GENERATION Z PERCEPTIONS OF GASTRONOMY IN TOURISM

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores how Generation Z students perceive the role of gastronomy in tourism destinations, with a particular focus on cultural meaning, authenticity, experiential value, and digital influence on food-related travel behaviour.
Methodology/Design/Approach – The research involved 52 third-year undergraduate students enrolled in a Food and Beverage Management course. Data were collected through a digital brainstorming workshop using the Mural platform, enabling collaborative idea generation in a structured online environment. Participants expressed their perceptions, associations, and evaluations of gastronomic tourism. The data were analysed using inductive thematic content analysis to identify dominant patterns and thematic clusters. The analysis revealed four key thematic dimensions: gastronomic tourism perceptions, determinants of food experience, social media influence, and travel motivation.
Findings – Results indicate that Generation Z perceives gastronomy as a central component of destination identity and experiential tourism. Authenticity, quality, visual presentation, sustainability, and local identity emerged as key determinants of gastronomic satisfaction. Furthermore, social media platforms significantly shape awareness, expectations, and decision-making processes, with visual content and user-generated recommendations playing a dominant role. Findings also show that gastronomy can function both as a supporting element and, in some cases, as a primary motivation for travel when associated with unique and authentic cultural experiences.
Originality of the research – This study contributes to the tourism and hospitality literature by offering an integrated understanding of Generation Z perceptions of gastronomic tourism, combining cultural, experiential, and digital dimensions within a single analytical framework. It also demonstrates the effectiveness of digital collaborative brainstorming methods for capturing generational perspectives in tourism research.
Keywords Generation Z; gastronomic tourism; authenticity; social media; destination image

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INTRODUCTION

Gastronomy has become one of the most important components of contemporary tourism experiences. Beyond satisfying basic physiological needs, food and beverage consumption increasingly serves as a medium through which tourists engage with local culture, traditions, and ways of life. Gastronomic experiences contribute to destination attractiveness, destination image formation, tourist satisfaction, and memorable travel experiences, while simultaneously facilitating deeper cultural engagement with destinations (Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2016; Ellis et al., 2018; Kivela & Crotts, 2006). Consequently, gastronomy has evolved from a supporting tourism service into a strategic resource that enhances destination competitiveness and differentiation in the global tourism market (Okumus et al., 2018; Su et al., 2020).

Recent research indicates that tourists increasingly value authenticity, local food products, sustainability, and meaningful experiential consumption when selecting destinations and planning travel activities (Estrada et al., 2024; Recuero-Virto & Arróspide, 2024). Food-related experiences enable visitors to establish emotional connections with destinations while simultaneously supporting cultural heritage preservation and local economic development (Stalmirska & Ali, 2025). Consequently, gastronomy is increasingly recognised as a strategic component of destination branding, destination identity, and travel motivation, contributing to destination competitiveness and differentiation in contemporary tourism markets (Rašan et al., 2026).

At the same time, significant changes in tourist behaviour are being driven by the emergence of Generation Z as an increasingly influential travel market segment. Generally defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, Generation Z is characterised by high levels of digital literacy, extensive use of social media, a preference for personalised experiences, and heightened awareness of environmental and social issues (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018; Pricope Vancia et al., 2023). Unlike previous generations, Generation Z frequently relies on user-generated content, online reviews, influencers, and visual social media platforms when making travel decisions (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Their travel behaviour is often shaped by a desire for authentic, shareable, and experience-oriented activities, making gastronomy an increasingly important component of their tourism experiences.

In response to these gaps, this study explores Generation Z students' perceptions of gastronomy in tourism destinations. The research specifically examines how students define gastronomic tourism, which factors they consider important in shaping gastronomic experiences, how social media influence their food-related travel decisions, and whether gastronomy can serve as a primary travel motivation. To achieve these objectives, a digital brainstorming workshop was conducted using the Mural platform, enabling participants to collaboratively generate ideas and associations in a structured online environment.

