



Challenges in Practicing Sustainable Tourism Behavior among Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City

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Abstract

Sustainable tourism is increasingly recognized as a crucial development orientation in the context of globalization and escalating environmental crises. Generation Z, characterized by progressive thinking and high digital proficiency, is expected to be a driving force in promoting responsible travel behaviors. However, in Ho Chi Minh City, a significant gap persists between sustainable awareness and actual behavior within this demographic group. This study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured in-depth interviews with five individuals from Generation Z to identify key barriers to the implementation of sustainable tourism practices. The analysis reveals four main categories of constraints: psychological (e.g., diffusion of responsibility, present bias), institutional (e.g., lack of incentive mechanisms, non-transparent information), market-based (e.g., high costs, limited options), and technological (e.g., limitations of digital platforms). These barriers not only undermine individual motivation but also reflect structural shortcomings in supporting sustainable behavior. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of green consumption behavior in urban contexts and provides implications for policy development and communication strategies tailored to younger generations.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, Generation Z, Consumer Behavior, psychological barriers

1. Introduction

In the face of escalating global environmental challenges, sustainable development has become an imperative across all sectors, including tourism. More than a strategic orientation, sustainable tourism is increasingly regarded as a reflection of ethical consumerism in modern society—where individuals are expected to consider not only their personal experiences but also the long-term impacts on local communities and ecosystems.

Generation Z, born in the era of digital technology and globalization, is emerging as a key consumer group with the potential to shape sustainable consumption trends. With high levels of technological literacy, critical thinking skills, and growing awareness of social and environmental issues, this generation is expected to play a central role in fostering behavioral change towards sustainability. Nevertheless, the gap between awareness and actual behavior remains a pressing concern—especially in tourism, where decisions are often influenced by cost, convenience, and social conformity.

In Vietnam, most existing research on sustainable tourism has focused on policy or business perspectives, while socio-psychological factors influencing individual behavior—particularly among young consumers—have received limited scholarly attention. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to identify specific barriers that hinder Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City from adopting sustainable tourism behaviors. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, this paper seeks to uncover both individual and structural impediments and, in doing so, proposes practical implications for policymaking and behavior-change interventions tailored to the local context.

2. Research methodology and interview sample

2.1 Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach, specifically semi-structured in-depth interviews, to explore the barriers to sustainable tourism behavior among Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City. This method enables an in-depth understanding of individual perceptions, experiences, and influencing factors that are difficult to quantify through quantitative techniques.

A total of five individuals from Generation Z (aged 18 to 27), currently living and studying in Ho Chi Minh City, were selected using purposive sampling. Selection criteria included recent travel experience and a basic understanding

of sustainability concepts. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and focused on respondents' awareness, behavior, psychological–social barriers, and experiences with sustainable tourism services.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and thematic synthesis. After five interviews, the study reached thematic saturation, with no new information or emerging themes identified. This indicates that the sample size was sufficient to comprehensively reflect the key barriers to sustainable tourism behavior among the target group.

2.2 Sample Description

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of interview participants

Code	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Monthly Income (VND million)
PV01	Male	20	High school	Student	5
PV02	Male	25	University	Office worker	10
PV03	Female	19	High school	Student	5
PV04	Male	27	University	Freelancer	12
PV05	Female	20	High school	Student	5

Source: Compiled by the author, 2025.

Table 1 presents the basic demographic characteristics of the five respondents who participated in the in-depth interviews on the challenges of practicing sustainable tourism among Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City. The variables include respondent code, gender, age, educational background, occupation, and average monthly income.

Gender: Among the five respondents, three are male (PV01, PV02, PV04) and two are female (PV03, PV05), indicating a relatively balanced gender distribution in the small sample.

Age: All participants fall within the young adult age range (19–27), which aligns with the general definition of Generation Z (born approximately between 1995 and 2012). The youngest is 19 years old (PV03), and the oldest is 27 (PV04).

Education level: Three respondents have completed high school (PV01, PV03, PV05), and two have university degrees (PV02, PV04), reflecting varying levels of educational attainment within the target group.

Occupation: The respondents' occupations are diverse, including three students (PV01, PV03, PV05), one office worker (PV02), and one freelancer (PV04).

Monthly income: Income levels range from 5 to 12 million VND per month. The student respondents earn the lowest (5 million VND), while the office worker (PV02) earns 10 million and the freelancer (PV04) earns the highest at 12 million VND per month.

