Hospitality in the age of Gen Z: a critical reflection on evolving customer and workforce expectations

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Abstract

Purpose – Gen Z, the largest and fastest-growing consumer generation, is transforming the hospitality industry as both customers and employees. By critically synthesizing empirical literature, this study aims to explore how this generation's distinct behaviors are reshaping customer expectations and workforce trends within the sector.

Design/methodology/approach – A critical synthesis of empirical studies was used to examine current research on Gen Z as customers and employees in the hospitality industry.

Findings – Gen Z exhibits distinct preferences and expectations in their dual roles as customers and employees, prompting substantial shifts in hospitality industry standards and practices. They rely heavily on digital channels and peer recommendations when making travel decisions and expect highly personalized, tech-enabled experiences. This young cohort of travelers values unique, authentic and sustainable offerings. As employees, Gen Z prioritizes flexible work arrangements, career growth and workplaces aligned with sustainability, diversity and social responsibility. Hospitality providers must adapt their customer experience, marketing and HR strategies to meet these evolving demands.

Practical implications – To engage Gen Z customers and employees in the hospitality industry effectively, businesses must prioritize personalized experiences, leverage technology and adopt sustainable practices aligned with Gen Z's social and environmental values. Moreover, offering adaptable work environments with remote opportunities and investing in professional development enhances appeal for Gen Z employees.

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Understanding Gen Z's values and behaviors can help businesses improve customer satisfaction, attract top talent and remain competitive in a rapidly evolving market.

Originality/value – This study represents a preliminary endeavor to provide a critical assessment of Gen Z in the hospitality and tourism sector, offering novel insights into their travel behaviors, preferences and work values. It explores their expectations, attitudes toward work and career choices, offering guidance on how businesses can meet the evolving demands of this key demographic.

Keywords Gen Z behavior, Digital savvy, Generational change, Hospitality workforce, Hospitality career perceptions

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Generational cohorts, shaped by collective values, preferences and lifelong motivations, exhibit enduring behaviors, such as consumption patterns and travel habits (Sakdiyakorn and Wattanacharoensil, 2018), which markedly influence customer behavior, impacting preferences and decision-making in purchasing goods or services (Seyfi and Hall, 2024). Generational shifts extend beyond mere chronological transitions, profoundly impacting destinations and businesses (Robinson and Schänzel, 2019). Understanding generation-specific demographics and travel behaviors is therefore critical for accurately forecasting future tourism demand (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie, 2019).

In the youth travel market, a new generation of travelers, Gen Z (typically referring to those born from the late 1990s to the late 2000s), has emerged, estimated to constitute over a third of the world's population. Gen Z, also referred to as "postmillennials," or "centennials" (Seyfi *et al.*, 2024a), or the iGeneration due to their familiarity with an advanced media and technology environment, represents the first generation to grow up with the internet and mobile technology (Goh and Okumus, 2020). Known for their digital savvy, entrepreneurial spirit and social consciousness, this cohort embodies a unique connection to the digital age (İlhan *et al.*, 2022).

Recent research highlights Gen Z as the youngest and fastest-growing consumer cohort, exerting significant influence and spending power in the tourism, recreation and hospitality markets (Goh and Lee, 2018; Haddouche and Salomone, 2018; İlhan *et al.*, 2022; Seyfi *et al.*, 2024b). As the Gen Z population grows, it is anticipated to lead to notable shifts in customer preferences for travel, hospitality and leisure. Consequently, destinations and businesses are placing greater emphasis on understanding the characteristics and behaviors of this emerging group of travelers, analyzing the potential development and impact of these changes on the global tourism industry.

Gen Z not only constitutes a significant customer demographic but also plays a substantial role in the workforce. In 2020, Gen Z accounted for 34% of the US hospitality workforce (BLS, 2020). Projected to make up nearly 30% of the global labor force by 2025, this cohort is poised to become the largest segment of hotel staff and future industry leaders (Goh and Okumus, 2020; Stylos *et al.*, 2021). Importantly, Gen Z distinguishes itself in the professional arena by possessing unique priorities, values and requirements that differ from previous generations (Lee and Yu, 2023; Sakdiyakorn *et al.*, 2021; Self *et al.*, 2019). Thus, recent research has emphasized the need for a profound understanding of the characteristics and working attitudes of younger employees entering the hospitality industry as older workforce members retire (Goh and Lee, 2018; Goh and Okumus, 2020; Lee and Yu, 2023; Sakdiyakorn and Wattanacharoensil, 2018; Seyfi *et al.*, 2024a; Stylos *et al.*, 2021).

Existing research in the hospitality field has primarily concentrated on the predominant generational groups in the current workforce, including Baby Boomers (1946–1964), Generation X (1965–1979) and Generation Y (Millennials) (1980–1998). Despite ongoing debates about defining generational boundaries, prior research reveals substantial variations among these

generations concerning work values, behaviors and attitudes (Goh and Okumus, 2020; Sakdiyakorn *et al.*, 2021; Self *et al.*, 2019; Sun *et al.*, 2022; Tang *et al.*, 2020). However, there is a notable gap in understanding how the emerging Gen Z – characterized by their distinct technological inclinations, sustainability values and unique expectations – shapes customer expectations and workforce trends in the hospitality industry. This gap highlights the need for a deeper and critical synthesis of research exploring the unique characteristics, workplace attitudes and preferences of Gen Z.