The collected data were analysed using thematic content analysis to identify dominant themes and patterns. By examining the perspectives of future tourism and hospitality professionals, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of gastronomy in contemporary tourism experiences and provides methodological insights into the application of digital collaborative tools in tourism and hospitality research.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.1 Conceptualisation of gastronomic tourism perceptions among Generation Z

Gastronomy has emerged as a central component of contemporary tourism experiences, shifting from a basic functional necessity to a key driver of destination attractiveness and experiential value creation. Previous research has demonstrated that food-related experiences significantly influence destination image formation, tourist satisfaction, and overall destination competitiveness (Ellis et al., 2018; Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Okumus et al., 2018). In this context, gastronomy is increasingly recognised as a strategic tourism resource that contributes to the differentiation of destinations through authentic and locally embedded experiences (UNWTO, 2019; Everett, 2016). Food experiences are therefore not only a consumption activity but also a key mechanism through which tourists engage with the cultural and symbolic meanings of destinations, reinforcing their role in contemporary experiential tourism development (Sims, 2012).

Generation Z, generally defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, represents a digitally native cohort whose travel behaviours and consumption patterns are strongly shaped by experiential value, authenticity, and digital connectivity. Previous research suggests that this generation tends to prioritise meaningful experiences over material consumption, seeking immersive and culturally embedded travel activities (Priporas et al., 2017). Within tourism contexts, this implies that gastronomic experiences may be interpreted not only as consumption acts but also as cultural encounters and identity-forming experiences.

Theoretical perspectives on experiential tourism (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) further support the idea that tourism experiences are co-created through sensory, emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions. Accordingly, gastronomic tourism can be understood as a layered experience in which food consumption becomes a medium for cultural interpretation and personal meaning-making.

Despite the growing body of literature on gastronomic tourism, less attention has been given to how Generation Z specifically perceives its role within tourism experiences, particularly in terms of cultural meaning and experiential value. This represents a research gap that this study aims to address through the following research question:

Q1: Does Generation Z primarily perceive gastronomic tourism through cultural and experiential dimensions?

1.2 Authenticity, quality, and gastronomic satisfaction

Tourist satisfaction in gastronomic tourism is commonly associated with perceived quality, authenticity, and overall experiential value. Recent research conceptualises authenticity as a multidimensional construct that significantly shapes emotional responses, memorability, and satisfaction in food-related tourism experiences (Nam et al., 2023; Prayag et al., 2022). Authenticity in this context is increasingly understood as both object-related (e.g., food origin, preparation methods) and existential, reflecting the personal meaning tourists derive from culinary encounters.

In gastronomic tourism settings, authenticity is closely linked to perceptions of local identity, traditional culinary practices, and cultural embeddedness of food experiences. Quality is typically associated with sensory attributes, service excellence, and perceived value, all of which strongly influence satisfaction formation and behavioural intentions in tourism contexts (Ab-Latif et al., 2024; Kim & Song, 2024).

Generation Z travellers are characterised by high digital literacy and a strong reliance on visual and user-generated content when evaluating travel experiences. Their perception of gastronomic satisfaction is therefore increasingly shaped by online representations of food, influencer content, and peer reviews, which act as proxies for both authenticity and quality (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Jegham & Bouzaabia, 2022).

Despite growing literature on food tourism satisfaction, empirical research still lacks a focused understanding of how authenticity and quality are interpreted specifically within Generation Z gastronomic experiences, particularly in digitally mediated tourism environments. This leads to the second research question:

Q2: Are authenticity and quality the dominant determinants of gastronomic satisfaction among Generation Z travellers?

1.3 Social media influence on gastronomic decision-making

Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped tourism decision-making processes, with social media platforms increasingly functioning as primary sources of inspiration, information search, and evaluation of travel experiences. Recent research emphasises that visually driven platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and other short-form video applications play a central role in shaping destination awareness and travel intentions by exposing users to user-generated and influencer-driven content (Hudson et al., 2016; Leung et al., 2015).

In gastronomic tourism, visual representation of food experiences, peer-generated content, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) significantly influence tourists' perceptions and choices. User-generated content is perceived as more credible and authentic than traditional promotional communication, thereby strongly shaping behavioural intentions and destination preferences (Casaló et al., 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Generation Z travellers, as highly digitalised consumers, demonstrate a strong reliance on social media platforms during travel planning and consumption processes. Recent research shows that social media marketing activities significantly shape Gen Z travel behaviour by influencing destination awareness, engagement, and behavioural intentions through interactive, entertaining, and user-generated content (Liu et al., 2023). In particular, algorithmically curated feeds and influencer-driven content have become key mechanisms through which travel inspiration is formed and continuously reinforced (Manthiou et al., 2024).