3. Findings and Discussion

Amid the escalating climate crisis, ecological degradation, and resource depletion, sustainable tourism has emerged as an indispensable direction for the development of the travel industry. No longer merely an environmentally friendly economic model, sustainable tourism is now regarded as a new ethical standard in modern consumer behavior—reflecting individual responsibility toward the environment, local communities, and future generations. Within this ethical

framework, Generation Z—young citizens born into a digital and globalized world—is expected to play a pivotal role in reshaping tourism toward greater sustainability. With high technological accessibility, open-minded attitudes, and increasing concern for social and environmental issues, Gen Z is seen as a potential catalyst for behavioral transformation in tourism.

However, survey data from Ho Chi Minh City reveal a concerning reality: the persistent presence of the value–action gap in sustainable tourism behavior. Specifically, while 78% of Gen Z respondents report clear awareness of the negative consequences of unsustainable tourism, only 32% believe that their individual actions can make a meaningful difference (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002) ^[6]. This finding echoes a well-documented phenomenon in environmental psychology—the value–action gap—whereby positive values, beliefs, and attitudes fail to translate into behavior due to intervening factors. In other words, high awareness alone is insufficient to ensure sustainable behavior, particularly when individuals face barriers at both internal (e.g., psychological, motivational) and external (e.g., market, institutional, technological) levels.

To comprehensively explain this phenomenon, the study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating survey data and in-depth interviews with Generation Z residents in Ho Chi Minh City. The data synthesis identified seven primary barriers to sustainable tourism behavior, which were categorized into four core domains: (1) Psychological barriers – including diffusion of responsibility and present bias; (2) Institutional barriers – including the lack of enabling mechanisms and information transparency; (3) Market-related barriers – including high costs and limited availability of sustainable tourism options; and (4) Technological barriers – including the constraints of digital platforms in supporting green consumer behavior.

Table 2: Typology of barriers to sustainable tourism behavior among Gen Z in Ho Chi Minh City

Barrier Group	Specific Barrier	No. of Respondents (n=5)	Percentage
Psychological	Diffusion of responsibility	4	80%
	Present bias	3	60%
Institutional	Lack of incentive mechanisms	5	100%
	Non-transparent information	4	80%
Market	High costs	4	80%
	Limited choices	3	60%
Technological	Platform limitations	5	100%

Source: Compiled by the author, 2025.

The analysis shows that structural barriers—particularly institutional and technological—were mentioned by all respondents (100%), suggesting that sustainable tourism behavior is not solely shaped by internal motivation but is heavily dependent on the surrounding social and technological context. Meanwhile, psychological barriers such as the diffusion of responsibility and present bias remain substantial obstacles to behavioral intention formation. Market-related challenges—including high service costs and a lack of diverse options—also demonstrate that Gen Z continues to face significant difficulties in accessing sustainable tourism products in a convenient and cost-effective manner.

Based on these categorized findings, the next sections of the study will delve deeper into each group of barriers, exploring the underlying mechanisms and the interrelationships among influencing factors. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of what prevents sustainable tourism behavior in Generation Z, particularly in rapidly developing urban settings such as Ho Chi Minh City.

3.1 Psychological barriers: diffusion of responsibility and present bias

One of the key psychological and social factors impeding the transformation of awareness into sustainable tourism behavior among Generation Z is the influence of diffusion of responsibility and present bias.

The diffusion of responsibility effect—first described by Latane and Darley (1968) [8] in classical social psychology—occurs when individuals feel less personally accountable in a collective situation, believing that responsibility is shared or has already been assumed by others. In the context of sustainable tourism, this effect leads individuals to underestimate the significance of their personal behavior in creating positive change, thereby weakening their motivation to act. Empirical observations reveal that many young people in Generation Z, despite acknowledging the negative consequences of unsustainable tourism, remain skeptical about the actual impact their individual efforts may have on the environment and community. This disconnect between awareness and behavior is a hallmark of the value–action gap described by Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) [6] in environmental behavior studies.

Responses from in-depth interviews confirm the prevalence of this psychological pattern among the participants. As one respondent (PV01) shared:

“I know that littering and pollution are harmful, but me riding a bike or cutting down on plastic bags won’t solve anything. This kind of thing only works if a lot of people do it together. I’ve thought about it while traveling, but

those ‘green’ tours I tried were twice as expensive and offered nothing different from regular ones. So now I prioritize saving money over sustainability.” (PV01, 2025)

This statement clearly reflects a low sense of personal efficacy, which is a critical factor in promoting pro-environmental behavior (Steg & Vlek, 2009) [9]. When individual actions are perceived as insufficient to create impact, behavioral change becomes devalued in the eyes of the consumer—regardless of their ideal environmental awareness.

