 'relatable' a brand is rather than how long it has been on the market. Emotional relevance and peer validation are stronger drivers of repeat engagement than loyalty programs or corporate reputation ^[29].

Taken together, local and foreign studies converge on three consistent themes namely primacy of digital influence, the demand for value-driven branding, and the rejection of purely transactional loyalty models.

However, divergence emerges in how these are expressed contextually, Philippine Gen Z travelers tend to emphasize affordability and community engagement, while international studies highlight innovation, design, and environmental credentials [30]. This study contributes originality by situating Gen Z behavior within the Philippine socio-cultural and economic context, which has been underexplored in global tourism literature. While global studies emphasize innovation and aesthetics, our findings highlight affordability and community engagement as equally decisive factors.

2.3. Digital influence on travel decisions

Gen Z is the first generation to be born into a fully digitized world, and this has dramatically transformed the way they plan, experience, and evaluate travel [31]. Digital media serves not just as a source of information but also as a filter of desirability. Travel choices are frequently influenced by trends on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, where visual storytelling plays a pivotal role [32]. These platforms create aspirational narratives around destinations and accommodations, turning ordinary travel spots into "must-visit" locales through virality. The phenomenon of "Instagrammable" locations is one clear outcome of this digital gaze, influencing not just where Gen Z wants to go, but why [33].

Another critical layer is how digital platforms facilitate trust and immediacy. Studies indicate that Gen Z travelers heavily rely on user-generated content and real-time peer reviews to make booking decisions [34]. These reviews often carry more weight than promotional materials from the brand itself. According to Bunea et al. [35], mobile-first behavior is shaping expectations around convenience, with Gen Z expecting seamless integration of search, booking, customer support, and feedback systems into one accessible interface. Hospitality brands that lack digital responsiveness risk being filtered out in the early stages of decision-making [36]. This reflects a broader trend toward what scholars' call "digitally mediated consumer behavior," where engagement, not just exposure, dictates purchase and loyalty.

2.4. Value-driven hospitality consumption

Gen Z's relationship with brands particularly in hospitality is deeply rooted in alignment with personal values. Environmental sustainability, diversity and inclusion, ethical sourcing, and mental wellness are non-negotiable for this generation when evaluating where to stay or who to support [37]. This emphasis on values transcends performative branding; it requires hospitality enterprises to embed these ideals into their operations and customer experiences. For Gen Z, a hotel's commitment to reducing plastic use, supporting local economies, or offering gender-neutral spaces is not just admirable is expected [38]. Brands that fail to live up to these values often face public criticism or social media backlash.

More than that, value-driven behavior in hospitality involves a preference for brands that serve as cultural and ethical extensions of the self. Gen Z wants brands to reflect their identity and mission, not just deliver services. This leads to high brand-switching tendencies when values are misaligned or inconsistent [39]. At the same time, those brands that clearly communicate purpose and integrate meaningful initiatives such as community partnerships or social justice campaigns tend to enjoy stronger loyalty [40]. In essence, Gen Z does not separate consumption from activism. According to Çalışkan [41], their travel and hospitality choices are expressions of what they stand for, which significantly reshapes how hospitality enterprises must think about branding and consumer engagement.

2.5. Brand engagement patterns of Gen Z

Gen Z redefines how brands are experienced, followed, and supported. Traditional customer loyalty models, which rely on reward points or long-term patronage, are being displaced by dynamic, short-term but intense brand relationships [42]. This generation engages with hospitality brands through digital storytelling,

peer interactions, and interactive experiences, such as challenges or feedback polls on social platforms [43]. Building strong relationships with clients is essential in the fiercely competitive travel sector. To provide a better product and improve client experience, service providers in the tourist sector need to be skilled expressive communicators [44]. Engagement for them means co-creation: commenting on posts, resharing experiences, contributing to branding narratives, or even participating in product development discussions [45]. Brands that open themselves to participatory engagement tend to be more trusted and visible to Gen Z travelers.