This paper responds to the call for a deeper examination of the Gen Z cohort (Goh and Okumus, 2020; Sakdiyakorn and Wattanacharoensil, 2018; Seyfi *et al.*, 2024a, 2024b) by providing a critical analysis that synthesizes existing empirical research to discuss the role of Gen Z as both customers and employees within the hospitality sector. The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the primary characteristics and behavioral traits of Gen Z that influence their customer preferences and expectations in the hospitality industry?

RQ2. What strategies can hospitality businesses implement to effectively attract and engage Gen Z customers while aligning with their unique expectations and values?

RQ3. How can hospitality organizations adapt their recruitment, training and work environment practices to meet the needs and expectations of Gen Z employees, and what impact does this have on workforce retention and satisfaction?

The paper is organized as follows: First, it provides an in-depth exploration of Gen Z's unique customer characteristics, discussing the key determinants that define the travel persona of this cohort. Next, it focuses on strategies for attracting and engaging Gen Z as future hospitality customers. Following this, the paper examines how to embrace Gen Z as the future hospitality workforce, addressing the opportunities and challenges associated with integrating this demographic into the industry and highlighting strategies for attracting and retaining them. The paper then outlines directions for future research, identifying gaps in the current understanding of Gen Z's impact on the hospitality sector and suggesting areas for further investigation. Finally, the paper concludes with a summary of key insights and a review of the study's limitations.

2. Defining the distinctive characteristics of Gen Z

2.1 Gen Z core traits, values and habits

Gen Z born into a world dominated by technology and social media, exhibits unique traits that significantly impact their behaviors and preferences. Gen Z's traits can be encapsulated in four key pillars:

(1) an interest in new technologies;

(2) an emphasis on user-friendliness;

(3) a desire for safety; and

(4) a need for temporary escapism (Haddouche and Salomone, 2018; Wood, 2013).

These traits, influenced by global events, contribute to the collective consciousness and development of human values within Gen Z (Wood, 2013). The strong connection of Gen Z to new technologies shapes distinct buying habits centered around personalization and self-identity, distinguishing them from earlier generations (Yamagishi *et al.*, 2024).

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Studies also depict Gen Z with traits such as impatience, individualism and materialism, attributed to their status as a customer-driven generation (Kılıç *et al.*, 2021). While previous comparisons focused on cohorts with distinct formative experiences, such as Millennials and Gen Z, the current young generations share similarities due to common experiences in digital technology and social media. However, life stage differences may introduce inter-generational variations in consumption patterns (Seyfi *et al.*, 2024a). Millennials and Gen Z both seek self-enhancement, but individual and generational differences shape their consumption perceptions and behaviors. While both initially engage with social media, its role may diminish for aging Millennials taking on more responsibilities, in contrast to the digitally immersed Gen Z (Seyfi *et al.*, 2023a).

Major 21st-century challenges, including globalization, global warming, financial crises, terrorism, technological revolutions and, recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, have significantly shaped Gen Z's attitudes and beliefs (Seyfi *et al.*, 2024a). The pandemic has profoundly transformed how we live, work and conduct business, though the long-term implications remain uncertain. The pandemic had profound impacts on Gen Z, affecting their mental health, economic prospects, and social interactions (Vacchiano, 2023). The prolonged periods of lockdown and social distancing heightened their reliance on digital technologies and social networks for maintaining connections and accessing information (Liu *et al.*, 2021). This increased dependency on digital platforms entrenched their preference for online interactions and virtual experiences. Additionally, the pandemic exacerbated mental health issues among Gen Z, leading to higher levels of anxiety, depression and feelings of isolation (Vacchiano, 2023). The economic uncertainty induced by the pandemic has significantly affected Gen Z's career aspirations and financial behaviors, leading to increased risk aversion and a heightened focus on job security, particularly within the hospitality industry (Goh and Baum, 2021). This shift has, in turn, influenced their travel behaviors and practices. With a greater emphasis on financial stability, Gen Z is now more cautious in their travel spending and decision-making, opting for budget-friendly and flexible options (Seyfi *et al.*, 2024a).

While Millennials are often labeled the "Me-Generation," Gen Z shows a greater inclination toward collective action (European Travel Commission, 2020). Actively engaging in activism and progressive ideas, they prioritize themes such as diversity, sustainability and personal empowerment (Seyfi and Hall, 2023). Gen Z's identity and life skills have been forged in a socioeconomic environment marked by instability, turbulence and ambiguity (White, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has also heightened these conditions, making Gen Z more adaptable and resilient, but also more cautious and concerned about global issues (Vacchiano, 2023). Thus, these global events, including the pandemic, along with technology and social networks, significantly impact the general characteristics and behaviors of Gen Z.

2.2 Key determinants influencing the travel persona of Gen Z

The key factors influencing Gen Z's travel preferences and behaviors are outlined below, highlighting how they differ from previous generations:

2.2.1 Gen Z's demand for authentic, urban and spontaneous experiences. Gen Z is characterized by their sophisticated and high travel expectations, presenting significant challenges for the tourism industry (Haddouche and Salomone, 2018). Unlike previous generations, Gen Z exhibits a distinct interest in urban culture and nightlife. This generation of travelers is often identified as immersive explorers and city life enthusiasts (Booking.com, 2019; European Travel Commission, 2020). Their travel behavior is marked by spontaneity, including last-minute decision-making, a pursuit of unique opportunities, and a heavy reliance on word-of-mouth recommendations. This spontaneity is coupled with a preference

for low-cost services, reflecting a pragmatic approach to travel that balances the desire for rich experiences with budget considerations (Mignon, 2003).