In parallel, present bias, a concept from behavioral economics introduced by Laibson (1997) [7], also emerges as a significant psychological barrier. This phenomenon describes the tendency to overvalue immediate rewards at the expense of long-term outcomes, leading individuals to favor convenient, cheaper, or emotionally appealing options over sustainable choices that require short-term sacrifice. In this study, 3 out of 5 respondents (PV01, PV03, PV05) explicitly referred to this tendency, highlighting a negative correlation between economic convenience and environmental responsibility.

Some illustrative comments include:

“Sustainable tours are way more expensive—sometimes even double the price. And they rarely come with any deals or promotions. As someone working in an office, saving even 500,000 VND per trip means a lot more than thinking about the environment in the long term. I know it’s not the best mindset, but that’s reality.” (PV02, 2025)
“Last time, all my friends booked fancy 5-star hotels with pools and great views. I tried a ‘bamboo homestay’ thinking it would be cool. But when I posted photos, I barely got any likes, while they got hundreds. It was kind of depressing!” (PV05, 2025)

These insights reflect not only internal psychological constraints but also the strong influence of social motivation, particularly in the digital age, where Gen Z’s consumption behavior is closely tied to personal branding and peer recognition on social media platforms.

Moreover, the effects of present bias are often exacerbated by financial constraints. As Becken and Pant (2020) note, affordability is a significant determinant in the decision to choose sustainable tourism services—especially in developing countries where economic considerations remain dominant.

In summary, psychological barriers—especially diffusion of responsibility and present bias—are central to understanding why Gen Z, despite having strong awareness and goodwill,

struggles to turn sustainability intentions into actual behavior. Overcoming these barriers requires not only individual-level change, but also the development of supportive social and institutional mechanisms to foster long-term behavioral commitment.

3.2. Institutional barriers: lack of incentives and information transparency

In addition to psychological factors, limitations in the current institutional framework also emerge as significant barriers to sustainable tourism behavior among Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City. Although existing legal regulations have begun to establish basic principles of accountability in tourism activities, concrete incentive mechanisms—which serve as intermediaries to help convert awareness into action—remain poorly developed or ineffective. This institutional void not only reduces motivation to engage in sustainable practices but also leads individuals to feel that their actions are neither recognized nor supported by the system, thereby exacerbating the gap between awareness and behavior.

All five interviewees reported a lack of practical policy support, particularly in terms of financial assistance, infrastructure, and service accessibility. One respondent expressed this sentiment clearly:

“I was planning to take a ‘green’ tour recently, but I heard you have to handle everything yourself, and it’s inconvenient to get around. So I just booked a regular hotel instead—it costs a bit more but saves a lot of hassle.” (PV04, 2025)

This statement illustrates concerns over opportunity cost and practical inconvenience when institutional support is lacking—even among consumers with good intentions. In contrast, countries like Thailand have implemented policies such as a 20% tax reduction for tourism businesses certified by international sustainable standards (e.g., GSTC) as part of broader green transition strategies (Font *et al.*, 2019) [3]. Such examples highlight notable institutional disparities among developing markets in the region. Research by Dolnicar and Grün (2021) [2] further supports the effectiveness of “carrot-and-stick” approaches—combining regulation with incentives—to encourage sustainable consumer behavior in tourism.

Another critical institutional barrier is the lack of transparency regarding products and services labeled as “sustainable.” In a digital consumption environment where Gen Z primarily relies on online platforms to evaluate and book services, the absence of clear criteria and credible certification systems undermines consumer trust and discourages sustainable choices.