Furthermore, Gen Z's brand engagement is episodic yet influential. They may not stay loyal to one hotel chain for years, but they will strongly endorse a brand that delivers meaningful, personalized experiences even just once [46]. These micro-loyalties, driven by momentary alignment of values, aesthetics, or convenience, are amplified by the reach of their digital networks. A single positive post can translate into widespread exposure and consumer influence [47]. Conversely, a single negative experience can result in viral criticism. Therefore, brands that are authentic, responsive, and emotionally intelligent stand a better chance of maintaining positive engagement cycles with Gen Z. In this landscape, hospitality branding must evolve from being static and image-based to fluid, value-driven, and co-authored.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design to examine the tourism behaviors of Generation Z travelers from Zamboanga Peninsula and how these behaviors relate to their engagement with hospitality brands. The qualitative approach allowed for a detailed investigation of personal experiences, decision-making patterns, and value-driven choices in the context of travel and hospitality. As the research focused on understanding participant perspectives rather than quantifying variables, the exploratory design provided flexibility in uncovering patterns that may not be observable through structured methods [48]. This approach is supported by Chavez and Prado [49], who used discourse analysis to explore how online gender-based humor reflects deep-seated social patterns, highlighting the ability of qualitative designs to expose complex cultural behaviors.

3.2. Research instrument

A semi-structured interview guide served as the primary data collection tool. The inclusion of criteria such as travels planning, destination preferences, digital influence, and perceptions of brand values (sustainability, inclusivity, and innovation) was guided by prior studies emphasizing their relevance in Gen Z travel decision-making [50]. These categories represent the most consistently reported drivers of Gen Z tourism behavior in both local and global contexts. The guide consisted of open-ended questions and optional follow-up prompts to encourage deeper reflection while maintaining consistency across interviews. This ensured that the instrument was both structured and flexible enough to capture nuanced participant insights. As demonstrated in the study by Abdurasul et al. [51], open-ended qualitative tools were effective in uncovering deeply rooted cultural practices, such as language preservation behaviors, reinforcing the strength of semi-structured instruments for nuanced exploration.

Table 1. Instrument of the study

Objectives	Interview Questions
To explore the dominant tourism behaviors and travel preferences of Gen Z travelers in relation to their hospitality choices.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What are your usual priorities when planning a trip, and how do these influence your choice of accommodations?2. Can you describe the kind of travel experiences or destinations you usually seek and why they appeal to you?

Objectives	Interview Questions
<p>To examine how Gen Z tourists' behaviors and values influence their perception and support of hospitality brands.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="674 280 1432 348">3. How do digital platforms or peer recommendations affect your travel and hospitality decisions? <li data-bbox="674 348 1432 415">1. What qualities or values in a hospitality brand make you feel more connected or loyal to it? <li data-bbox="674 415 1432 482">2. Can you recall a specific hotel or hospitality experience that made a strong impression on you? What influenced that perception? <li data-bbox="674 482 1432 498">3. How important is it for you that a hospitality brand reflects your personal values, such as sustainability, inclusivity, or innovation?

Table 1. (Continued)

3.3. Sampling procedure

The study utilized purposive sampling to select participants who met specific inclusion criteria: (1) aged 18 to 28, representing the core of Generation Z; (2) Filipino citizens; (3) had traveled within the past twelve months for leisure; and (4) were either employed or had completed their undergraduate studies. A total of 28 participants were purposively selected based on their ability to articulate travel preferences and brand-related decisions. While modest in number, this sample was sufficient to achieve thematic saturation, the point at which no new insights emerge from additional data. Including additional participants, such as 29th or 30th, would not have yielded substantially different findings, as patterns had already stabilized across responses. The chosen number thus balanced feasibility and depth of inquiry while ensuring representation of diverse Gen Z perspectives. Similar to the approach used by Cabiles et al. [52], purposive sampling enabled the selection of digitally active Filipino participants in their study of gaming discourse, proving effective in capturing the lived experiences of a targeted demographic.

3.4. Data gathering procedure

Data was collected through individual interviews, conducted either face-to-face or through online video conferencing platforms, depending on the availability and preference of each participant. Before each interview, participants received an overview of the research and signed a written or digital informed consent form. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed for analysis. The participants were encouraged to express themselves in either English or Filipino, according to their comfort. Notes were also taken during interviews to capture contextual information that supported the transcription and coding process. Chavez et al. [53] also utilized interviews in their qualitative inquiry on AI and academic ethics, which showed how flexible data gathering methods like semi-structured interviews can accommodate contextual and language-based variability among participants.

3.5. Data analysis

The study used reflexive thematic analysis to examine the data. This method includes familiarization with the data, constructing themes, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, and producing the final report. An inductive approach was applied to allow categories to emerge from the data rather than being predetermined. To enhance trustworthiness, credibility was established through member-checking, where participants were asked to verify the accuracy of their transcripts and initial interpretations. Transferability was ensured by providing thick descriptions of participants' contexts and travel experiences. These measures align with recognized criteria for qualitative rigor.