Empirical evidence further indicates that Generation Z is highly responsive to visual, short-form, and peer-generated content, which strongly affects destination preferences and decision-making processes (Fang et al., 2023). Social media platforms function not only as information sources but also as experiential environments where users evaluate, compare, and emotionally engage with destinations prior to actual travel. Consequently, travel and food-related decisions are increasingly shaped by perceived authenticity, social validation, and visual attractiveness rather than traditional marketing communication channels.

Despite growing evidence on digital influence in tourism, the specific mechanisms through which social media shapes gastronomic decision-making among Generation Z remain underexplored, particularly in relation to experiential and cultural food consumption. Accordingly, the following research question is proposed:

Q3: Do social media recommendations significantly influence gastronomic decision-making processes?

1.4 Gastronomy as a standalone travel motivation

Motivations for travel have traditionally been explained through push and pull factors, where tourists are driven by internal desires (push factors) and external destination attributes (pull factors). Within this framework, gastronomy has increasingly been recognised as a significant pull factor that can, in certain contexts, evolve into a primary rather than secondary motivation for travel.

Food tourism literature indicates that culinary experiences may function as a central reason for travel, particularly when strongly associated with authenticity, local identity, and destination distinctiveness (Quan & Wang, 2004). In such cases, gastronomy moves beyond its supporting role and becomes an integral component of the overall travel experience and destination choice process.

Recent studies further suggest that contemporary travellers increasingly engage in experience-driven and meaning-oriented tourism, where food-related experiences contribute directly to travel intention formation and destination selection (Ab Karim & Chi, 2010; Tikkanen, 2007). Within this context, Generation Z travellers, characterised by a preference for immersive, authentic, and experience-rich consumption, are particularly inclined to integrate gastronomy into travel decision-making processes, although empirical evidence on gastronomy as a sole travel driver within this cohort remains limited. Accordingly, the final research question is formulated:

Q4: Can gastronomy function as a standalone travel motivation when associated with authentic cultural experiences?

The formulation of research questions in this study is grounded in established theoretical perspectives on experiential tourism, authenticity, digital influence, and tourist motivation. As suggested by Maxwell (2013), research questions emerge through an iterative dialogue between theory and empirical curiosity, rather than being fixed at the outset.

Furthermore, as highlighted by Janesick (2000) and Agee (2009), research questions should not only reflect theoretical gaps but also be relevant to real-world contexts and observable behaviours. In this study, the final research questions are designed to capture Generation Z's perceptions, behaviours, and motivations within gastronomic tourism, integrating both cultural and digital dimensions of contemporary travel.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research approach and design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach aimed at exploring subjective perceptions, meanings, and interpretations that Generation Z students attribute to gastronomic tourism. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for examining complex, socially constructed phenomena and for generating in-depth insights into human experiences within real-world contexts (Busetto et al., 2020; Takona, 2024). In this sense, gastronomic tourism is understood as a multidimensional experiential construct shaped by cultural, sensory, and social meanings rather than as a purely behavioural variable.

In line with its exploratory purpose, the study seeks to understand how gastronomic tourism is perceived through cultural, experiential, and digital dimensions. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the research follows an inductive logic of inquiry that allows patterns and meanings to emerge from participants' narratives (McGinley et al., 2021).

The study is positioned within an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through participants' subjective experiences and meanings. Contemporary interpretivist tourism research emphasises reflexivity, contextual sensitivity, and the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participants (Ivanova et al., 2022; Silverman, 2024).

2.2 Sample and participants

The study involved 52 third-year undergraduate students enrolled in a Food and Beverage Management course. All participants belong to Generation Z and represent a relevant cohort for exploring contemporary gastronomic tourism perceptions due to their dual exposure to academic hospitality education and personal travel experiences.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed, selecting participants based on their relevance to the research objectives and their familiarity with gastronomy as part of tourism experiences. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research to ensure information-rich cases that can provide in-depth insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Etikan et al., 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015).

