
Pro-Environmental Initiatives in the Hospitality Sector as a Driver of Brand Loyalty Among Generation Z

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Abstract:

Purpose: This study explores the role of pro-environmental initiatives in the hospitality sector in driving brand loyalty among Generation Z consumers. With the increasing environmental awareness reshaping the hospitality industry, the research highlights Generation Z as a pivotal demographic driving modern consumer trends in this sector.

Design/Methodology/Approach: A quantitative survey involving 575 Generation Z respondents provides valuable insights into their sustainability attitudes and preferences. This paper presents a literature review that offers a theoretical foundation and contextual understanding of the topic, along with practical, research-based recommendations, for companies in the hospitality sector to commit to implementing pro-environmental initiatives.

Findings: The research findings underline the importance of tailoring sustainability initiatives in the hospitality industry to meet the specific expectations of Generation Z, a demographic poised to shape the industry's future. By focusing on sustainable practices and transparent communication, the hospitality sector can cultivate long-term brand loyalty within this cohort, creating a mutually beneficial relationship that supports both business objectives and environmental goals.

Practical Implications: This constitutes a statement that pro-environmental initiatives not only meet ethical standards but also serve as strategic tools for fostering customer loyalty from this cohort.

Originality/Value: Both theoretical and empirical research presented in this article reveal a strong alignment between pro-environmental initiatives and brand loyalty, among consumers from Generation Z.

Keywords: Pro-environmental initiatives, hospitality sector, brand loyalty, Generation Z.

JEL codes: M31, Q56, L83, Q50, D12.

Paper type: Research article.

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1. Introduction

In an era defined by heightened environmental awareness, the hospitality sector holds a unique position of both influence and susceptibility to the evolving sustainability goals (Loureiro, Guerreiro, and Han, 2022; Rasoolimanesh, Hall, Esfandiar, and Seyfi, 2023; Park, Bitaab, Lee, and Back, 2024). According to the Accenture's Destination Sustainability survey, 75% of hotel owners admits that increasing pressure to focus on sustainability is coming from customers (Accenture, 2023). Among these consumers, Generation Z – individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s – emerges as a significant force driving change (Seemiller and Grace, 2018; Homer and Kanagasapathy, 2024).

Known for their digital nativity, social consciousness, and environmental advocacy, Gen Z represents a cohort whose values and expectations are reshaping the business landscape, also in hospitality. According to the Hilton report, 72% of Gen Z planned to reduce other areas of their personal spending to prioritize leisure travel in 2024 (Hilton, 2024).

As this generation becomes a dominant consumer group, their preferences are compelling hospitality brands to rethink and reconfigure their operational strategies, with pro-environmental initiatives playing one of the key roles in building brand loyalty. Consequently, the hospitality sector not only adapts to meet these new demands but also can play a crucial role in promoting environmental consciousness by setting examples and encouraging broader societal changes towards a more sustainable future.

Considering the implications discussed above, the aim of the study was to explore the role of pro-environmental initiatives in the hospitality sector as a driver of brand loyalty among Generation Z consumers. By examining this relationship, the research aimed to provide valuable insights for both theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, the article sought to deepen the understanding of pro-environmental preferences and brand loyalty within Generation Z, as the existing literature offers limited research in this topic. From a practical standpoint, the research offers valuable insights for hospitality businesses seeking to enhance customer loyalty by aligning their brand values with the growing interest in pro-environmental initiatives.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Pro-Environmental Initiatives in the Hospitality Sector

As researchers indicate, the concept of sustainable development constitutes one of the significant determinants of the development of the tourism industry in the contemporary world (Tzschenke, Kirk, and Lynch, 2004; Cao *et al.*, 2024; Agarwal *et al.*, 2024). This is associated with the dynamic growth of this sector, which exerts

a strong influence on the environment (Liu *et al.*, 2022). Consequently, there has been a push towards developing more sustainable practices that balance economic benefits with the preservation of the environment (Kraus, Rehman, and Garcia, 2020). It is also noted that the implementation of pro-environmental practices enhances the quality of hospitality sector services and serves as a source of competitive advantage in the hospitality industry (Edgell, 2006; Wang, 2022).