Gen Z actively seeks distinctive travel narratives and strives to engage with local communities to gain deeper personal meanings from their journeys (Robinson and Schänzel, 2019). This search for authenticity means that they prefer locally immersive experiences over traditional tourist activities, indicating a shift toward more meaningful and personal travel experiences (Wee, 2019). Moreover, Gen Z also favor exchange travel, which includes programs like study abroad or cultural exchanges, reflecting their global outlook and desire for immersive learning experiences. Conversely, they show less interest in historical, cultural and religious tourism, which were more popular with previous generations (Tavares *et al.*, 2018).

2.2.2 Gen Z and the digital transformation of travel. Various factors shape the experiences of Gen Z, influenced by global, destination-centric and individual forces at different stages of travel (Robinson and Schänzel, 2019). While the reasons and patterns of Gen Z travel may align with those of previous generations, contemporary factors, particularly technological advances, significantly impact their expectations and experiences (Yamagishi *et al.*, 2024). Gen Z relies heavily on the web for travel-related decisions and social sharing. They favor online reviews, instant messaging and chat apps on mobile devices, in contrast to Gen Y, which relies more on personal computers and integrates online information with telephone calls and magazines, showing a greater influence of face-to-face communication and word-of-mouth (Monaco, 2018). This shift towards mobile and instant communication highlights the need for travel businesses to adapt their digital strategies to meet the preferences of Gen Z (Yamagishi *et al.*, 2024).

Social media significantly shapes Gen Z's travel decisions, as they focus on distinctive and emotionally significant experiences (Stylos and Vassiliadis, 2023). Platforms like Instagram, TikTok and YouTube serve as primary sources of inspiration, where visually engaging content and influencer endorsements can heavily influence their travel choices. The rise of digital technology and social media has profoundly impacted Gen Z's travel behaviors, making them highly responsive to online reviews, social media influencers and digital travel communities (Seyfi and Hall, 2024; Yamagishi *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, the integration of technology in travel extends beyond social media. Gen Z values digital experiences, such as mobile check-ins, virtual tours and app-based travel guides. These technological features enhance convenience and provide a richer, more interactive travel experience. Companies that leverage technology to offer personalized and efficient services are likely to attract more Gen Z customers (Monaco, 2018). The emphasis on technology also emphasizes Gen Z's expectation for connectivity during their travels. They prefer destinations and accommodations that offer free Wi-Fi and other digital amenities. This constant connectivity allows them to share their experiences in real-time, further influencing their peers and creating a ripple effect in travel trends.

2.2.3 Gen Z's demand for sustainable and ethical tourism. Gen Z's demand for sustainable and ethical tourism is fundamentally reshaping the travel industry, pushing businesses to realign their practices with the values of this environmentally and socially conscious generation (Seyfi and Hall, 2024). Unlike previous generations, Gen Z places a high priority on sustainability in every aspect of their lives, including their travel choices. This generation is increasingly seeking out destinations and services that demonstrate a genuine commitment to environmental stewardship. They are drawn to eco-friendly accommodations, engage in conservation activities and favor businesses that actively reduce their environmental impact. This preference for sustainability reflects a broader societal shift toward more responsible and mindful travel practices (D'Arco *et al.*, 2023; Djafarova and Foots, 2022; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2023).

The role of digital media in shaping Gen Z's sustainable travel preferences cannot be overstated. Social media platforms have become important tools for this generation, serving

not only as sources of travel inspiration but also as arenas for environmental advocacy and ethical consumerism. Gen Z uses these digital spaces to research and share information about sustainable travel options, enhancing their impact through collective action (Seyfi and Hall, 2024; Seyfi *et al.*, 2023b). Social media influencers and digital campaigns play a significant role in promoting eco-friendly destinations and responsible travel practices, creating a community of informed and conscientious travelers. This extensive digital engagement highlights the necessity for travel businesses to maintain transparency and actively communicate their sustainability efforts to attract and retain Gen Z customers.

Moreover, Gen Z's focus on sustainability extends beyond their travel choices to other areas of their lives, such as dining. They exhibit a strong preference for dining out at establishments that emphasize organic ingredients, sustainable sourcing and eco-friendly practices (Orea-Giner and Fusté-Forné, 2023). This inclination toward ethical consumption reflects a broader commitment to sustainability, where Gen Z actively seeks out brands that align with their values and make informed decisions based on the ethical standards of the products and services they choose. Their approach is characterized by a heightened skepticism toward superficial "greenwashing" and a preference for genuine efforts toward environmental and social responsibility (Seyfi and Hall, 2023).

This generation's ethical considerations are deeply rooted in a growing awareness of broader political and economic issues, including poverty, inequality and economic instability. Gen Z perceives these issues as having significant implications for their lives and expects businesses and governments to respond effectively. Their customer behavior is influenced by the complex social and normative contexts of late capitalism and economic globalization, leading them to evaluate not only the environmental impact of their consumption choices but also their socio-economic effects (Nonomura, 2017). The rise of ethical consumerism among Gen Z is reshaping industry standards, pushing companies to adopt more transparent and responsible practices (Seyfi and Hall, 2024). For the tourism industry, this means not only embracing sustainable practices but also effectively communicating these efforts to meet the expectations of Gen Z and foster a more ethical and sustainable future for travel.