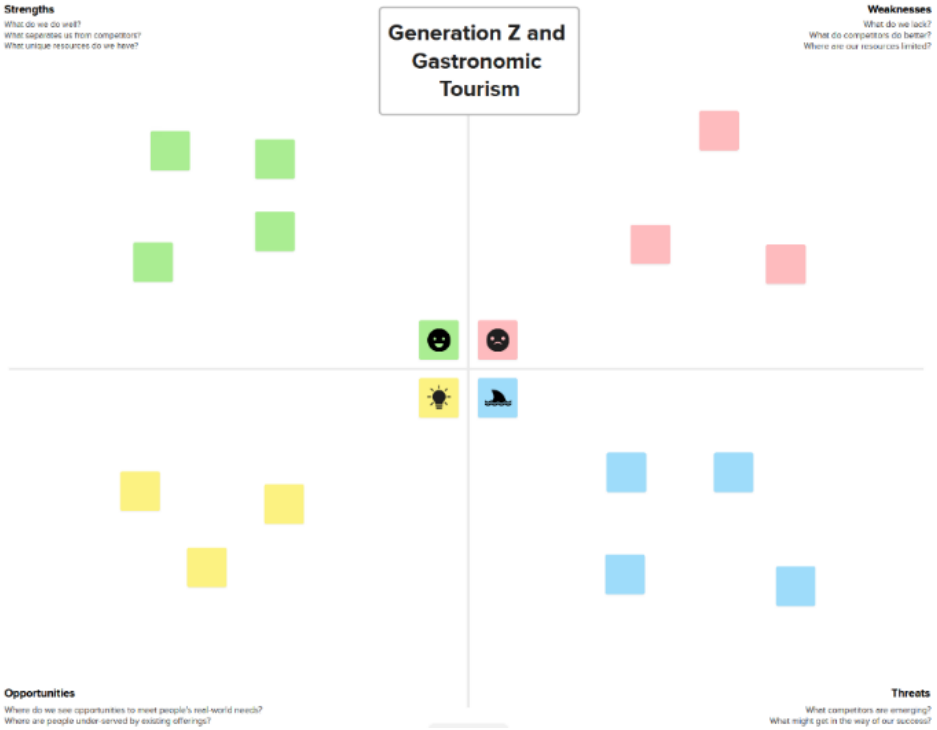
The sample size of 52 participants is considered appropriate for exploratory qualitative research using thematic analysis, where data saturation is not strictly defined by numerical thresholds but by thematic adequacy and conceptual depth (Braun & Clarke, 2021). All participants voluntarily agreed to take part in the study and were informed about the purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations prior to data collection. Participation was anonymous, and all responses were analysed in aggregated form to ensure confidentiality and data protection.

2.3 Data collection method

Data were collected using a digital brainstorming workshop conducted via the Mural online collaboration platform. This method enables structured yet flexible idea generation in a synchronous digital environment, supporting collaborative qualitative inquiry and reducing researcher influence during initial response creation. The use of digital collaborative tools is particularly suitable for engaging Generation Z participants, who are highly familiar with online interactive platforms and visual communication formats.

The workshop was organised using a pre-designed digital template created in the Mural platform, which served as a structured framework for guiding participant responses. The template consisted of four thematic sections aligned with the research questions (Figure 1).

Figure 1: **Template**



Source: Authors

It functioned as a data collection scaffold rather than a data output, ensuring consistency in response generation while allowing participants to freely express associations and ideas.

Participants responded to four open-ended prompts:

1. What does gastronomic tourism represent to you?
2. What is most important to you in a gastronomic experience during travel?
3. How do social media influence your gastronomic choices during travel?
4. Can gastronomy be the main motive for travel? Why?

The digital format enabled participants to contribute ideas anonymously using virtual sticky notes, which encouraged spontaneity, reduced conformity pressure, and supported richer idea generation. Similar collaborative qualitative approaches have been shown to enhance creativity, reflection, and diversity of responses in group-based digital research settings.

2.4 Research instrument and procedure

A structured digital template within the Mural platform was designed to correspond to the four research questions of the study. Participants were asked to independently generate associations, keywords, and short statements for each thematic prompt.

The data collection procedure consisted of four sequential phases:

1. Introduction phase – Participants were briefed about the study purpose, procedure, and ethical considerations, including confidentiality and voluntary participation.
2. Idea generation phase – Participants individually contributed responses to each of the four prompts using digital sticky notes.
3. Structuring phase – All responses were made visible to participants, enabling them to read and reflect on others' inputs, thereby encouraging additional interpretation and idea expansion.
4. Clustering phase – Similar responses were collaboratively grouped into emerging thematic categories through an iterative structuring process.

The entire process was conducted in a controlled online environment to ensure consistency and comparability of responses. The researcher acted as a facilitator of the process, ensuring smooth progression through the phases without influencing the content of participant responses.

