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Understanding Gen Z Travel Behavior through Sustainable Destination Branding: A Conceptual Approach

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Abstract

In the digital and value-driven tourism landscape, destination image has emerged as a key determinant in shaping travel decisions, particularly among Generation Z. This conceptual study proposes an integrative model that links sustainable tourism practices and collaborative marketing strategies as foundational elements in developing an authentic and trusted destination image. Drawing from stakeholder theory, value co-creation, and the triple bottom line framework, the model addresses how sustainability narratives co-created by governments, businesses, communities, and travelers can influence trust, perceived authenticity, and ultimately, visit intention among Gen Z tourists. The framework positions destination trust and authenticity as mediators, while digital engagement and environmental consciousness act as moderating variables that reflect Gen Z's digitally native and value-driven behavior. By synthesizing contemporary tourism, marketing, and consumer behavior theories, this study contributes to the development of sustainability-oriented destination branding. It also offers practical guidance for destination management organizations (DMOs) to design inclusive, narrative-based strategies that resonate with Gen Z values. Future empirical validation through structural equation modeling (SEM) is recommended to test the interrelationships proposed in the model.

Keywords: *destination image, sustainable tourism, collaborative marketing, Gen-Z, co-creation*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the increasingly competitive global tourism market, destination image has become a central factor influencing tourists' decision-making processes. This image comprises a blend of cognitive, affective, and evaluative perceptions, shaped through a combination of personal experiences, marketing stimuli, and media influence. Gartner, (1994) tripartite model encompassing *organic*, *induced*, and *autonomous* sources remains a foundational framework for understanding how potential visitors form mental representations of places, often even before a direct experience occurs.

This process of image formation is particularly nuanced in the context of Generation Z, a cohort of digital natives who are highly responsive to value-driven messaging. Unlike previous generations that may have prioritized affordability or prestige, Gen Z travelers actively seek destinations that align with their personal beliefs around sustainability, authenticity, and social responsibility (Theocharis & Tsekouropoulos, 2025). As such, aesthetic appeal alone is no longer sufficient. Rather, successful destination branding must integrate ethical and ecological dimensions, especially those rooted in the *Triple Bottom Line* (TBL) framework, which considers environmental, economic, and social sustainability as interdependent pillars (Veseli et al., 2025).

However, translating sustainability into actionable and coherent strategies across tourism actors remains challenging. Common obstacles include short-term economic interests, siloed policies, and fragmented stakeholder coordination (Pinho & Gomes, 2023). This is particularly problematic in destinations where tourism is rapidly growing but lacks governance mechanisms that promote inclusive, long-term planning. Still, the rising awareness and ethical expectations of Gen Z present a powerful opportunity. Their willingness to support sustainable practices creates a demand-side push for more transparent, community-based, and environmentally mindful tourism offers (Ciuculescu & Luca, 2025).

To effectively engage this audience, destination branding must evolve into a more participatory, narrative-based strategy. Digital storytelling particularly when co-created

with local communities, businesses, and eco-influencers has been shown to improve trust and perceived authenticity among younger travelers. It also facilitates emotional engagement, which is a key predictor of brand attachment in tourism (Theocharis & Tsekouropoulos, 2025). Therefore, this study argues for the development of a conceptual framework that links sustainable tourism principles with collaborative marketing efforts as mechanisms for building a compelling and credible destination image among Generation Z. Such a framework is not only timely but also essential for advancing tourism that is both competitive and socially responsible in the post-digital era.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Destination Image and Its Influence on Visit Intention

The concept of destination image is central in tourism studies, significantly influencing tourists' visit intentions and decisions. It encompasses cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions and can be shaped without direct experience. Later models expanded this understanding by including functional, psychological, and holistic attributes (Echtner et al., 1993). Modern perspectives consider destination image as a dynamic construct shaped through organic (e.g., word of mouth), induced (e.g., marketing campaigns), and autonomous (e.g., independent media and user-generated content) sources (Gartner, 1994). In the digital era, autonomous content—especially user-generated content (UGC) has become a dominant influence on the travel decisions of Generation Z. This cohort increasingly relies on social media content that reflects their personal values, such as sustainability and authenticity (Correia et al., 2025; García-Carrión et al., 2023). According to the value-congruence framework, tourists are more likely to select destinations that align with their ethical, environmental, and social ideals (Mar et al., 2025). Studies show that participatory UGC and sustainability-aligned branding significantly boost Gen Z's trust, emotional connection, and intention to visit destinations (Yamagishi et al., 2024).

