

Environmental Awareness among Young People: a Study on Sustainable Travel Practices among Gen Z Travelers in Ho Chi Minh City

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Abstract

Due to the increasing global significance of climate change the tourism sector is increasingly encouraged to adopt more sustainable practices. This exploratory study examined the environmental awareness and sustainable travel behavior of Generation Z travelers in Ho Chi Minh City, a rapidly developing urban destination facing growing environmental challenges. Based on survey data collected from 50 participants aged 18 to 27, a noticeable gap between environmental awareness and self-reported sustainable travel behavior was identified within the surveyed sample. Results also suggest that financial constraints, convenience-related habits, and limited supporting infrastructure may hinder the adoption of sustainable travel behavior. Although these findings were based on a small exploratory sample, they provided preliminary insights that may support future studies and discussions on promoting sustainable urban tourism in Viet Nam.

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Keywords

Environmental consciousness; sustainable tourism behavior; Generation Z tourists; awareness-behavior gap.

1 Introduction

Tourism bodies are under strain to integrate sustainable practices owing to global warming and destruction of the environment [1]. Sustainable tourism has therefore become an important element in the process of developing tourism policies in many countries [2]. Generation Z (Gen Z) is regarded as the most environmentally conscious generation due to the extensive interaction with social media and environmental issues [3]. Today's young travelers are more knowledgeable about environmental issues and sustainable living due to the use of technology and internet communication [4]. Nonetheless, environmental consciousness does not always translate into environmentally sustainable actions. Previous studies have reported that many young

tourists continue to prioritize convenience, travel costs, and comfort over environmental considerations when making travel decisions [5, 6].

Tourism development has been seen as one of the contributors to economic growth in Viet Nam. The same trend has also been observed in cities such as Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). Nevertheless, urbanization in HCMC has led to environmental challenges such as air pollution, plastic wastes, and traffic jam. The challenges have started becoming evident in urban life on a daily basis. There is a lack of studies that have been done on sustainable behaviors in relation to Gen Z tourists in Viet Nam [7]. The difference between environmental awareness and behavior is described in literature as the awareness-behavior gap or the value-action gap. It implies that individuals may hold

environmentally-friendly values and attitudes but are unable to apply them to their actual behavior due to different personal and contextual barriers. In tourism studies, the awareness-behavior gap has already been noticed in travelers who claim to be supporters of sustainable tourism but actually make their travel decisions considering their convenience, cost, and accessibility. Thus, using the awareness-behavior gap theory, the current study is going to be an exploratory one in order to show initial evidence for the existence of such a phenomenon among Gen Z travelers in HCMC. Consequently, the goal of the exploratory study is to investigate the degree of environmental awareness and sustainable travel behavior of Gen Z travelers in HCMC.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research approach

The research design used in this study was that of exploratory descriptive research through the use of quantitative research method. In an exploratory study, the purpose of conducting such a study is to generate initial findings regarding the environmental consciousness and sustainable travel behavior of Gen Z travelers in HCMC. Descriptive research was deemed suitable for the study since it gave the researchers the opportunity to observe the level of awareness and behavior of the respondents.

2.2 Data collection

In order to gather the primary data, the researchers developed a comprehensive questionnaire after conducting thorough research in the sustainable tourism literature and Gen Z consumption behavior. The questionnaire was developed by using the guidelines provided by previous literature studies. The researchers prepared a questionnaire that is specific to the setting of HCMC. The questionnaire was divided into five sections: (A) demographics such as age group, occupation type, and how often respondents' travel; (B) awareness about sustainable tourism concepts and principles; (C) self-reported behavior regarding eco-friendly activities while traveling; (D) preferences regarding modes of transportation and

eco-friendly accommodations; and (E) respondents' willingness to pay a premium for sustainable tourism services. The method of data collection was a mix of online sharing through social media sites popular among Gen Z, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, and offline data collection by meeting people at popular spots for tourists and university students in HCMC. The data was collected from October to November 2025. A convenience sampling method was used, which is appropriate for this study. A total of 50 valid data were collected for the study.