2.2.4 Gen Z's political consumerism. Gen Z's political consumerism signifies a notable transformation in marketplace engagement, characterized by their proactive involvement in both boycotting (negative purchasing and consumption decisions) and buycotting (positive purchasing and consumption decisions) driven by their ethical and social values (Seyfi *et al.*, 2023b). This behavior is driven by a combination of personal factors such as fulfillment, self-identity and frugality, as well as prosocial motivations like altruism and social justice (Seyfi *et al.*, 2023a). For instance, they might avoid travel companies that do not align with their values or actively choose those that support social justice and fair labor practices.

Unlike previous generations, Gen Z does not merely consider traditional factors such as price and convenience when making purchasing decisions. Instead, their customer behavior is heavily influenced by a combination of personal values, social justice concerns and environmental considerations (Siyamiyan Gorji *et al.*, 2023). They actively choose to support brands and businesses that align with their ethical standards, which include a commitment to sustainability, fair labor practices and social equity. Conversely, they are quick to boycott companies that do not meet these standards or are perceived as engaging in deceptive practices like "greenwashing" or failing to address social issues (Seyfi *et al.*, 2023a).

Digital media plays a key role in facilitating Gen Z's political consumerism. Social media platforms such provide Gen Z with the tools to access, share and disseminate information about the ethical practices of companies. These platforms also serve as venues for organizing and mobilizing collective action, whether through online petitions, social media campaigns or viral content that brings attention to unethical business practices (Tuan *et al.*, 2023). By leveraging

these digital tools, Gen Z can quickly spread awareness about companies that support or undermine their values, influencing peers and exerting pressure on businesses to adopt more responsible practices. This digital engagement allows Gen Z to scrutinize corporate behaviors more rigorously and hold companies accountable in real time (Seyfi *et al.*, 2023a).

In addition to their focus on environmental and ethical issues, Gen Z's political consumerism reflects their broader lifestyle choices and values. This generation places a high emphasis on making purchasing decisions that resonate with their commitment to social justice, inclusivity and economic fairness. For example, they are more inclined to support brands that demonstrate transparent supply chains, fair trade practices and community support (Djafarova and Foots, 2022). This extends beyond travel to all areas of consumerism, including fashion, technology and entertainment. Their lifestyle choices are therefore not just about individual satisfaction but are also driven by a desire to contribute to societal change and promote ethical standards across various industries.

The impact of Gen Z's political consumerism is reshaping industry standards and prompting businesses to reassess their practices and policies. Companies that fail to align with the ethical expectations of Gen Z risk losing their market share and damaging their reputation. As a result, there is a growing emphasis on transparency and corporate social responsibility. Businesses are increasingly adopting and communicating sustainable and ethical practices to appeal to Gen Z customers, who are not just passive buyers but active participants in the global movement towards a more equitable and sustainable economy. This shift highlights the influence of Gen Z in driving changes across industries through their conscientious and politically motivated customer behaviors.

3. Ways to embrace Gen Z as future hospitality customers

3.1 How does Gen Z's reliance on technology influence their perception and engagement of hospitality services?

Gen Z's reliance on technology significantly shapes their perception and engagement with hospitality services, creating numerous opportunities for the industry to enhance the customer experience through innovative digital solutions. As digital natives, Gen Z has grown up with technology deeply integrated into their lives, including their travel and hospitality experiences. They use smartphones, apps and online platforms as primary tools for researching, booking and reviewing hospitality services. This tech-savvy approach leads them to prioritize convenience, instant access to information and digital communication channels. Consequently, they expect hospitality providers to offer user-friendly digital experiences, such as booking apps and virtual concierge services, which align with their high expectations for efficiency and personalization (Stylos *et al.*, 2021).

Social media significantly shapes Gen Z's travel preferences and perception of hospitality services, and they use them for gathering opinions, reading reviews and sharing experiences. Positive or negative feedback on these platforms can significantly impact a hospitality provider's reputation and influence potential customers' decisions. User-generated content and vlogs have emerged as influential advertising tools that affect Gen Z's destination choices and booking decisions (Goh and Lee, 2018; Yamagishi *et al.*, 2024). Community and materialistic values also significantly impact their social media use, further affecting their engagement with and decisions about hospitality services (Chang *et al.*, 2023).

Moreover, Gen Z's tech-savvy nature drives innovation in the hospitality industry. Businesses that invest in cutting-edge technologies such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI) can gain a competitive edge. Studies suggest that Gen Z's intention to use VR is positively influenced by travel fears and environmental concerns, and this intention is associated with a willingness to pay a premium and engage in electronic word-of-mouth. Additionally, Gen Z positively perceives robots' effectiveness in

influencing booking intentions and expresses interest in revisiting robotic restaurants post-pandemic (Romero and Lado, 2021). This highlights the critical role of technological integration in meeting Gen Z's expectations and enhancing their overall travel experience.

Gen Z's heavy reliance on technology significantly influences their engagement with hospitality services, driving demand for innovative and personalized digital solutions. The industry's ability to adapt and invest in advanced technologies not only meets the expectations of this tech-savvy demographic but also positions businesses to gain a competitive edge in an increasingly digital marketplace.