2.5 Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic content analysis, a widely used qualitative analytical method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis followed an inductive, data-driven approach, allowing themes to be systematically developed from participants' responses rather than imposed a priori.

The analysis process involved the following steps:

1. Familiarisation with the dataset through repeated reading of all responses
2. Initial coding of individual statements and meaningful units of text
3. Grouping codes into preliminary categories
4. Reviewing, refining, and merging themes through iterative comparison
5. Defining and naming the final thematic structure

Through this process, four dominant thematic clusters were identified:

- Gastronomic Tourism Perceptions
- Food Experience Determinants
- Social Media Influence
- Travel Motivation

These themes are visually presented in Figure 2, which illustrates the conceptual structure of Generation Z perceptions of gastronomic tourism derived from the analysis.

2.6 Research trustworthiness and ethical considerations

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, established criteria for qualitative rigour were applied, including credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported through transparent data collection procedures and participant familiarity with the topic. Dependability was ensured by following a clearly defined and systematically documented coding and analysis process. Confirmability was strengthened through iterative review of codes and themes to minimise researcher bias.

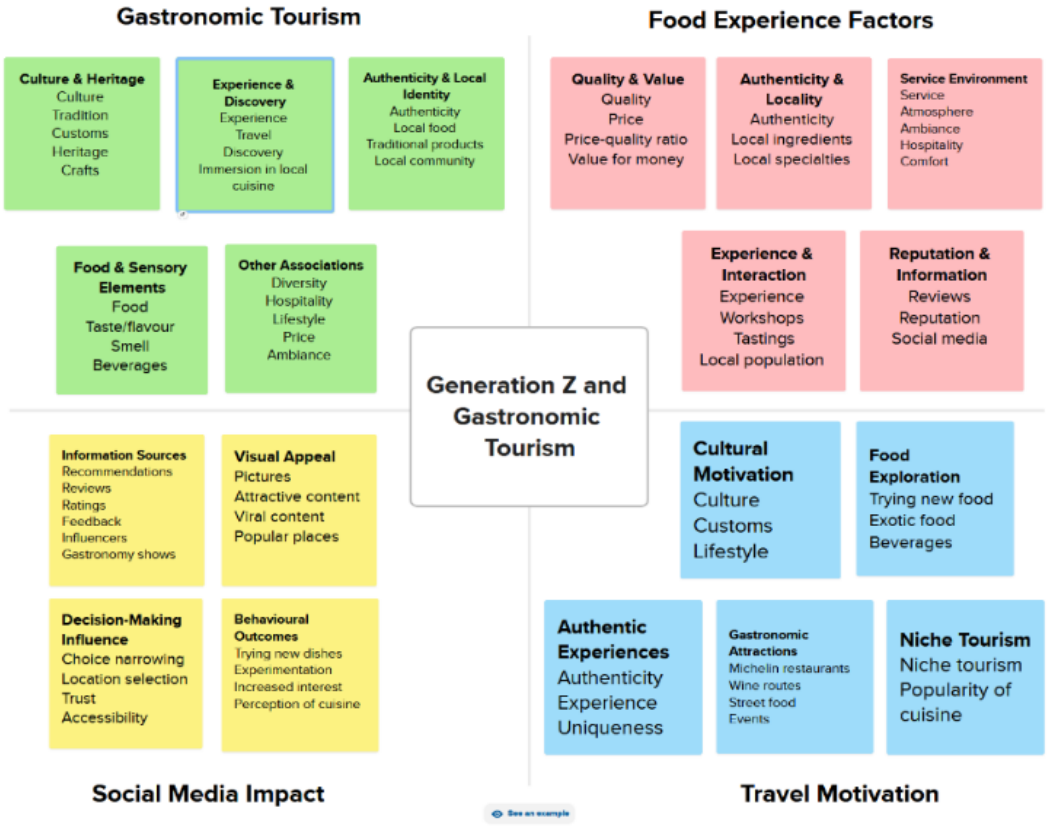
Participant anonymity was maintained throughout the study, and all responses were analysed in aggregated form to ensure confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. No personal, identifiable, or sensitive data were collected during the research process.

3. RESULTS

The analysis of data collected from 52 Generation Z students revealed structured insights corresponding to the four research prompts: (1) the meaning of gastronomic tourism, (2) key determinants of gastronomic experiences, (3) the influence of social media on food-related decisions, and (4) gastronomy as a travel motivation. Through thematic analysis, four dominant thematic clusters were identified: Gastronomic Tourism Perceptions, Food Experience Determinants, Social Media Influence, and Travel Motivation (Figure 2).