2.3 Data analysis

Data cleaning and coding was done using Microsoft Excel. Frequency distributions, percentage distribution, and mean values were computed for respondents' demographics, awareness, and self-reported travel practices. The results were shown through tables and figures to ensure better presentation of the data. Results were then analyzed and discussed in light of other scholarly research on sustainable tourism. Being a pilot study with a small sample size, the analysis was limited to descriptive statistics only.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Demographic characteristics of the sample

An analysis of 50 valid respondents showed that most of them were university students, accounting for 70% of the total sample size. About 25% of the sample size comprised young office workers. A small portion comprised individuals who work in other sectors. Most of the respondents fell within the age range of 20 to 25 years, representing the Gen Z core group in Viet Nam. In terms of gender balance, more females were present than males. This is typical of academia. When it comes to travel, most of the sample indicates that they make one to three trips annually.

This demographic data is consistent with the goals of this research project. However, the limited sample size and the employment of convenience sampling in this research design should be taken into account when extrapolating the results. The demographic characteristics presented in this study should be

interpreted as reflecting only the surveyed sample rather than the wider Gen Z population in HCMC.

3.2 Awareness of sustainable tourism

The survey results revealed a notably high level of awareness regarding sustainable tourism concepts and environmental issues among Gen Z respondents in HCMC.

Table 1 Respondents' awareness of sustainable tourism ($n = 50$)

Statement	Mean Score	Agree/Strongly Agree (4-5) (%)
I understand the concept of "sustainable tourism"	4.2	68
I am aware of the importance of protecting the environment when traveling	4.4	74
I believe individual behavior impacts destination sustainability	4.3	70
Composite average	4.3	68

The findings from the survey showed that the surveyed people have fairly good knowledge and awareness about the environment and sustainable tourism practices. As shown in Table 1, 68% of the participants gave themselves marks between 4 and 5 for their understanding of sustainable tourism and the significance of protecting the environment while traveling. In addition, most of the participants acknowledged that the tourists' conduct could affect the sustainability of tourism sites. This finding is in line with previous research that Gen Z has relatively better environmental awareness than other generations [8]. Today's youth is always informed about sustainability via the various communication platforms and the media. This has resulted in greater

concern about environmental pollution and sustainable consumption behavior. The role of educational institutions in enhancing environmental consciousness in young generations cannot be ignored [9, 10]. With the implementation of environmental education programs at university and school levels, students have been gradually made more aware about sustainable consumption.

3.3 The gap between awareness and sustainable travel practices

While the awareness levels were encouraging, the most significant and concerning finding of this study was the substantial gap between what Gen Z travelers know and what they actually do when traveling.

Table 2 Comparison between awareness and sustainable behaviors ($n = 50$)

Category	Mean Score	High Awareness/ Regular Practice (4-5) (%)
Awareness of sustainable tourism	4.3	68
Regular environmentally friendly behaviors	3.6	46
Awareness-behavior difference	-0.7	-22

This disparity can be seen clearly in Table 2 above. Although 68% reported a high level of awareness, only 46% state that they perform eco-friendly actions when traveling. The descriptive results indicate a

difference of approximately 22 percentage points between awareness and reported behavior. Because this exploratory study relied on descriptive statistics, no statistical significance testing was conducted.

Table 3 Specific sustainable practices among respondents ($n = 50$)

Practice	Mean Score	Regular Practice (4-5) (%)
Preference for green transportation (walking, cycling, public transport)	3.8	50
Preference for eco-certified accommodation (if prices similar)	4.0	60
Reducing waste/plastic use when traveling	3.5	42

Carrying reusable items (bottles, bags)	3.4	38
Supporting local businesses and food vendors	4.1	64

Transportation responses demonstrate a medium degree of preference for sustainable mobility options. Almost half of the respondents claimed that they occasionally opt for walking, cycling, or taking public transportation in moving from one place to another within cities. Such preferences can be attributed not only to environmental consciousness but also to factors such as affordability and convenience. Within a busy city such as HCMC, these mobility practices provide individuals with firsthand experience of the surrounding environment rather than traveling through private modes of transport, which are infamous for causing pollution [11].