3.2 What influence do Gen Z's sustainability and social responsibility values have on their consumption decisions in the hospitality sector?

Gen Z exhibits a strong affinity for sustainability and social responsibility, influencing their preference for businesses embracing eco-friendly practices. This highlights a proclivity among Gen Z to prioritize eco-friendly accommodations (D'Arco *et al.,* 2023; TELUS International, 2019). Features such as credibility and sustainability (Morrone *et al.,* 2024), sustainability and social interaction (Fan *et al.,* 2023), corporate social responsibility and the green image of hotel brands (Seyfi and Hall, 2024), brand prestige and inclusivity significantly influence Gen Z's choices and loyalty toward hospitality brands. Factors such as environmental knowledge and ethical food choices (Orea-Giner and Fusté-Forné, 2023), technology-based services, experiential innovativeness (Ding *et al.,* 2022) and the significance of brands sharing social and environmental values, influence Gen Z's perspectives on sustainable consumption in food tourism (Ayyildiz *et al.,* 2022). Thus, Gen Z's strong affinity for sustainability and social responsibility shapes their preferences within the hospitality sector, underlining the need for businesses to integrate eco-friendly practices, promote diversity and inclusion, and communicate their commitment to social and environmental values in their practices and operations. By doing so, businesses can cultivate lasting loyalty and appeal to this increasingly influential demographic.

3.3 What strategies should hospitality businesses use to attract and retain Gen Z customers successfully?

Focusing on technology and sustainability/social responsibility values is essential for hospitality businesses aiming to attract and retain Gen Z customers, given the unique characteristics and expectations of this generation. Gen Z, as digital natives, has grown up with rapid technological advancements and an increased awareness of global issues, making these factors central to their customer behavior. Technology, particularly in the form of advanced digital solutions and innovative experiences, significantly influences their perceptions and interactions with brands. Simultaneously, their strong commitment to sustainability and social responsibility shapes their expectations and purchasing decisions (Seyfi *et al.,* 2024a, 2024b).

To effectively appeal to Gen Z, hospitality businesses should prioritize integrating cutting-edge technology into their operations. This generation's reliance on technology presents opportunities to enhance the guest experience through innovative digital solutions. Implementing tools such as AR and VR can offer immersive previews of accommodations and amenities, helping potential guests make informed decisions and increasing engagement. Additionally, leveraging AI for personalized guest interactions – through chatbots and virtual concierges – can streamline the booking process and enhance customer service. For instance, implementing AI-driven recommendation engines can offer personalized room suggestions, dining options and local activities based on individual preferences and past behaviors. The integration of robotics for tasks like room service or check-in/check-out can also create a unique and memorable experience, caters to Gen Z's demand for convenience and digital interactions (Romero and Lado, 2021).

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Offering flexible and innovative booking options is also essential to cater to Gen Z's preference for technology and spontaneity. Providing a user-friendly mobile app that enables easy booking, modifications and cancellations caters to their need for convenience and flexibility. Features such as last-minute deals, instant booking confirmations and real-time updates on availability can accommodate their often-spontaneous travel plans. This flexibility ensures a smoother booking experience and aligns with Gen Z's tech-savvy nature.

Digital media plays a significant role in shaping Gen Z's engagement with brands. Using social media platforms effectively – through engaging content and partnerships with influencers – can help businesses reach and resonate with this audience. Gen Z spends significant time on platforms like Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat, making it essential for hospitality businesses to have a strong social media presence. Interactive content such as Instagram Stories, TikTok videos, and live Q&A sessions can capture their attention. For example, a hotel might share behind-the-scenes glimpses of its operations or run social media contests encouraging guests to post their experiences using a branded hashtag. This not only promotes the brand but also engages Gen Z in a way that feels authentic and interactive.

Highlighting sustainability and social responsibility is also important. Gen Z is particularly attuned to environmental and social issues, so incorporating and communicating eco-friendly and socially responsible practices can significantly influence their choices. Businesses should implement green practices such as reducing single-use plastics and promoting energy-saving initiatives. Another strategy involves integrating social responsibility into the core of the hospitality business model. This includes developing programs that support local communities, such as sourcing food and products from local vendors, thereby boosting the local economy and reducing carbon footprints associated with transportation. Offering guests options to contribute to social causes, such as making a small donation to a charity during their booking process or participating in volunteer activities, can further align with Gen Z's desire to support ethical practices. Clearly articulating these efforts through the company's website and social media channels helps build trust and appeal to environmentally conscious travelers such as Gen Z.

Creating authentic and immersive experiences is key to appealing to Gen Z's desire for unique and meaningful travel. This generation seeks genuine interactions and local culture, so businesses should focus on offering exclusive experiences that connect travelers with the destination. Partnering with local businesses to provide culinary tours, cultural workshops or adventure activities can enhance the travel experience. Marketing these unique offerings effectively can attract Gen Z customers looking for authenticity and a deeper connection with their travel destinations.