One respondent illustrated this challenge:

“Some homestays claim to be ‘green’ or ‘sustainable,’ but there’s no standard to verify that. It’s different from Booking or Traveloka, where you can see clear reviews. I feel like a lot of places use the word ‘sustainable’ as a marketing trick, but there’s nothing different in reality. Without a way to check, I’d rather not take the risk.” (PV02, 2025)

Another case highlights the real-world consequences of information opacity:

“Last year, I booked a so-called ‘green’ hotel through an app, but when I got there, it was just like any regular hotel—still using plastic straws and no energy-saving systems. So now I’m skeptical. I can’t tell which services are truly sustainable.” (PV03, 2025)

This situation stems from Vietnam’s lack of a standardized and widely adopted certification system for sustainable tourism products and services. In contrast, many countries have already implemented international standards such as those from the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) to enhance credibility and align information between providers and consumers (Font *et al.*, 2019) [3]. Lund-Durlacher (2020) also emphasized that the absence of measurable indicators—such as water and electricity usage or recycling rates—is a major cause of confusion in green consumption behavior.

It is clear that institutional barriers in Ho Chi Minh City arise not only from the lack of effective incentives but also from the absence of transparent, reliable information systems—both of which are foundational to supporting and sustaining sustainable tourism behavior. To enable Gen Z—a generation with strong environmental values—to realize their intentions in practice, strong government intervention is needed. This includes policy reform and the development of transparent, trustworthy information systems that facilitate green decision-making.

3.3 Market barriers: high costs and limited options

Another significant constraint to sustainable tourism behavior among Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City stems from the structure of the tourism product and service market itself. Findings from both the survey and in-depth interviews highlight two primary issues: high costs and a lack of diverse options, both of which directly limit young consumers’ access to and selection of sustainable alternatives.

First and foremost, cost is seen as the most prominent barrier when comparing sustainable versus conventional tourism services. Four out of five respondents indicated that the high price of “green” tours or eco-friendly products discourages them from making sustainable choices—especially given the relatively limited income levels of most Gen Z individuals.

One respondent expressed this concern explicitly:

“I think sustainable tourism is good—it helps protect the environment by reducing waste and saving resources. I’ve thought about it when traveling, but the green tours I’ve tried were twice the price, and the services were no different from regular ones. So now I just go for the cheaper option over sustainability.” (PV01, 2025)

Research by Gössling *et al.* (2019) [4] similarly shows that sustainable tourism services are typically 15–20% more expensive than standard ones, posing a particular challenge in emerging or developing markets where price remains a critical factor in consumer decision-making. Another respondent confirmed this dilemma:

“I do want to live green—I really do—but... these tours cost nearly double. Booking one is like climbing a

mountain. And if I tell friends I went on a 'sustainable' tour, they just think I'm being fancy, even though the room was basically the same as a budget homestay (laughs). So I'd rather go with something convenient and affordable." (PV04, 2025)

Beyond cost, the lack of accessible sustainable options is also a notable barrier. According to data from the Ho Chi Minh City Department of Tourism (2023) ^[10], only 12% of tour operators offer certified sustainable tours. This scarcity makes it difficult for even well-intentioned consumers to find relevant information or book eco-friendly services.

Several respondents reflected this frustration:

"On big sites like Booking.com, it's all expensive 4–5 star hotels. If you want to find an eco-friendly homestay, you have to dig through random Facebook groups. But the info there is so chaotic—you don't know what's real or fake. It's risky to book something that might not meet your expectations." (PV02, 2025)

"It's really hard to find information. Most booking apps just promote luxury hotels, and there's hardly anything about green homestays. And even tours don't show any environmental metrics, so I have no idea which ones are actually sustainable." (PV05, 2025)

These responses point to a clear gap in the design and integration of sustainable products into mainstream travel platforms, making the search process time-consuming and high-risk in terms of information reliability. Juvan *et al.* (2021) ^[5] also identified the lack of filtering tools, eco-labels, and measurable sustainability indicators on digital tourism platforms as major impediments to responsible consumer behavior.

As shown in Table 2, 80% of respondents cited high costs, and 60% cited limited options as major market-related barriers. These factors not only dampen motivation for green consumption but also place Gen Z consumers in a difficult position—forced to choose between environmental ideals and practical economic needs.

In summary, the sustainable tourism market in Ho Chi Minh City currently faces two structural challenges: high pricing and an underdeveloped product ecosystem. While Gen Z demonstrates a clear interest in environmental issues, the lack of enabling conditions from the supply side continues to make sustainable behavior an impractical choice under present circumstances.

3.4 Technological barriers: limitations of digital platforms

In the context of rapid digital transformation, technology is widely expected to serve as a powerful tool in promoting sustainable tourism behavior—particularly for Generation Z, a consumer group that heavily relies on digital platforms for searching, comparing, and making travel decisions. However, both survey and interview results reveal that current digital platforms in Vietnam have yet to fully realize this potential. In fact, they may constitute one of the key barriers undermining sustainable behavior.