When it comes to accommodation, 60% of the participants said they would choose eco-friendly hotels and homestays, however, only provided that their prices were comparable to non-green alternatives. In other words, it implies that sustainability is viewed positively, although still assessed in terms of cost-effectiveness. Such an outcome confirms the previous

results that showed that the price issue is critical for young people's booking decisions [12].

The frequency of behaviors related to sustainability seems to be less consistent than attitudes or intentions. The number of actions that included using fewer plastics or always taking reusable products was relatively low. It suggests that it is more challenging to sustain environmental awareness in regular travel settings because convenience often overrides other factors when making decisions. This trend is consistent with previous studies, indicating a continuous discrepancy between pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors in tourist destinations [13].

3.4 Main barriers to sustainable travel practices

In order to identify the reasons for this disparity between awareness and actions by Gen Z travelers, the research focused on analyzing the barriers encountered by Gen Z travelers during the process of moving towards sustainability. Four broad categories of barriers was found, and these barriers do not work in isolation from one another in a simplistic manner.

Table 4 Willingness to pay extra for sustainable options ($n = 50$)

Statement	Mean Score	Agree/Strongly Agree (4-5) (%)
Willing to pay up to 10% extra for sustainable options	2.8	32
Paying more to protect environment is worthwhile	3.5	48
Would choose slightly more expensive option if better for environment	3.2	40

The results indicate Gen Z travelers in HCMC and how aware they are about sustainable tourism and how this awareness translates to actual behavior. At the top is awareness, with a mean of 4.3. This shows that Gen Z has a good understanding of sustainable tourism ideas. However, actual behavior is represented by green transportation with a mean of 3.8, eco-friendly accommodations with a mean of 4.0, and reducing plastic usage with a mean of 3.5. The least frequently reported behavior was willingness to pay extra for sustainable tourism with a mean of 2.8.

These figures showed that although Gen Z is aware of sustainable tourism, actual behavior is inhibited by various factors. The gap is much clearer when it comes to Gen Z travelers' knowledge of sustainability, which is rated at a 4.3, and their willingness to pay for it, which is a much lower 2.8. Gen Z travelers are for the concept of sustainable travel, but when it comes to paying for it, it's a different story altogether. Financial and convenience factors appear to have a stronger influence than sustainability beliefs.

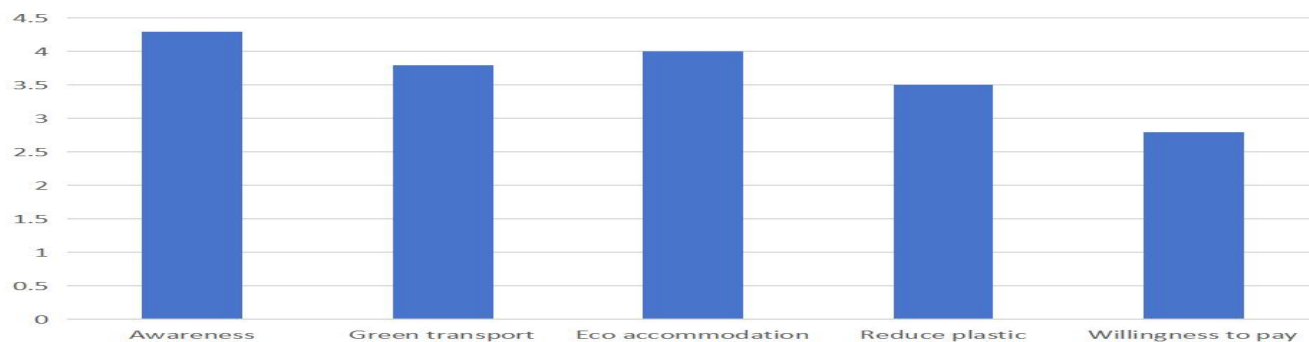


Figure 1 Comparison of sustainable tourism awareness and practices among Gen Z travelers in HCMC

3.4.1 Financial constraints

The problem of money comes up in different ways. For example, eco-friendly accommodations are more expensive than normal accommodations. Organic foods are more expensive than non-organic foods. Sustainable tour operators that provide quality services by keeping a low number of tourists at a time, as well as paying their guides a fair wage, are more expensive than other tour operators that are not sustainable. These are some challenges that young tourists face as far as money is concerned.