4. Ways to embrace Gen Z as the future hospitality workforce

4.1 How do Gen Z's attitudes and values influence their career aspirations in the hospitality industry?

Gen Z employees in the hospitality sector have distinct expectations shaped by their values and preferences. Studies focused on Gen Z's career aspirations in the hospitality sector and found that Gen Z tends to seek flexible working arrangements, avenues for career growth and workplaces aligned with their values, including sustainability and social responsibility (Goh and Okumus, 2020). Values such as universalism, benevolence, self-direction, achievement and security (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021), as well as team spirit, flexibility, career assurance, work–life balance, faster progression, independence and workplace happiness (Goh and Okumus, 2020), play significant roles in shaping Gen Z's career aspirations in the hospitality sector. Moreover, early career development and comparable occupational standings (Walmsley et al., 2020), intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Barhate and Dirani, 2022), tech-savviness, acceptance of differences, a desire for higher salaries and a greater inclination toward technology (Self et al., 2019) have been identified

as key motivators influencing Gen Z's attraction to careers in hospitality. Additionally, factors such as job satisfaction (Goh and Lee, 2018), job resources (Chiang and Chen, 2023), psychological, developmental and social values associated with employers (Kapuściński *et al.*, 2023), and career beliefs, self-efficacy and social support (Goh and Okumus, 2020), are also significant considerations for Gen Z's career choices in the hospitality industry.

Other strands of research have found that Gen Z prioritizes concerns such as sustainability, diversity and social justice (Seyfi *et al.*, 2023a), as well as social responsibility in their workplace (Leung *et al.*, 2021; Self *et al.*, 2019; Sun *et al.*, 2022), and they expect the businesses they work for to align with these values. Ethical dilemmas related to balancing customer satisfaction with the guilt of wasting food have also been found among motivations of Gen Z hotel workers regarding food waste (Goh and Jie, 2019).

The various perspectives on Gen Z's attitudes toward employers and career aspirations in the hospitality industry highlight a range of factors influencing their choices and motivations. Understanding these perspectives is essential for hospitality businesses to tailor recruitment and retention strategies effectively and foster a positive work environment that aligns with Gen Z's expectations and aspirations.

4.2 How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced Gen Z's perceptions of careers in the hospitality industry and their acceptance of advanced technology in the workplace?

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced Gen Z's perception of careers in the hospitality industry, leading many to perceive it as a risky career option due to factors such as low pay and long working hours (Sakdiyakorn *et al.*, 2021). Growing up amid economic decline, inequality, employment instability and pervasive social media (Robinson and Schänzel, 2019), Gen Z places particular emphasis on job stability, protection and privacy (Goh and Okumus, 2020). Other studies have explored the impact of COVID-related corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities on Gen Z's intentions to enter the hotel industry (Sun *et al.*, 2022), as well as how the hotel industry, through CSR during COVID-19, addresses post-pandemic labor shortages and attracts Gen Z (Leung *et al.*, 2021).

The integration of technology into the workplace has also been seen as a strategy to attract and retain Gen Z talent in the post-pandemic era. During the pandemic, Gen Z employees have shown a favorable inclination toward working in technologically advanced hotels, expressing a strong intention to use such technologies (Yu *et al.*, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has also significantly impacted Gen Z's perception and acceptance of advanced technology in the hospitality industry. Despite initial concerns, Gen Z employees have displayed a positive inclination toward technologically advanced hotels. This shift in perception highlights the importance for hospitality businesses to prioritize technology integration as a means to attract and retain Gen Z talent post-pandemic. However, addressing barriers such as technical challenges and insecurity regarding service robots is critical for fostering Gen Z's acceptance of technology in the workplace. Furthermore, recognizing Gen Z's motivations, such as the desire for meaningful work and excitement (Goh and Okumus, 2020), can further enhance talent retention and management strategies during and beyond the pandemic.

4.3 What strategies should hospitality businesses use to attract and retain Gen Z employees successfully?

Gen Z, poised to be a vital force in the workforce, brings unique expectations and values that hospitality businesses must address to attract and retain this emerging demographic (Stylos *et al.*, 2021; Zhou *et al.*, 2024). As the next generation of talent, Gen Z's integration into the hospitality industry necessitates a deeper understanding of their preferences and work attitudes. While the entry of Gen Z into the hospitality industry offers fresh perspectives and

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expectations, both attracting and retaining Gen Z workers have been challenging for hospitality executives (Zhou *et al.*, 2024). Prior research emphasizes the critical role of understanding Gen Z's working attitudes for talent and human resource management (Skinner *et al.*, 2018). Talent management strategies, including offering transparent pay structures, travel opportunities and mentorship programs, have been discussed as key factors in retaining Gen Z in the hospitality sector (Goh and Okumus, 2020; Skinner *et al.*, 2018). Previous studies have also shown that Gen Z individuals prioritize flexibility in their work schedules, opting for part-time or alternative arrangements to maintain a balanced work–life equilibrium (Goh and Okumus, 2020; Self *et al.*, 2019). They also value engaging in meaningful work and collaborative project-based assignments over rigid hierarchical structures (Goh and Okumus, 2020; Sakdiyakorn and Wattanacharoensil, 2018).

Implementing career-long learning plans and job rotation opportunities have been identified as effective strategies to attract and retain Gen Z employees, facilitating their skill enhancement and professional growth within the organization (Leung *et al.*, 2021). Establishing a collaborative organizational culture is essential, as Gen Z appreciates teamwork and tasks that encourage creative contributions (Sakdiyakorn and Wattanacharoensil, 2018). Furthermore, acknowledging Gen Z's reliance on technology for communication and social interaction (Yu *et al.*, 2022) by integrating social media interactions into workplace environments has been proposed as a method to enhance employee engagement and promote brand awareness (Goh and Okumus, 2020).