Sustainable, pro-environmental initiatives can be a tool for building customer loyalty. Previous research shows a positive attitude among consumers towards hotels that implement pro-ecological practices (Teng, Lu, and Huang, 2018; Merli, Preziosi, Acampora, and Ali, 2019; León and Araña, 2020; Quan, Koo, and Han, 2023). When hotels take steps to reduce their environmental impact, such as using renewable energy sources, reducing waste, and conserving water, they not only contribute to the well-being of the planet but also enhance their brand image in the eyes of environmentally conscious customers.

This alignment with customers' values fosters a deeper emotional connection and trust, leading to increased customer loyalty and repeat business. Consequently, hotels that prioritize sustainability can differentiate themselves in a competitive market, attracting a growing segment of eco-aware travelers and build their loyalty (Cerchione and Bansal, 2020; López-Gamero, Molina-Azorín, Pereira-Moliner, and Pertusa-Ortega 2023; Khalil, Che Abdullah, Haron, and Hamid, 2024)

2.2 Brand Loyalty in the Hospitality Sector

Understanding and fostering brand loyalty is essential for businesses seeking long-term success and competitive advantage. One of the most frequently referenced definitions of brand loyalty is that proposed by R.L. Oliver. This researcher characterizes brand loyalty as “a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior” (Oliver, 1999).

However, contemporary researchers indicate that the evolution of this concept has led to perceiving brand loyalty encompassing a higher degree of interaction, influence, and ownership by stakeholders in relation to the brand (Oh *et al.*, 2020; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020; Goyal and Verma, 2024; Szkudlarek, 2024). With its multidimensional and holistic nature (Fernandes, Moreira, 2019; Ramaseshan, Stein, 2014) brand loyalty exerts significant influence on brand perception and value and offers plethora of initiatives that can contribute to brand narrative and corporate image (Parris, Guzman, 2023; Karim, Rabiul, 2024).

In the hospitality sector brand loyalty is understood as a deep commitment to re-buy a preferred product consistently, resisting influences that might cause switching (Górska-Warsewicz and Kulykovets, 2020) and is a reflection of the customer

experience offered by the hotel (Guan *et al.*, 2021). When customers feel valued and their expectations are met or exceeded, they are more likely to develop a strong allegiance to the brand.

Hence, brand loyalty in this sector reflects the cumulative impact of the hotel's efforts to enhance customer satisfaction and build lasting relationships. Brand loyalty gives hospitality companies a powerful marketing edge by lowering marketing costs, retaining current customers, and attracting new ones. However, sustaining brand loyalty in this sector relies on improving service quality and building customer trust (Cao *et al.*, 2024). Understanding these dynamics not only helps hospitality businesses retain customers and reduce marketing costs but also enhances their ability to attract new clientele.

2.3 Generation Z as Loyal Customers of Hospitality Sector

Brand loyalty among Generation Z is a rapidly evolving phenomenon that reflects the unique values and preferences of this cohort. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z exhibits a strong inclination towards brands that align with their social values, including sustainability, inclusivity, and ethical practices (Orea-Giner and Fusté-Forné, 2023; Kara and Min, 2024; Gross-Gołacka, 2020; 2022; 2024).

Gen Z exhibits a unique approach to decision-making, driven by a deep-seated quest for truth that underpins all their actions and behaviors (Tracy and Hoefel, 2018). Table 1 presents a set of “truths” defining this generation, this can serve as a kind of roadmap for building brand loyalty within this group of customers.

Table 1. Set of “truths” defining Generation Z

Attribute	Undefined ID	Communaholic	Dialoguer	Realistic
Definition	Don't define yourself in only one way	Be radically inclusive	Have fewer confrontations and more dialogue	Live life pragmatically
Kind of truth	Expressing individual truth	Connecting through different truths	Understanding different truths	Unveiling the truth behind all things

Source: Own study based on Tracy, Hoefel 'True Gen': Generation Z and its implications for companies, 2018, p. 3.

For members of Generation Z, the crucial aspect described as “Undefined ID” is not to confine themselves to a single stereotype. Instead, they focus on exploring various ways of expressing their individuality and gradually developing their unique identities.