Many participants admitted that they “would love to choose sustainable options” but “cannot afford it”. One participant explained it like this: “I know I should stay at eco-hotels and eat organic food when I’m traveling, but as a student, I have to choose the cheapest option”. The above attitude was mentioned several times; it shows that there is a constant conflict between what is best for the environment and what is affordable.

3.4.2 Convenience and habit

The next challenge is the strength of the influence of convenience and routine. In the street food scene and the busy shops of HCMC, single-use plastics are ubiquitous. Drinks are served in plastic cups with plastic straws. Food is packaged in plastic bags and containers. Items are placed in plastic bags after being purchased. All of these are done without a second thought by the vendors and the customers.

For young travelers who want to reduce their plastic footprint, traversing this environment requires a watchful eye, foresight, and a willingness to take a different path from the rest. Bringing a refillable

bottle, coffee cup, and bag may take a lot of effort and may be a hassle. Asking vendors to refrain from using plastic or to use refillable containers may also make you encounter awkward social situations. When you are thirsty, hungry, or tired, the temptation to take the path of least resistance and use plastic may be greater than sticking to your principles. Research has proven that over 91% of plastic use in HCMC is not recycled and is instead buried in landfills, showing just how difficult the situation is.

3.4.3 Infrastructure deficits

The third big challenge is the infrastructure of the cities. This also makes it more difficult or less effective to make the choices that are more sustainable. Many interviewees expressed their wish to take public transportation more often. However, public transportation system of HCMC does not always offer its users convenience and reliability.

In addition, it is at times poorly integrated with tourist sites. Although moving about by walking or even cycling around the region has been suggested, this is at times not possible due to the traffic and the poor state of the infrastructure. Another issue that local raised was on the effectiveness of waste sorting and recycling. They confirmed that their efforts of sorting and reducing the use of plastics were unworthy due to waste sorting system. Sustainable tourism development does not only rely on the consumers, but it also requires significant financial investment in infrastructure.

3.4.4 Information and greenwashing

The other challenge relates to distinguishing firms and goods that are genuinely sustainable from those that

merely undertaking “green washing”, which means the practice of falsely claiming to have a number of environmentally friendly practices. In the market where the word “sustainable” is now a buzzword, the average traveler does not actually know what to look for when it comes to eco-labeling, hotel ratings, and tour operators. This leads to cynicism and a feeling that no matter what they do, their actions will not make a difference. For those who wish to actually make a difference, the problem of sorting through the claims of sustainability and actually verifying the truth of those claims can be daunting, particularly when a trip is being planned with limited time and energy. Research indicated that “while 100% of Vietnamese travelers surveyed said they would choose a hotel committed to sustainable tourism, knowing how to spot a sustainable hotel is a problem.”

3.5 Discussion

The findings from this exploratory study revealed several notable patterns that warrant discussion in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

Awareness-Behavior Gap in Context: In line with the value-action gap theory, the current study identified a gap between the environmental awareness and sustainable travel behavior of the Gen Z respondents. Similar patterns have been observed in previous international studies on young tourists' behavior. For example, research have shown that while Gen Z tourists are environmentally conscious people, their travel choices are motivated by convenience and cost factors [5]. Moreover, Gomes and Pinho [6] found that the Portuguese Gen Z tourists had an attitude towards sustainable tourism which is called a “critical question mark” – high level of awareness and a lack of consistent actions. In the current study, a descriptive difference of approximately 22 percentage points was observed, which is similar to other results obtained in other developing countries. As Alam et al. [14] stated that in South Asia, structure factors such as lack of infrastructure and economic issues influence on sustainable tourism behavior rather than personal attitudes do.