The pandemic, as a global event, has significantly influenced Gen Z's work expectations and behaviors. The shift to remote work, coupled with increased health and safety concerns, has heightened Gen Z's demand for flexibility and adaptability in their work environments (Goh and Baum, 2021). Studies showed that during the pandemic, many Gen Z workers prioritized jobs that offer remote or hybrid work options, valuing the ability to maintain a better work–life balance and avoid potential exposure to health risks (Self *et al.*, 2019).

The pandemic has also accelerated the reliance on technology for communication and work processes, reinforcing Gen Z's preference for digital interactions. This shift highlights the importance of integrating technology into the workplace to enhance engagement and productivity. Hospitality businesses can leverage digital tools such as virtual collaboration platforms, online training modules and digital communication channels to facilitate remote work, streamline operations and support employee development. Additionally, incorporating social media into workplace culture can help businesses connect with Gen Z employees, who are accustomed to digital interactions and value platforms that facilitate social connectivity and professional networking (Yu *et al.*, 2022).

Moreover, the pandemic has heightened the importance of meaningful work and a sense of purpose among Gen Z employees. This generation is increasingly drawn to employers that demonstrate corporate social responsibility and contribute to societal well-being. To attract and retain Gen Z talent, hospitality businesses should emphasize their commitment to social and environmental issues, such as sustainability and community support. Engaging employees in purpose-driven projects, supporting local initiatives and demonstrating a genuine commitment to positive social impact can enhance job satisfaction and foster loyalty among Gen Z workers (Seyfi *et al.*, 2024a, 2024b).

Furthermore, the economic uncertainties and disruptions caused by the pandemic have shifted Gen Z's career priorities toward job security and career growth opportunities. This generation values stability and is keen on roles that offer clear pathways for advancement and professional development. Hospitality businesses should invest in career-long learning plans, mentorship programs and job rotation opportunities to provide Gen Z employees with continuous growth and

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skill enhancement. Offering structured career development paths and promoting from within can help address Gen Z's desire for long-term career progression and increase employee retention.

Finally, the pandemic has emphasized the need for a collaborative and inclusive work environment. Gen Z employees, who value teamwork and creative collaboration, are more likely to thrive in workplaces that foster a sense of community and encourage collective problem-solving. Creating a supportive and inclusive organizational culture, where employees feel valued and empowered to contribute their ideas, can enhance job satisfaction and retention.

5. Expanding insights into Gen Z's impact on the hospitality industry: future research directions

A review of the existing literature on Gen Z's impact on the hospitality industry reveals several notable gaps that warrant further exploration. These gaps are outlined and summarized in Figure 1.

First, most studies generalize Gen Z's characteristics and preferences, overlooking their diversity in cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses and geographic locations (Seyfi *et al.,* 2023a, 2023b), risking oversimplification of their interactions with the hospitality industry. Additionally, insufficient research has been conducted on the cultural context influencing Gen Z's attitudes and behaviors in hospitality, necessitating cross-cultural insights and region-specific strategies for effective engagement. Future research could explore how factors like cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic status within Gen Z impact their interactions with the hospitality industry.

Second, there is a lack of an intersectional lens to explore how intersecting identities shape Gen Z's consumption patterns and workplace expectations, thereby providing a more in-depth understanding of their impact on the industry. Additionally, the existing literature has rarely examined the underlying reasons or mechanisms driving the behaviors of Gen Z. Merely describing traits such as tech-savviness or sustainability consciousness without contextualizing
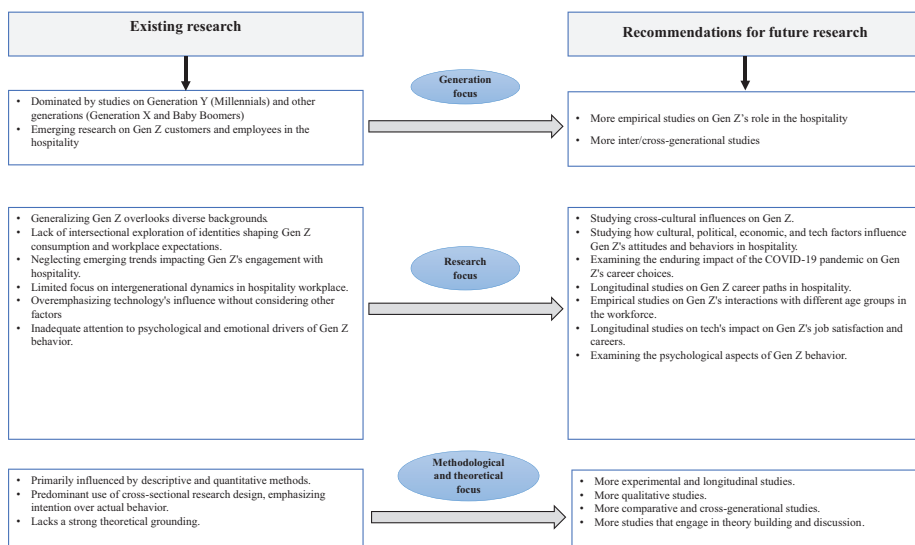
Source: Authors' own creation

Figure 1. Directions for future research

them within broader societal trends or psychological frameworks limits the depth of understanding. Therefore, there is a need for unpacking the link between cultural, political, economic and technological factors that shape Gen Z's attitudes and behaviors in the hospitality sector.