This attribute relates to expressing an individual truth. “Communaholic” attribute refers to be profoundly inclusive, making no distinction between friends met online and those in the physical world. Gen Z's seamlessly navigate between communities,

leveraging technology to building relations. The high level of connectivity provided by technology allows them to engage and mobilize effectively. Online communities are particularly valued by Gen Z, as they enable individuals from diverse economic backgrounds to connect and rally around shared interests and causes.

This is what they understand as connecting through different truths. Members of the generation Z describe themselves as “Dialoguers” highlighting how they value open communication and are differing viewpoints, both within the institutions they are involved in and within their own families. They belief in understanding different truths including a strong appreciation for individual identity, a rejection of stereotypes, and a significant degree of pragmatism. To effectively engage and build loyalty within this cohort, brands must understand and align with these core “truths”.

The existing literature offers limited research on the brand loyalty of Generation Z within the hospitality sector (Salinero, Prayag, Gómez-Rico, Molina-Collado, 2022). Nonetheless, gaining a comprehensive understanding of their preferences is essential for achieving a competitive advantage. Especially since this generation places great emphasis on travel-related goals, treating travel as an element of their education and personal development.

What is more Gen Z, an increasingly significant group of future travelers, prioritizes cultural understanding, foreign language learning, and unique experiences in their travel decisions (Popşa, 2024). Additionally, they pay particular attention to pro-environmental and sustainability (Han, Kim, Kiatkawsin, 2017; Ribeiro et al., 2023). Such priorities highlight the necessity for the hospitality sector to adapt and cater to these evolving preferences.

3. Materials and Methods

The aim of the study was to explore the role of pro-environmental initiatives in the hospitality sector as a driver of brand loyalty among Generation Z consumers. Based on that goal, the following research problem was defined: “What is Generation Z's attitude toward pro-environmental initiatives in the hospitality sector, and how does this attitude influence their brand loyalty?”

In this study, the authors chose to structure their research based on the research questions rather than predefined hypotheses. This decision stemmed from the exploratory nature of the research, which aims to examine a relatively uncharted aspect of Generation Z's attitudes toward pro-environmental initiatives in the hospitality sector.

By adopting this approach, the study seeks to contribute both to academic discourse and practical applications. Moreover, this methodological choice aligns with the recommendations of other scholars who advocate for research that generates actionable insights to support and advance industry practices (Dolnicar, 2020;

Demeter, Fechner, and Dolnicar, 2023). Following this approach, three research questions have been defined:

- Q1: What are Gen Z's attitudes regarding pro-environmental initiatives in a broader context, extending beyond the hospitality sector?
- Q2: What kind of rewards would encourage Gen Z's to engage in pro-ecological practices at accommodation facilities?
- Q3: How do the pro-environmental initiatives in the hospitality sector influence Gen Z's loyalty toward accommodation facilities?

The study was carried out using a quantitative survey questionnaire. The quantitative data was collected through the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) method on a group of 575 respondents. 64% of the respondents were women and 36% were men. The questionnaire consisted of three groups of questions.

Within the first group respondents were asked to assess their stance on pro-environmental initiatives in a broad context, extending beyond the hospitality sector. In the second group of questions respondents were asked to assess how various rewards encouraging eco-friendly behaviors would make them more likely engage in pro-ecological practices at accommodation facilities. Finally, the last group of questions assessed Gen Z's loyalty toward accommodation facilities implementing pro-environmental initiatives.

4. Data Analysis

The initial phase of the study involved an assessment of respondents' attitudes towards pro-environmental initiatives within a broad context, extending beyond the hospitality sector. This approach was taken to gain a more holistic understanding of how respondents perceive and value environmentally friendly initiatives. Data analysis presented in the Table 2 shows that a substantial majority, 59.7% of respondents—indicate an intention to follow ecological principles, despite acknowledging that they do not always succeed in doing so.

What is more, a committed 17.9% of respondents regard ecological practices as important, consistently striving to integrate sustainable actions into their lives. In summary, 77.6% of respondents have a positive attitude towards pro-environmental initiatives. This level of commitment suggests a segment of the population aligned with environmental principles, potentially serving as advocates or influencers in broader ecological movements.

In the case of attitudes towards various rewards on encouraging eco-friendly behaviors, the research showed that financial rewards, particularly discounts on accommodation and cash incentives, are the most effective motivators for engaging in pro-environmental practices. However, the differences in approach between women and men were observed.