The Role of Perceived Behavioral Control: Applying the Theory of Planned Behavior framework, the barriers identified in this study, financial constraints, convenience-related habits, infrastructure deficits, and information challenges, can be understood as dimensions of perceived behavioral control. Participants expressed positive attitudes toward sustainability and perceived social norms supporting environmental protection, yet their perceived ability to actually perform sustainable behaviors was constrained by these external factors. This pattern supported the TPB proposition that perceived behavioral control moderates the relationship between intention and action.

Main Constraint – Financial Barriers: Willingness to pay for sustainable tourism services turned out to be the least significant behavioral aspect ($mean = 2.8$), in line with the previous studies by Buckley [12] and Nguyen et al. [4]. The results can be aligned with the general findings related to sustainable consumption and show that young customers were more likely to be sensitive to prices due to their low level of disposable income. As opposed to the context of Europe and North America, where sustainable tourism is viewed as a luxury, Viet Nam may need another strategy to apply.

Infrastructure as an Enabling Environment Barrier: The barriers related to infrastructure mentioned by the participants such as inadequate public transportation services, poor waste management facilities, and lack of cycling facilities suggest the significance of the wider enabling environment. This finding was consistent with Moral-Cuadra et al. [3], who stated that sustainable travel behavior can only be developed with more than mere individual awareness. Taking into consideration HCMC, where fast-paced urbanization is responsible for many environmental issues [7], infrastructure might need to be developed as a pre-requisite.

Implications for Theory: The findings provide preliminary evidence that may contribute by providing empirical evidence from a less-studied context (Viet Nam) and generation (Gen Z). The study suggests that the VAG framework, originally developed in Western contexts, may also be applicable to the Vietnamese

urban setting, though the relative importance of barrier types may differ. Specifically, structural barriers (infrastructure, economic constraints) may outweigh individual barriers (knowledge, attitudes) in developing country contexts.

Comparison with Other Related Researches: While the awareness scores recorded were high (68%), this is in line with the results [8], which explained that the high level of Gen Z awareness was due to heavy social media use and environmental education. On the contrary, the behavior scores recorded (46%) were lower than other studies carried out in developed nations in which 60% of the young travelers have sustainable behaviors.

Implications: Theoretical and Practical: **Theoretical:** The findings of this research indicate that the awareness-behavioral gap of Gen Z individuals in Viet Nam can be more appropriately attributed to structural barriers than personal attitudes. This implied that further research should take into account the need to incorporate structural variables (such as infrastructure availability and economic limitations) more consistently into the study of sustainable travel behavior in developing nations. **Practical:** The results imply that any initiative aimed at promoting sustainable tourism in HCMC should take into consideration both personal awareness and structural barriers. While awareness can be raised through information programs, the lack of infrastructure and incentives will limit behavior change.

Limitations of Interpretation: these analyses have been conducted on an exploratory sample of 50 people and thus can be taken as preliminary observations instead of confirmatory findings. These trends need to be confirmed through future researches done on larger scales and through better sampling processes. It would be advisable for future studies to try validating TPB and VAG using structural equation modeling.

4 Conclusion

4.1 Conclusion

This exploratory study examined environmental awareness and sustainable travel behavior among a

sample of Gen Z travelers in HCMC. The findings suggested that, within the surveyed sample, respondents reported relatively high awareness of sustainable tourism but lower levels of self-reported sustainable travel behavior. This result indicated a possible awareness-behavior gap among the participants. The findings also suggested that financial concerns, convenience, limited supporting infrastructure, and uncertainty about sustainable tourism services may influence the adoption of environmentally friendly travel practices. These preliminary findings imply that raising awareness alone may not be sufficient to encourage sustainable behavior. Instead, greater support from tourism stakeholders may help reduce barriers to sustainable travel. Given the exploratory nature of this study and the small convenience sample, the findings should be interpreted with caution. They are intended to provide preliminary evidence and may serve as a useful foundation for future studies with larger and more representative samples.