Destination image also fosters destination trust, acting as a mediating variable between perception and behavioral intention(Prayag & Hosany, 2023; Sharma et al., 2025). Trust is influenced by perceived authenticity and the consistency of digital experience. Moreover, eco-influencers and collaborative marketing strategies involving

local communities and digital actors help build credible and engaging sustainability narratives (Abate et al., 2025). Overall, destination image is no longer merely a promotional visual, but a multidimensional construct composed of values, narratives, emotions, and trust. The demands of Generation Z call for a new model of image formation that integrates sustainability, authenticity, and participatory engagement as core drivers of travel decision-making.

Collaborative Marketing in the Context of Destination Management

Collaborative marketing in the context of tourism destinations refers to a joint promotional strategy involving multiple stakeholders; local governments, tourism industry actors, and local communities to create a cohesive and compelling destination image and value proposition. The theoretical foundation of this approach is rooted in Stakeholder Theory Freeman & Mcvea, (1984), which asserts that the success of an organization or in this case, a destination depends on how effectively it manages the relationships and interests of its diverse stakeholders. In tourism, stakeholders are not merely beneficiaries but also active contributors to the development of destination products and images (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015)

This theory evolved into what is known as Collaborative Destination Marketing (CDM), which, according to (Y. Wang & Xiang, 2007), emphasizes the importance of synergy among actors to build trust, brand identity cohesion, and cross-platform promotional effectiveness. CDM is particularly vital in multi-actor destinations such as Bali, Barcelona, or Kyoto, where destination image results from the interplay of diverse actors often operating with different agendas. Unlike top-down governmental approaches, CDM is more flexible and participatory, focusing on dialogue, joint value creation, and adaptive branding strategies.

A more recent advancement in tourism governance is the application of Network Governance Theory, which reconceptualizes destinations not as top-down managed entities but as complex, interdependent networks of stakeholders—including government, businesses, communities, and tourists—that must be governed through horizontal coordination rather than hierarchical control (H. Wang & Ran, 2023). In this framework, the role of government transitions from that of a central authority to a

facilitator that enables collaboration by setting regulatory parameters, offering infrastructure and financial support, and promoting inclusive stakeholder engagement. Crucially, promotional narratives and marketing content are no longer unilaterally designed by destination authorities but are co-created with local businesses, civil society, and increasingly, digitally connected travelers.

A recent evolution in destination management is the adoption of network governance, which conceptualizes tourism destinations as interdependent systems of organizations working collaboratively rather than through centralized, hierarchical models. In this framework, the role of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) is shifting from that of centralized controllers to facilitators and orchestrators of collaboration among stakeholders, including local businesses, communities, and tourists (Farmaki, 2020). Network governance enhances flexibility, inclusivity, and responsiveness, particularly in addressing complex challenges such as sustainability and digital transformation (Paddison & Walmsley, 2018). Rather than relying solely on top-.down promotion, this model empowers local actors to co-create destination narratives, aligning with the participatory expectations of younger generations such as Gen Z.

A crucial distinction exists between collaborative marketing and community-based branding. Recent scholarship emphasizes that destination image should be co-created not only by formal institutions but also through grassroots narratives from local communities, enabling the articulation of cultural identity, authenticity, and shared values (Daldanise, 2020); Adeyinka-Ojo, 2020). This participatory approach promotes stronger emotional connections between tourists and destinations. However, challenges remain, particularly in ensuring equitable participation across stakeholders with varying levels of capacity, which may lead to representational imbalances or dominant narratives shaped by more powerful actors (Ngo et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2023). Collaborative branding frameworks, when inclusive and network-driven, enhance trust, local pride, and sustainability legitimacy among both residents and visitors.

In the digital age, collaborative marketing strategies have evolved to encompass new actors such as eco-influencers and user-generated content (UGC) creators, reshaping the way destinations communicate their value propositions. Recent studies emphasize that

sustainability-oriented tourism promotion is most effective when stakeholders co-create content that is authentic, interactive, and digitally engaging. This form of value co-creation allows not only tourism organizations but also visitors and online communities to actively participate in shaping the identity and narrative of a destination (Xu et al., 2022; Bhuiyan et al., 2022). As a result, tourism branding becomes a participatory process, where social media platforms act as arenas for collaborative storytelling, trust-building, and reinforcing the destination's ethical and sustainable values (Ravazzani & Hazée, 2022).

Conceptually, collaborative destination marketing faces two core challenges in the digital era. First, effective coordination among heterogeneous stakeholders—governments, tourism operators, local communities, and influencers—requires not only shared objectives but also mechanisms for trust-building and inclusive participation. Second, digital transformation demands varying levels of technological readiness and digital literacy, which often exacerbate capacity asymmetries among actors (Pascual-Fraile et al., 2024). Despite these hurdles, studies show that when managed equitably, stakeholder collaboration and digital engagement significantly enhance destination competitiveness, especially among value-conscious Gen Z travelers (Ciuculescu & Luca, 2025). This generation responds well to destination narratives that integrate sustainability, transparency, and authenticity delivered through co-created content, eco-influencers, and user-generated media. Collaborative marketing thus evolves from a mere promotional tool to a strategic governance mechanism that shapes value-based destination image, builds trust, and fosters long-term loyalty in the tourism ecosystem (Pascual-Fraile et al., 2024; (Prevolšek et al., 2024).