Themes were refined through repeated reading and comparison across transcripts to ensure accuracy and internal consistency. This approach is consistent with the manual coding and theme refinement strategies used by Chavez and Cuilan [54] in their discourse analysis of gender-based online humor, where emergent themes were identified through iterative engagement with textual data.

3.6. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was secured from the appropriate institutional review board prior to data collection. Each participant was informed of their rights, including voluntary participation, confidentiality of responses, and the ability to withdraw at any point without penalty. Pseudonyms were used in place of real names in transcripts and written outputs. All digital files, including audio recordings and transcriptions, were stored in secure, password-protected folders accessible only to the researcher. Participants were also given an opportunity to ask questions or express concerns before and after the interview process. In a similar manner, ethical safeguards were emphasized by Chavez and Cuilan [55], in their research on online discourse, where participant anonymity and institutional clearance were core components of the data collection process.

4. Result

Objective 1. To explore the dominant tourism behaviors and travel preferences of Gen Z travelers in relation to their hospitality choices.

Question 1. What are your usual priorities when planning a trip, and how do these influence your choice of accommodations?

Budget-Conscious Yet Value-Oriented Planning

Twenty-one (21) respondents shared that cost-efficiency plays a key role in their accommodation choices, but not at the expense of comfort, cleanliness, or location. These travelers are strategic and practical, checking reviews, verifying honesty in property listings, and prioritizing both affordability and essential amenities. While they avoid luxury, they expect satisfaction and convenience to be present in whatever price range they choose.

“First of all, the budget is important to me. I want a place that is affordable but decent clean, safe, and near tourist spots.”

“My non-negotiables are security, cleanliness, and transparency. I don’t just look at price; I also look at how honest the place is in their photos and descriptions.”

“Every trip is special to me it’s not something I can do all the time. That’s why I’m really strict when choosing accommodations... I prioritize cleanliness, safety, and sincerity.”

“My first priority is really the location it should be close to the spots I want to visit. I also check if the place is secure and has a cozy and Instagrammable ambiance.”

Experience-Oriented and Emotionally Reflective Accommodation Choice

Nineteen (19) respondents emphasized the emotional and atmospheric quality of accommodation, choosing places that allow them to reflect, recharge, and find peace. These travelers seek authentic environments that feel intimate, quiet, and locally rooted. Their criteria go beyond aesthetics or brand name. They consider whether the place enhances their inner experience and aligns with their personal rhythm.

“I prefer accommodations that feel quiet, maybe even a little hidden... Somewhere that feels like it belongs in the place not a chain hotel.”

“I prioritize peaceful and meaningful places, not the popular ones that everyone posts about... I want to feel that I’m really on a break from stress both physically and mentally.”

“I travel to slow down, to remember why I work hard, and to thank myself for surviving all the difficult seasons.”

Detail-Focused and Safety-Centered Preferences

Fourteen (14) respondents reflected a meticulous approach to travel planning, valuing verified information, honest reviews, and proactive communication with accommodation providers. For these individuals, trust and accuracy are more important than price. Safety, clarity, and consistency are their top concerns before making any booking decisions.

“I usually message the property first to clarify things... I don’t mind paying a bit more as long as I know exactly what I’m getting.”

“I always check reviews to see if the area is okay and if the place is secure—especially when we’re traveling as an all-Gen Z group.”

Question 2. Can you describe the kind of travel experiences or destinations you usually seek and why they appeal to you?

2.1 Culturally Immersive and Learning-Oriented Travel

Twenty-three (23) respondents expressed a strong preference for travel experiences that allow them to engage with history, local culture, and personal growth. These travelers are drawn to destinations where they can interact with local communities, discover authentic traditions, and reflect on their own lives. Travel is seen not just as a form of leisure, but as an opportunity to connect deeply with place and people, often leading to new insights and meaningful memories.

“I enjoy visiting historical cities, heritage sites, or locations where I can engage with local communities... travel is an extension of personal growth.”

“I like places with a story or deep cultural roots. I usually spend time talking to locals or just walking around small towns.”

“I’m more into places that have cultural depth... places like Sagada or Siquijor that have stories.”

“I want a place with connection to local life where I can eat local food or see how people live.”