4.2 Recommendations

4.2.1 Recommendations for tourism businesses

These findings pointed out that tourism companies might find ways to promote sustainable travel behavior through environmentally friendly and affordable services provided to Gen Z travelers. It can be done through incorporating sustainability within regular business activities and not through providing an additional expensive service. Tourism companies can lower the environmental impact on nature by optimizing processes and applying technologies without raising prices. Companies should consider obtaining third-party sustainability certifications and providing tourists with detailed information about their environmentally friendly practices. With the growing problem of greenwashing, tourists require more trustworthy information. The provision of clear information about sustainability activities will increase the tourists' trust in choosing products and services of tourism companies. The third-party sustainability certification can contribute to this even more. The collaboration between tourism companies

will make sustainable options more available for customers.

4.2.2 Recommendations for government and policymakers

These results imply that government institutions might be vital in establishing the necessary conditions for sustainable tourism development. According to the preliminary results of this exploratory research, one of the priorities could be the continued improvement of public transport. In the case of HCMC, it will involve investing in public transport to increase the number of ways of efficient transportation. The second step will be setting the regulations. Creating regulations for the environmental certification process may help avoid deceiving the consumers. This step will involve creating the regulation process of the certification of green products and businesses. The third step will be setting the incentives. Incentives may motivate businesses to adopt sustainable processes. Some incentives include tax incentives for the certified businesses and financial incentives for sustainable tourism businesses.

4.2.3 Recommendations for educational institutions

Sustainability education can play a major role in ensuring that educational institutions help create environment-conscious travelers. This would involve introducing sustainability topics across other subjects

apart from the tourism related ones. The importance of environmental classes that not only create awareness but also teach skills cannot be understated since this is the only way that the students can make use of what they have learned. It is important for universities to exhibit sustainable practices on the part of their campus as well. Sustainable practices on the campus can further reinforce the environmental awareness of the students.

4.3 Limitations

Some limitations of this study that should be taken into consideration. Firstly, this study was based on a fairly limited number of 50 respondents who were selected using convenience sampling method. Thus, the results cannot be generalized to Gen Z population in HCMC and Viet Nam. Secondly, the research methodology included cross-sectional research design, meaning that it only reflected the views and self-reported behavior of the respondents at the point of data collection. Thirdly, self-reporting was used in the survey questionnaire, thus, it was subject to bias or inaccuracies. Finally, the analysis of the results involved mainly the use of descriptive statistics. Although this was adequate for exploratory research, further research should involve larger samples and other statistics techniques.

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Nhận thức về môi trường và hành vi du lịch bền vững của du khách Gen Z tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh

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Tóm tắt Trong bối cảnh biến đổi khí hậu ngày càng trở thành một thách thức toàn cầu, ngành du lịch đang được khuyến khích áp dụng giải pháp thực hành theo hướng bền vững hơn. Nghiên cứu thăm dò này xem xét mức độ nhận thức về môi trường và hành vi du lịch bền vững của du khách thuộc thế hệ Gen Z tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh nơi phát triển nhanh nhưng đang phải đối mặt với nhiều thách thức về môi trường. Dựa trên dữ liệu khảo sát thu thập từ 50 người tham gia trong độ tuổi từ 18 đến 27, kết quả cho thấy tồn tại khoảng cách đáng chú ý giữa nhận thức về môi trường và hành vi du lịch bền vững do người tham gia tự đánh giá trong phạm vi mẫu khảo sát. Kết quả cũng cho thấy những hạn chế về tài chính, thói quen ưu tiên sự tiện lợi và hệ thống hạ tầng hỗ trợ còn hạn chế có thể là những rào cản đối với việc thực hiện hành vi du lịch bền vững. Mặc dù kết quả nghiên cứu được xây dựng trên một mẫu nghiên cứu thăm dò có quy mô nhỏ, nhưng vẫn cung cấp những bằng chứng ban đầu, góp phần làm cơ sở cho các nghiên cứu tiếp theo cũng như các thảo luận về thúc đẩy phát triển du lịch đô thị theo hướng bền vững tại Việt Nam.

Từ khóa Nhận thức môi trường; du lịch bền vững; du khách Gen Z; nhận thức và hành vi.