Generation Z as Digital and Environmentally Conscious Tourists

Generation Z (born 1995–2010) is the first generation raised entirely in a digital environment and is often referred to as digital natives due to their constant engagement with technology (Nowacki et al., 2023). Their travel preferences exhibit a unique blend of digital fluency and strong awareness of environmental, social, and ethical issues (Ivasciuc et al., 2025). Research has shown that Gen Z tourists seek immersive, authentic experiences that align with sustainability principles and personal values, favoring

destinations that promote ecological integrity and cultural authenticity (Lu et al., 2025; Pricope Vancia et al., 2023). According to recent findings, the intrinsic motivation of Gen Z to choose a destination is not merely hedonistic but often value-driven—rooted in identity, social impact, and responsible behavior (Nowacki et al., 2023); Seyfi & Hall, 2023).

They adopt a value-driven travel model, viewing tourism as a means of expressing identity and values, rather than mere recreation (Hoang & Nguyen, 2025). Their preferences are shaped by user-generated content, online reviews, and influencers more than by traditional marketing(Abate et al., 2025). As such, eco-influencers and collaborative storytelling play a growing role in shaping Gen Z's destination image.

Gen Z's behavior aligns more with value congruence theory than the traditional push–pull model, prioritizing destinations that reflect environmental conservation and social justice(Sharma et al., 2025). The Smart Tourism Behavior model Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019) also aptly describes Gen Z as active participants in digital value creation and real-time tourism narratives. However, a significant *attitude–behavior gap* persists among Generation Z travelers. While they express strong support for sustainability, this does not always translate into consistent pro-environmental travel behavior—particularly when sustainable options come with higher costs or lower convenience (de Araújo et al., 2025; Liu-Lastres et al., 2025). This discrepancy highlights the importance for destination strategies to not only communicate sustainability narratives but also lower psychological and financial barriers through incentives, education, and digital engagement.

3. PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The conceptual model proposed in this study is built upon a synthesis of grand, middle-range, and applied theories, forming an integrative framework to explain how sustainable tourism and collaborative marketing contribute to shaping a destination image that is meaningful and relevant to Generation Z. Philosophically, this model is grounded in the interpretivist–constructivist paradigm, which views destination image as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped through the interaction of values, narratives, and perceptions particularly within digital and sustainability contexts (Echtner et al., 1993).

At the conceptual level, this model integrates Stakeholder Theory, emphasizing multi-actor collaboration—including governments, tourism businesses, and local communities—in building shared value for destination branding. Within this collaborative framework, value co-creation emerges as a crucial process, particularly in the digital era where tourists—especially Generation Z—are not passive consumers but active participants in shaping destination narratives (Xu et al., 2022; Konar et al., 2024). Gen Z's consumer behavior is increasingly driven by value congruence, sustainability, and digital authenticity, which makes them more responsive to participatory storytelling and content co-produced with local stakeholders and influencers. Studies show that when travelers contribute to destination communication through user-generated content, reviews, or digital engagement, their emotional attachment and trust toward the destination increase significantly (Cheung et al., 2023C. This aligns with the evolution of consumer behavior in tourism, where experiential and ethical dimensions increasingly outweigh traditional, aesthetic promotional appeals. Consequently, collaborative marketing is not only a branding tool but also a strategic governance mechanism that aligns stakeholder interests and responds to the value-driven expectations of contemporary travelers.

To articulate the sustainability dimension, the model adopts the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework from sustainable tourism theory, covering the social, economic, and environmental aspects of tourism (Elkinjton, 1997; Butnaru et al., 2022). These values are internalized by tourists and contribute to two key mediating variables: destination trust and perceived authenticity. The relationship between perceived sustainability, collaborative marketing, and destination image is further explained by Value Congruence Theory (Chon, 1991), which posits that travelers are more likely to feel connected to and develop a higher intention to visit destinations that align with their personal values. Generation Z, characterized by digital fluency and a heightened awareness of sustainability and ethics, is the primary target group in this conceptual model. Their travel preferences are strongly influenced by perceived authenticity, social responsibility, and environmental alignment (Seyfi & Hall, 2023; Nowacki et al., 2023). These values drive Gen Z to seek tourism experiences that are both meaningful and