2.2 Nature-Driven and Restorative Escapes

Twenty (20) respondents indicated that they seek natural, tranquil destinations that help them disconnect from urban life and reset emotionally. Their ideal travel experiences involve quiet landscapes, scenic views, and outdoor environments like beaches, mountains, lakes, and forests. These settings provide space for introspection, emotional healing, and creative expression often serving as a break from fast-paced, high-pressure environments.

“I travel to feel grounded again... I love places that tell stories without words, like old churches, empty beaches, or rice fields during sunset.”

“I’ve been to places like Sagada and Siquijor... it feels healing to just sit somewhere quiet and listen to nature.”

“I prefer places that are quiet, cultural, or nature-based... it’s not just for social media, but for memories and learning.”

2.3 Anti-Commercial and Authentic Preferences

Sixteen (16) respondents voiced a clear disinterest in overly developed or commercialized tourist spots. They prefer destinations that feel genuine, personal, and less influenced by mass tourism. The desire is to travel on their own terms, away from crowded scenes and staged attractions. Authenticity, peace, and a slower pace are key to making travel worthwhile for them.

“I avoid commercialized spots because they feel forced and overpriced... I travel to disconnect, not to chase trends.”

“I still appreciate modern comforts, but I tend to seek a balance between immersive, authentic environments and well-organized infrastructure.”

Question 3. How do digital platforms or peer recommendations affect your travel and hospitality decisions?

3.1 Social Media and Digital Content as Planning Tools

Twenty-five (25) respondents revealed that social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube significantly influence their travel decisions. These findings suggest that hospitality branding must prioritize visibility on short-form, peer-driven platforms where authenticity and relatability hold more weight than formal advertising. Creating shareable digital content, collaborating with micro-influencers, and fostering peer-to-peer reviews are actionable strategies aligned with Gen Z’s decision-making patterns.

“Before I book anything, I spend hours on TikTok and YouTube watching travel vlogs and room tours.”

“I always check TikTok, Instagram, or Facebook first... I believe more in actual experiences than in hotel ads.”

“I use Instagram and TikTok not just for ideas but also for assessing what a place feels like visually and atmospherically.”

“They help, but I don’t depend on them fully... I use YouTube and blogs to see honest experiences.”

3.2 Peer Validation and Trust-Based Influence

Twenty-two (22) respondents emphasized the importance of trusted peer recommendations. While social media offers broad insight, it is the feedback from real people such as friends, consistent influencers, or bloggers with personal narratives that holds the most weight. These individuals tend to cross-reference information and value emotional honesty over visual appeal. Travel decisions are shaped more by trust and authenticity than by popularity or trend.

“If a trusted peer or influencer speaks highly of a hospitality brand, I’m more likely to choose it.”

“I message friends who have been to the place... I ask them questions like, ‘Is it peaceful?’ or ‘Did you feel welcome there?’”

“When friends recommend something they personally experienced, it matters more to me than sponsored content.”

3.3 Cautious and Critical Use of Online Platforms

Thirteen (13) respondents described a more critical and skeptical approach to digital content. While they do use online platforms for research, they do not take curated content at face value. These travelers look for unfiltered images, compare sources, and prioritize practical, experience-based reviews over promotional posts. Visual content is helpful, but not enough without consistency and credibility.

“I cross-check reviews from different platforms and always look for unfiltered, guest-taken photos.”

“I like watching travel videos, but I don’t copy what others do... A close friend’s suggestion means more to me than a viral TikTok.”

Objective 2. To examine how Gen Z tourists’ behaviors and values influence their perception and support of hospitality brands.

Question 4. What qualities or values in a hospitality brand make you feel more connected or loyal to it?

4.1 Social Responsibility and Ethical Practices

Twenty-six (26) respondents shared that they are more loyal to hospitality brands that uphold values such as sustainability, inclusivity, and ethical responsibility. These individuals look beyond comfort and convenience, seeking businesses that show purpose and accountability whether through support for local artisans, eco-conscious practices, or fair treatment of staff. A brand earns their loyalty when it demonstrates genuine concern not just for profit, but for people and the planet.

“I appreciate brands that are transparent about their business practices fair employment, sustainability efforts, or community partnerships.”

“What makes me loyal is when a brand is transparent, responsive, and has authentic care for guests... I also like when they give a platform to local culture.”

“If a brand shows they care more about connection than profit, that’s when I remember them.”