These findings demonstrate that participants' perceptions of gastronomic tourism are multidimensional, combining cultural, experiential, and digitally mediated elements. The identified themes reflect both individual meaning-making processes and collective patterns emerging from the collaborative brainstorming session.

Figure 2: **Thematic structure of Generation Z perceptions of gastronomic tourism (brainwriting output)**



Source: Authors

3.1 Gastronomic Tourism Perceptions

The first thematic cluster captures how Generation Z students conceptualise gastronomic tourism and its role within the overall tourism experience. The findings indicate that participants consistently associate gastronomic tourism with cultural exploration, identity, and authenticity.

Respondent 5 stated:

> *"Gastronomy is the easiest way to understand the culture of a destination. Through food you can feel the tradition and lifestyle of local people."*

Similarly, respondent 12 emphasised the experiential nature of food consumption:

> *"It is not just about eating, it is about experiencing something new that you cannot get at home."*

The analysis also reveals that gastronomy is strongly linked to destination image formation. Respondent 21 noted:

> *"When I think about some destinations, I immediately think about their food. Sometimes food is even the first thing I search online."*

Overall, these findings suggest that participants perceive gastronomic tourism as a multidimensional construct that integrates cultural understanding, sensory engagement, and destination meaning-making. Rather than being perceived as a supplementary tourism activity, gastronomy emerges as a central component of destination experience and identity construction.

3.2 Food Experience Determinants

The second thematic cluster identifies the key factors shaping satisfaction with gastronomic experiences during travel. The analysis reveals four dominant determinants: authenticity, quality, presentation, and local sourcing of food.

Authenticity emerged as the most significant determinant of gastronomic satisfaction. Respondent 8 stated:

> *"For me, authentic food means food that is prepared the way locals prepare it, not something adapted for tourists."*

Quality was also identified as a crucial factor, particularly in relation to taste and service standards. Respondent 14 explained:

"It doesn't matter if it is traditional food, if it is not good quality and well presented, the experience is not complete."

Visual presentation played an important role in shaping expectations and perceived satisfaction. Respondent 3 noted:

"We eat with our eyes first. If the food looks good, I already expect a good experience."

Sustainability and local sourcing emerged as additional value-based criteria influencing food choices. Respondent 19 stated:

"I prefer restaurants that use local ingredients because it feels more responsible and connected to the place."

Overall, the findings indicate that gastronomic satisfaction among Generation Z is shaped by an interplay of sensory (taste and appearance), functional (quality and service), and ethical (sustainability and local sourcing) dimensions, with authenticity and quality functioning as the primary evaluative criteria.

3.3 Social Media Influence on Gastronomic Decision-Making

The third thematic cluster highlights the strong influence of social media platforms on gastronomic decision-making during travel. Participants consistently identified Instagram, TikTok, and online review platforms as primary sources of inspiration and information.

Respondent 2 explained:

"Most of the places I visit while travelling are based on what I see on TikTok or Instagram."

Similarly, respondent 17 stated:

"If something is not on social media, I probably won't even know it exists."

Visual content emerged as a particularly influential factor in shaping preferences and choices. Respondent 9 noted:

"Food has to look good on Instagram. That is often the reason I choose a restaurant."

In addition, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and online reviews were perceived as highly credible and influential in reducing uncertainty during decision-making. Respondent 25 highlighted:

"I always check Google reviews before choosing where to eat because I trust other people's experiences more than ads."

Overall, the findings demonstrate that social media platforms significantly shape awareness, expectations, and decision-making processes related to gastronomic experiences. In particular, visual appeal and peer-generated content act as key mechanisms influencing Generation Z's gastronomic choices.

3.4 Gastronomy as a Travel Motivation

The final thematic cluster explores whether gastronomy can function as a primary motivation for travel. The findings indicate a mixed but generally positive attitude toward food-driven travel.

Several participants confirmed that gastronomy can act as a standalone travel motive. Respondent 6 stated:

"Yes, I would travel somewhere just because of food, especially if it is something unique or traditional."

Respondent 18 added:

"I actually planned a trip to Italy mainly because of pasta and local cuisine experiences."