Although social media and digital platforms increasingly influence youth travel behavior, their effectiveness in fostering sustainable tourism remains limited. In practice, many Gen Z individuals still lack access to filtering tools for “green hotels” or sustainability criteria on mainstream travel applications. This reflects a lack of environmental content integration in both user interface design and recommendation algorithms. Insights from the in-depth interviews suggest that young consumers are often drawn to features such as competitive prices, high user ratings, or flashy promotions, while sustainability criteria are buried in obscure sections or absent altogether. Such design choices unintentionally marginalize sustainable information in the decision-making process.

As one respondent noted:

"Every time I open booking apps like Traveloka or Booking.com, it's all about discounts and flash sales. There's no mention of carbon indicators or environmental standards at all. That doesn't exactly motivate me to look deeper." (PV03, 2025)

By contrast, travel platforms in Europe—such as Ecosea Travel—have already integrated sustainability metrics like carbon savings, international eco-certifications, and energy usage indicators to help consumers make responsible decisions (Juvan *et al.*, 2021). The absence of such features in Vietnamese platforms reduces their role to mere commercial tools rather than true ecosystems for sustainable behavior.

Ironically, the heavy reliance on technology also produces a paradoxical barrier: when digital information is perceived as unreliable, Gen Z tends to become skeptical or abandon sustainable practices altogether. Several respondents conveyed this concern:

"Of course I care—I always try to choose eco-friendly options when I travel. But it's so hard to find a decent place! Ads are everywhere and overhyped, and when you get there, it's no different from any normal place." (PV04, 2025)

This skepticism highlights the lack of trustworthy decision-making tools, making green consumption more of a gamble than a rational, informed choice. Lund-Durlacher (2020), in her analysis of institutional gaps in digital transformation for sustainable tourism, identifies three critical issues affecting platform performance: (1) lack of standardized sustainability data, (2) algorithms that prioritize short-term profits over long-term goals, and (3) user interfaces that fail to support green searches.

As shown in Table 2, all five respondents (5/5) cited technological limitations as one of the key barriers. This finding suggests that in a context where Gen Z increasingly depends on digital platforms for travel decisions, limitations in functionality, data transparency, and algorithmic orientation are not merely technical shortcomings but systemic behavioral constraints.

Rather than acting as a catalyst for sustainable behavior, current technological platforms in Vietnam fall short of

guiding, supporting, and reinforcing green decision-making among Gen Z. Overcoming this barrier requires intervention not only from platform developers but also from certification bodies, regulatory agencies, and policymakers. These stakeholders must work together to standardize sustainability information, integrate environmental indicators, and redesign recommendation algorithms to better align with sustainable goals.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has systematically explored the barriers influencing sustainable tourism behavior among Generation Z in Ho Chi Minh City—a dynamic and increasingly influential consumer group expected to drive transformative change in green consumption. Findings from the in-depth interviews indicate that although Gen Z demonstrates relatively high awareness of the importance of sustainable tourism, significant difficulties persist in translating that awareness into concrete behavior.

The identified barriers were categorized into four main groups: (1) Psychological barriers, including diffusion of responsibility and present bias; (2) Institutional barriers, such as the lack of incentive mechanisms and information transparency; (3) Market barriers, including high costs and limited product diversity; (4) Technological barriers, stemming from the limitations of current digital platform design.

Based on these insights, the study proposes several recommendations to promote sustainable tourism behavior among Gen Z:

Policy Measures: Develop targeted support mechanisms such as financial incentives, tax reductions, or official green certifications for service providers to lower the access cost for young consumers.

Communication Strategies: Adjust the content and format of sustainable tourism messaging to be more visual, accessible, and aligned with Gen Z's personal values, including identity expression, community engagement, and shareability via social media.

Technological Solutions: Encourage travel service platforms to integrate sustainability filters, transparent environmental indicators, and verified rating systems to better inform and guide user decisions.

Educational Initiatives: Embed sustainable tourism content into formal curricula and extracurricular activities to foster behavioral norms and environmental consciousness from an early age.

These recommendations aim not only to bridge the gap between awareness and action in tourism consumption but also to provide a strategic framework for developing sustainable tourism policies attuned to the values and digital habits of the younger generation in rapidly urbanizing contexts.

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