“I value brands that support locals like using handmade items in rooms or offering local food on the menu.”

4.2 Human Connection and Respectful Service

Seventeen (17) respondents emphasized emotional connection and respectful treatment as key to brand loyalty. For them, being treated with sincerity, kindness, and personalized attention creates a lasting impact. These travelers appreciate brands that make them feel welcomed and understood where warmth, effort, and human dignity are embedded in the service culture.

“When the staff greet you genuinely or make an effort to make you feel at home that leaves a lasting impact.”

“I feel connected to brands that don’t just treat me as a paying guest, but as a person who deserves peace and dignity.”

“Even simple things like offering books to read or giving local handmade soap tell me they thought deeply about the guest experience.”

4.3 Professionalism, Responsiveness, and Consistency

Eleven (11) respondents indicated that their loyalty is earned by brands that demonstrate professional behavior and consistent service. They value efficient communication, proactive support, and delivery that meets or exceeds expectations. For these travelers, reliability and respect are more meaningful than aesthetics or luxury.

“If a brand respects guests’ time, privacy, and expectations, I remember that. I also value efficient communication.”

“I want brands that listen to feedback... even small things like slow Wi-Fi if they address it right away, I feel valued.”

Question 5. Can you recall a specific hotel or hospitality experience that made a strong impression on you? What influenced that perception?

5.1 Authentic Connection and Inclusive Atmosphere

Nine (9) respondents recalled experiences where the warmth and inclusivity of the hospitality staff left a memorable impact. These travelers appreciated places where they felt seen, accepted, and genuinely welcomed. Small, meaningful gestures such as personalized service or inclusive environments made them feel emotionally connected to space. These encounters went beyond the physical features of the accommodation and resonated on a personal and emotional level.

“I stayed at a guesthouse owned by an LGBT couple... the atmosphere was very inclusive, no judgment, and I felt safe expressing myself.”

“The staff didn’t treat me like a guest they treated me like someone who belonged there... It reminded me of my place in nature.”

“The family who owned the inn treated me with so much warmth... they shared local tips and even helped me arrange a trip to a nearby lake.”

5.2 Purposeful and Values-Based Hospitality

Eleven (11) respondents shared that they were impressed by accommodations that embodied purpose and social responsibility. These travelers valued sustainability, local culture, and meaningful interactions that reflected the brand’s mission. Their positive perception was shaped not by luxury but by the depth and thoughtfulness of the experience where every detail had a reason and reinforced shared values.

“They minimized plastic use, sourced ingredients locally, and provided information about local traditions... it made the experience feel rooted and thoughtful.”

“They didn’t use aircon or Wi-Fi, but gave a handwritten welcome note and spoke about the mountain with respect... That made me feel small, but in a good way.”

5.3 Attentiveness and Personalized Service

Eight (8) respondents highlighted how proactive service and attention to detail made a hospitality experience stand out. For them, small but thoughtful actions such as staff solving problems before being asked or providing personal recommendations created a sense of care and reliability. These experiences demonstrated the brand’s commitment to exceeding expectations without needing extravagance.

“The staff noticed something off with the room and upgraded us without making a fuss... it was about how much they paid attention.”

“The staff lent us a surfboard for free and gave tips on non-touristy food spots... it wasn’t a fancy hotel, but the service felt very personal.”

Question 6. How important is it for you that a hospitality brand reflects your personal values, such as sustainability, inclusivity, or innovation?

6.1 Alignment with Values as a Non-Negotiable Standard

Twenty-seven (27) respondents considered it essential for hospitality brands to reflect their personal values, particularly in areas such as sustainability, ethical practices, and inclusivity. These travelers are intentional about supporting businesses that are not only service providers, but also value-driven institutions. Brand choices are now seen as personal statements travelers want their bookings to reflect what they stand for. They are also aware of the long-term impact of tourism and seek brands that contribute positively to society and the environment.

“It’s not just important to me, it’s essential... I want every decision I make to have meaning even if it’s just travel.”

“I believe brands today carry social responsibility... I prefer those that mirror my ethics and treat all guests fairly.”

“As someone from the working class, I respect brands that are accessible, inclusive, and humble... not just chasing tourists.”

“It’s very important especially now that we’re more aware of travel’s impact... it’s more fulfilling if the brand aligns with my values.”