However, other participants viewed gastronomy as a complementary rather than primary motivation. Respondent 11 noted:

"Food is important, but I usually don't travel only because of it. It is part of the whole experience."

Overall, gastronomy emerges as an important component within travel decision-making processes, with its motivational role varying depending on the perceived uniqueness and authenticity of the food experience.

CONCLUSION

In the context of increasing experiential consumption and rapid digital transformation of tourism, this study contributes to the growing body of literature that emphasises the central role of social media in shaping contemporary tourism behaviour. Recent research confirms that tourism experiences are increasingly co-created through digital platforms, where user-generated content, influencer communication, and algorithmic curation jointly influence perceptions and decision-making processes (Leung et al., 2021; Tran & Rudolf, 2022). In this sense, gastronomic tourism is no longer understood solely as a physical consumption activity, but as a digitally extended experiential process.

The results demonstrate that Generation Z perceives gastronomic tourism as a key component of destination meaning-making, where authenticity, quality, and visual presentation jointly shape experiential value. This aligns with recent evidence showing that social media marketing activities significantly influence Gen Z travel behaviours, particularly through emotionally engaging and visually driven content (Liu et al., 2023; Wang & Iahad, 2025). In particular, the findings extend experiential tourism theory by suggesting that gastronomic experiences are increasingly interpreted through a digital lens, where meaning is constructed before, during, and after the actual consumption experience.

A key contribution of this study lies in the confirmation that authenticity in gastronomic tourism is not only a cultural construct but also a digitally mediated attribute shaped by online visibility and representation. This is consistent with findings that destination branding and perceived authenticity are strongly influenced by social media narratives and user-generated content (Tran & Rudolf, 2022). For Generation Z travellers, authenticity is therefore not only experienced on-site but also evaluated through digital cues, reviews, and visual storytelling.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that social media plays a decisive role in shaping gastronomic decision-making among Generation Z. Consistent with recent empirical research, Gen Z travellers demonstrate high reliance on influencer content, peer-generated reviews, and Instagram-based inspiration when forming travel and food-related preferences (Choi et al., 2024; Wang & Iahad, 2025). Importantly, influencer type, trustworthiness, and content format significantly affect behavioural intentions, highlighting the strong persuasive power of visual and social validation mechanisms in gastronomic tourism choices (Choi et al., 2024).

Another important insight of this study is the increasing importance of visuality and "Instagrammability" as independent evaluative criteria in gastronomic experiences. Food is not only consumed for taste and cultural meaning but also for its symbolic and shareable value within digital ecosystems. This reflects broader findings that social media platforms actively shape destination image formation and travel expectations through curated visual content (Leung et al., 2021; Tran & Rudolf, 2022).

The study also confirms that gastronomy can function both as a primary and secondary travel motivation among Generation Z travellers. While some participants emphasised food as the main driver of travel, others positioned it as an integral but complementary element of broader tourism experiences. This supports recent literature suggesting that Gen Z travel behaviour is highly flexible and influenced by social media-driven inspiration rather than fixed motivational categories (Liu et al., 2023; Wang & Iahad, 2025).

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to tourism literature by integrating experiential tourism theory with contemporary digital behaviour frameworks, demonstrating that gastronomic tourism should be understood as a multi-layered construct shaped by cultural meaning, sensory engagement, and digital mediation. The findings further support the causal-chain perspective of social media influence in tourism behaviour, where exposure, engagement, and trust sequentially shape behavioural outcomes (Leung et al., 2021).

From a practical perspective, the findings provide several implications for destination managers and hospitality providers. First, effective destination marketing must integrate authentic storytelling with visually engaging digital content. Second, influencer collaborations should be strategically designed, considering credibility and audience alignment. Third, user-generated content should be actively incorporated into destination branding strategies, as it plays a central role in shaping Gen Z perceptions and decision-making processes.

Limitations and future research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the sample consists of 52 students, which limits the generalisability of findings beyond the specific educational and cultural context. Second, the study focuses on perceived attitudes rather than actual behavioural data, which may differ in real-world travel situations.

Future research should therefore adopt mixed-method or quantitative approaches to validate these findings across broader and more diverse populations. Comparative studies across generational cohorts would also be valuable in identifying differences in gastronomic perception and digital behaviour. Additionally, future studies could explore the role of emerging short-video platforms and algorithm-driven recommendation systems in shaping gastronomic tourism decisions, as these are becoming increasingly influential in destination marketing and travel inspiration processes.

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