impact-conscious, positioning them as critical evaluators of destination branding and sustainability claims.
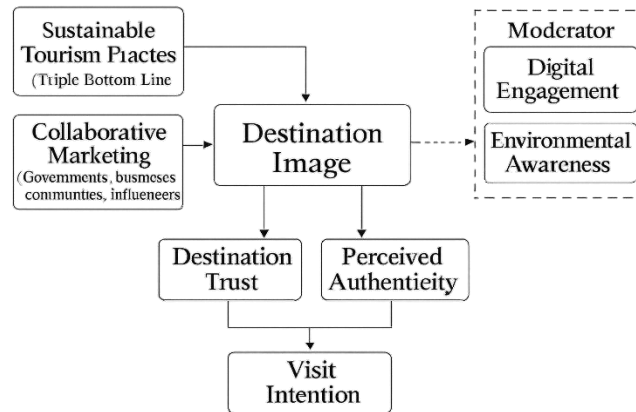

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Gen Z Destination Image

The model also integrates two moderating variables—digital engagement and environmental consciousness—which can either strengthen or weaken the effects of destination strategies on image perception and visit intention. These dynamics are rooted in the Smart Tourism Behavior framework Buhalis & Sinarta, (2019), which conceptualizes Gen Z travelers as active agents who co-design and disseminate tourism experiences in real time through digital and sustainability-oriented interactions.

Altogether, this conceptual model systematically explains how sustainable tourism practices and collaborative marketing strategies shape destination image through pathways of authentic perception and trust, ultimately influencing visit intention. It offers both theoretical and practical insights for destination managers seeking to design tourism development strategies that are value-based, collaborative, and adaptive to the evolving behaviors and expectations of new generations of travelers.This chapter contains research results and discussion.

4. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Implications

This study offers a theoretical contribution by integrating sustainable tourism, stakeholder collaboration, and consumer behavior frameworks into a unified model of destination image formation, specifically targeted at Generation Z. Unlike traditional

models that emphasize symbolic or aesthetic elements, this model reframes destination image as a socially constructed and participatory process. It synthesizes insights from Stakeholder Theory Freeman & Mcvea (1984), alue Congruence Theory Chon (1991). and Smart Tourism Behavior Buhalis & Sinarta, (2019), while also incorporating Generational Cohort (Inglehart, 1997) to explain Gen Z's ethical and technological orientation in tourism decision-making.

This model identifies destination trust and perceived authenticity as key mediators in the relationship between sustainable practices and visit intention. Previous research shows that when destinations project ethical credibility and emotional relevance—especially through sustainability narratives, they increase traveler loyalty and engagement (Rather, 2020) Generation Z, in particular, responds positively to destinations that align with their environmental and social values.

However, an attitude–behavior gap often persists, where Gen Z's declared commitment to sustainability does not always result in responsible travel behavior, particularly when sustainability comes at a personal cost (Çalışkan, 2021). To bridge this gap, co-created digital storytelling and authentic branding are critical. Therefore, the model advances destination branding theory by emphasizing participatory value creation, digital agency, and social impact alignment as core drivers of post-digital tourist behavior.

Practical Implications

From a managerial perspective, the model provides actionable strategies for Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and tourism stakeholders. It recommends that DMOs shift from centralized promotion models to facilitator roles; orchestrating collaborative branding with local communities, digital influencers, and even travelers themselves. This can be operationalized through co-created storytelling platforms, sustainability ambassador programs, and participatory content curation that resonate with Gen Z's expectations for transparency and ethical engagement (Pascual-Fraile et al., 2024; Cheung et al., 2023).

Moreover, the integration of data analytics and social listening tools is essential to personalize messaging, monitor sentiment, and remain responsive to evolving values and digital behaviors. Investing in digital literacy training for local actors also helps

democratize narrative construction and prevent representational imbalance. By aligning messaging with the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) principles; social, environmental, and economic sustainability DMOs can reinforce perceived authenticity and trustworthiness, two crucial determinants of loyalty and visit intention among young, conscious tourists. In sum, this model offers a roadmap for building destination strategies that are not only competitive and communicative but also inclusive, ethical, and generationally adaptive.

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5. CONCLUSION

This study develops a conceptual model that integrates sustainable tourism practices and collaborative marketing strategies to shape a credible and value-aligned destination image for Generation Z. As digital natives with high ethical and environmental awareness, Gen Z travelers expect destinations to embody authenticity, sustainability, and social responsibility. The model emphasizes the role of multi-stakeholder collaboration and digital co-creation in building trust and perceived authenticity, which in turn influence visit intention. It also incorporates mediating (trust, authenticity) and moderating (digital engagement, environmental consciousness) variables to reflect Gen Z's unique behavioral patterns. Future research is recommended to validate the model through empirical testing and to assess its applicability across diverse generational or geographic segments.

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