6.2 Seeking Authenticity in Action

Sixteen (16) respondents stressed that it is not enough for brands to claim they uphold values they must prove it through consistent and visible actions. These travelers are skeptical of surface-level or performative marketing and look for authenticity in operations, service, and culture. Their support is reserved for brands that demonstrate intentional choices, from sustainable materials to fair labor practices. For them, meaningful branding is shown not through labels, but through behavior and values.

“Anyone can post that they support sustainability or diversity, but I look for signs that they mean it.”

“If they say they’re sustainable, I expect to see that in operations not just a green logo.”

“Inclusivity is not just putting a rainbow sticker during Pride month... I support brands that actually walk the talk.”

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the tourism behaviors of Generation Z are deeply intertwined with their identity formation, ethical consciousness, and digital fluency factors that collectively shape how they engage with hospitality brands. As the participants’ responses show, travel is no longer perceived as merely a recreational activity but as a conscious pursuit of personal meaning, emotional fulfillment, and cultural relevance. This generation is distinguished by its tendency to treat tourism as a medium through which they assert their identities and social beliefs. These behaviors demonstrate a distinct departure from transactional tourism toward intentional, value-centered travel, affirming Gen Z’s role as not merely tourists, but as agents of branding transformation in the hospitality industry. Their preferences place pressure on hospitality enterprises to recalibrate their offerings, ensuring not just functional excellence but also emotional and ethical compatibility with this cohort’s values and expectations.

Gen Z travelers exhibit a nuanced blend of practicality and introspection in their travel planning [56]. As reflected in the interviews, participants balance affordability with core non-negotiables like safety, cleanliness, and emotional connection to place. Their choices reflect a strong demand for transparency, reliability, and emotional value that reveals travel planning as both a logistical and existential exercise. This supports Tirocchi et al.'s [57] observation that Gen Z evaluates travel through both economic and experiential lenses, prioritizing comfort, meaning, and identity expression. For many of them, trips are framed as self-reward, emotional renewal, or healing, rather than simple escapes from routine. Importantly, their decision-making reflects not mere consumer preference but a personal ethos where accommodation serves as extensions of self-care, emotional healing, and social alignment [58]. This behavioral orientation signals that Gen Z's expectations of hospitality providers now extend beyond product satisfaction. They seek a seamless match between inner values and outer experiences.

The prominence of digital platforms in travel choices further underscores this generation's reliance on visual, peer-driven content as both inspiration and validation. Social media functions not only as a source of travel ideas but also as a credibility filter through which Gen Z travelers assess destinations and services. Rather than passively consuming advertisements, Gen Z actively curates their own filters of credibility through TikTok vlogs, Instagram aesthetics, and friend-recommended locations. They value relatability, emotional honesty, and behind-the-scenes authenticity far more than polished promotional content. This behavior supports the concept of "digitally mediated consumer behavior" described by Janin et al. [59] and Băltescu & Untaru [60], wherein digital trust and narrative engagement hold more influence than traditional marketing. Their behavior places brands in a more participatory role one where visibility must be earned through shared stories, peer approval, and interactive engagement. Consequently, branding efforts in hospitality must adapt to this model by embracing participatory content creation and peer-reinforced authenticity. In doing so, they can foster deeper resonance and relevance in a digital space dominated by co-creation rather than consumption.

Furthermore, the values espoused by Gen Z social responsibility, ethical transparency, and inclusivity are not peripheral considerations, but central determinants of brand connection [61]. These ideals are not mere aspirations; they are benchmarks by which Gen Z measures brand integrity. Hospitality brands that fail to embody these values risk alienation from a consumer base that sees every booking as a form of advocacy. Participants actively seek out establishments that support local livelihoods, implement sustainable practices, and reflect inclusive values. The participants' preference for businesses that support local economies, reduce ecological harm, and foster human dignity is consistent with the assertions of Sertori et al. [62], who emphasize the embeddedness of ethics in Gen Z's consumption patterns. Unlike traditional customers who valued consistency or prestige, Gen Z elevates conscience and cultural alignment. This behavior redefines loyalty not as repeated patronage, but as episodic endorsement based on emotional, ethical, and experiential resonance. Their loyalty is flexible but fierce, it is easily withdrawn from inauthentic brands and swiftly transferred to those whose values reflect their own.

A critical insight that emerges is that Gen Z does not separate brand from behavior; for them, meaningful branding is rooted in demonstrable action, not performative declarations. They expect congruence between what brands say and what they do. Participants in the study were keenly observant of inconsistencies, quickly identifying whether sustainability claims were operationalized or merely decorative.