Third, while extensive literature discusses Gen Z's characteristics, it often overlooks emerging trends that could significantly impact their engagement with the hospitality industry. For instance, while sustainability interests are acknowledged, there is a lack of attention to other rising trends such as alternative accommodations, ethical consumerism, influencer-driven travel decisions and political consumerism. Neglecting these trends limits the literature's ability to offer forward-thinking insights for strategic decision-making in hospitality. Moreover, longitudinal studies tracking Gen Z employees' career trajectories and retention rates in hospitality are essential for understanding the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and can offer insights into talent management strategies and industry trends over time.

Fourth, the intergenerational interactions in the hospitality workplace have not been sufficiently investigated. Understanding how Gen Z employees engage with older generations such as Baby Boomers or Gen X, and dealing with potential conflicts, is essential for a harmonious, multigenerational workforce. Qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups can gather insights into employees' experiences and perceptions of these interactions. Additionally, future research could use quantitative surveys to evaluate how intergenerational conflicts affect job satisfaction and performance and explore how Gen Z collaborates with other age groups to boost performance and innovation.

Fifth, while recognizing Gen Z's tech affinity, often labeled as tech-savvy or digital natives, current literature tends to overemphasize technology's influence without adequately considering other significant factors. Although technology undoubtedly shapes Gen Z's behaviors and expectations, it is essential to explore how broader societal trends, economic conditions and cultural changes intersect with technology to impact their involvement in the hospitality industry. Future research could explore how societal trends, economic factors, cultural shifts and technology influence Gen Z's attitudes and behaviors in hospitality, using qualitative and quantitative methods. Longitudinal studies and investigations into the impact of advanced technologies like AI, robotics and automation on Gen Z's job satisfaction and career aspirations are also significant for understanding future workforce dynamics.

Sixth, while Gen Z's traits and preferences have been the focus of several research studies, the underlying psychological and emotional drivers that influence their decisions have not been sufficiently explored. Gen Z's attitudes toward travel, consumption and work are not solely determined by external factors such as technology or societal trends but are also shaped by internal motivations, aspirations and anxieties. By exploring the psychological dimensions of Gen Z's behaviors, a deeper understanding of their engagement with the hospitality industry could be provided.

Seventh, a significant limitation in the existing literature is the predominant focus on measuring intention rather than actual behavior among Gen Z customers. While intentions may offer insights into individuals' predispositions and attitudes, they may not always align with subsequent actions due to various factors such as situational constraints, external influences or changing preferences over time (Juvan and Dolnicar, 2014). By relying heavily on intention-based measures, an overly optimistic or idealized view of Gen Z's engagement with the hospitality industry may be presented, failing to capture the complexities of their actual behaviors and decision-making processes.

Finally, and most importantly, the existing literature lacks a solid theoretical framework to guide the analysis of Gen Z's role in the hospitality industry, resulting in a gap in theoretical development that could offer deeper insights into their behaviors and motivations. Drawing on established theories from sociology, psychology and marketing, the literature could offer new theoretical perspectives on Gen Z's impact in hospitality. Future research

should prioritize theoretical development to understand Gen Z's influence in hospitality beyond descriptive studies. Theoretical exploration can uncover underlying mechanisms guiding Gen Z's behaviors and preferences, leading to refined models that deepen our understanding of factors influencing their decisions in hospitality.

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6. Conclusion

This paper has critically synthesized the existing empirical research on Gen Z as both customers and employees in the hospitality industry. This review highlights that Gen Z, known as the most digitally native and socially conscious generation, is significantly reshaping industry norms and expectations. As customers, Gen Z's reliance on technology, demand for personalized experiences, and preference for sustainability and authenticity urge hospitality businesses to innovate and adapt. Their digital savviness drives the need for online interactions, while their strong ethical values necessitate genuine commitment to social and environmental responsibility. On the employee front, Gen Z's career aspirations are shaped by a desire for flexibility, work–life balance and alignment with organizational values such as sustainability and diversity. This cohort values early career development, technological integration and a supportive work environment. The hospitality industry must address these preferences to attract and retain top Gen Z talent. Our synthesis also reveals critical research gaps that were summarized above. Addressing these gaps will be significant for advancing research and developing effective strategies tailored to Gen Z.

Despite the insights gained from this critical review paper, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the review's scope is inherently constrained by the availability and quality of existing literature. The synthesis relies primarily on the studies reviewed, which may not include all relevant research or capture the full spectrum of Gen Z's in the hospitality industry. Second, when reviewing a diverse set of studies, it is sometimes challenging to reconcile conflicting findings or perspectives, which can make it challenging to reach a clear consensus or provide definitive conclusions. Third, the findings and analysis are predominantly based on peer-reviewed journal articles published in English, which may exclude potentially relevant research from other linguistic contexts. Furthermore, the review may not fully address the complexity of Gen Z's diverse experiences and backgrounds. Given the variation in cultural, socioeconomic and regional contexts, the experiences and expectations of Gen Z may differ significantly across different groups. The review's generalized findings may therefore not be able to capture these differences. The authors have acknowledged this limitation and have emphasized the need for further research to explore the heterogeneity within the Gen Z population and its implications for the hospitality industry.

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