The demand for operational alignment with stated values evident in calls for consistent sustainability practices and inclusive environments affirms the critique of superficial branding offered. Brands are not judged solely by their image but by how sincerely and consistently they translate values into action.

Sustainable consumption is an important issue in the tourism and hospitality industries [63-64]. As such, hospitality enterprises must transition from marketing values to embodying them structurally across their business models, from staff training and supply chains to guest interactions and post-stay engagement. Only by doing so can brands earn the trust of a generation that regards consumption as both personal expression and collective responsibility.

The episodic but impactful nature of Gen Z's brand engagement reveals a shift in how consumer influence operates. Their endorsement is not necessarily long-term or brand-exclusive, but it is powerful and emotionally driven. While traditional models emphasize loyalty programs and corporate history, Gen Z's trust is built in micro-moments of emotional fulfillment and social relevance, amplified through digital platforms [65-66]. They may support a brand once, share the experience widely, and never return not out of dissatisfaction, but because their loyalty is tied to alignment, not repetition. These fragile micro-loyalties, yet powerful, can elevate lesser-known brands into preferred destinations if the experience aligns with Gen Z's identity and values.

A single sincere act of service, a personalized recommendation, or a transparent ethical stance may generate a cascade of digital endorsements. Conversely, a single misstep may result in immediate reputational damage. Thus, hospitality branding in the Gen Z era requires emotional intelligence, value consistency, and participatory relevance an entirely new paradigm for how brand-consumer relationships is formed, sustained, and amplified. This research contributes to the knowledge in the field by expanding the understanding of how Generation Z's tourism behavior directly informs consumer-driven branding strategies. While earlier studies have described Gen Z mainly as digital natives with distinct travel motivations, this study demonstrates their active role as co-creators of brand identity in the hospitality sector.

New insights emerging from this study include the finding that Gen Z travelers in the Philippines evaluate hospitality brands not only on digital visibility or affordability, but also on alignment with personal values such as cultural authenticity, community engagement, and ethical transparency. These findings highlight that brand loyalty is flexible, episodic, and value-driven, which differs from prior models of consumer loyalty based on price and long-term patronage.

The main distinctions and innovations of this research lie in its contextual focus and applied implications. Unlike global literature that emphasizes innovation and aesthetics as the primary drivers of Gen Z loyalty, this study highlights the unique Philippine context where affordability and socio-cultural immersion are equally decisive. Moreover, by linking behavioral insights to branding mechanisms, this research advances from descriptive accounts of Gen Z behavior to prescriptive recommendations for hospitality enterprises, offering both theoretical contribution and practical strategies for industry stakeholders.

Gen Z's travel decisions offer more than insight into preferences they offer a lens into a generation's worldview, priorities, and sense of collective ethics. For hospitality enterprises, recognizing and responding to these behavioral patterns is not merely a matter of trend adaptation, but a strategic imperative for long-term brand relevance and sustainability. Aligning operational practices with the value-driven expectations of this generation, brands can not only remain competitive but also contribute meaningfully to the evolving culture of hospitality and ethical tourism.

6. Conclusion

The tourism behavior of Generation Z travelers from Zamboanga Peninsula reveals more than shifting consumer habits; they represent a generational redefinition of how hospitality brands earn trust and relevance. For this cohort, travel decisions embody identity, ethics, and digital culture, making them powerful

precursors of consumer-driven branding. This study establishes that Gen Z's loyalty is not secured by repetition or incentives, but by authentic alignment between brand practices and personal values such as sustainability, inclusivity, and transparency. For hospitality enterprises, the implication is clear: branding must move beyond persuasive imagery and embed value-driven commitments into every layer of service and operation. By doing so, businesses can transform fleeting encounters into meaningful advocacy, gaining resonance in a marketplace where digital narratives and ethical practices carry greater weight than price or prestige.

While bounded by its qualitative scope and cultural context, this research underscores the urgency for hospitality enterprises to evolve in step with Gen Z's expectations. Future studies should extend this inquiry through cross-generational and longitudinal approaches, exploring how these behaviors evolve as Gen Z transitions into new life stages. Ultimately, understanding and responding to the tourism behaviors of this generation is not simply a matter of adapting to trends, it is a strategic imperative for shaping sustainable, value-centered branding in the hospitality industry.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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