Table 2. Respondents' attitudes regarding pro-environmental initiatives.

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
It is a waste of time for me	11	1.9	1.9	1.9
I follow ecological principles only when it aligns with my interests	17	3.0	3.0	4.9
It is indifferent for me	101	17.6	17.6	22.4
I try to follow ecological principles, but I don't always succeed	343	59.7	59.7	82.1
It is important to me and I always try to follow ecological principles	103	17.9	17.9	100.0
Total	575	100.0	100.0	575

Source: Own study, $n=575$.

Table 3 presents the gender-based differences in various rewards on encouraging eco-friendly behaviors, such as water and energy conservation and recycling, within accommodation facilities. Among the incentives offered, discounts on accommodation and discounts on facility services emerged as the most effective motivators, with women rating discounts on accommodation at an average of 5.62 (SD = 1.267) and men slightly lower at 5.36 (SD = 1.454). Similarly, discounts on services scored highly, with women averaging 5.61 (SD = 1.273) and men 5.31 (SD = 1.404).

Additional loyalty program points were moderately effective, with an average rating of 5.10 (SD = 1.482) for women and 4.67 (SD = 1.565) for men, indicating a notable difference in gender response. Cash rewards were similarly valued by both groups, with women rating them at 5.15 (SD = 1.512) and men at 5.16 (SD = 1.507). Conversely, simple gadgets or material rewards were the least appealing, receiving average scores of 4.96 (SD = 1.596) from women and 4.74 (SD = 1.568) from men.

In terms of general attitudes towards eco-friendly behavior, men exhibited a higher level of indifference to incentives, with an average score of 3.89 (SD = 1.703), compared to women at 3.71 (SD = 1.815). Notably, a proportion of both men and women reported engaging in environmentally friendly actions regardless of external rewards, with women scoring this at 5.03 (SD = 1.433) and men at 4.67 (SD = 1.514). Overall, the data suggest that while discounts and loyalty rewards are effective motivators, material incentives are comparatively less influential. Women demonstrated a marginally higher responsiveness to incentives overall, as reflected in slightly higher mean scores across all categories. These findings underscore the potential of incentive programs based on financial rewards to foster sustainable practices within the hospitality industry.

Table 3. Gender-based differences in various rewards on encouraging pro-ecological behaviors

Distribution of response by gender		Discounts on accommodation	Additional loyalty program points (if available)	Cash	Discounts on services offered at the facility	Simple gadgets, material rewards	These matters are indifferent to me, and I don't see any tool that would influence my behavior	I care about the environment and act in an eco-friendly way even without additional incentives
Women	N	370	370	370	370	370	370	370
	Important	370	370	370	370	370	370	370
	Data gaps	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Average	5,62	5,10	5,15	5,61	4,96	3,71	5,03
Men	N	205	205	205	205	205	205	205
	Important	205	205	205	205	205	205	205
	Data gaps	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Average	5,36	4,67	5,16	5,31	4,74	3,89	4,67
Men	N	1,454	1,565	1,507	1,404	1,568	1,703	1,514
	Standard deviation	1,267	1,482	1,512	1,273	1,596	1,815	1,433
	Average	5,36	4,67	5,16	5,31	4,74	3,89	4,67
	Standard deviation	1,454	1,565	1,507	1,404	1,568	1,703	1,514

Source: Own study, n=575.

Regarding the analysis of the impact of pro-environmental initiatives in the hospitality sector on Gen Z's loyalty toward accommodation facilities, the Mann-Whitney U test results presented in Table 4 revealed statistically significant differences between women and men in their assessment of the influence of pro-environmental solutions on their loyalty to accommodation facilities ($p=0.007$). Higher rank values obtained by women suggest that they were more likely to declare loyalty to accommodation facilities implementing pro-environmental measures. This indicates that women tend to appreciate environmental protection efforts to a greater extent and are more inclined to revisit establishments actively engaged in pro-environmental initiatives.

Table 4. The impact of pro-environmental initiatives in the hospitality sector on Gen Z's loyalty toward accommodation facilities.

	The implementation of pro-ecological solutions by the accommodation facility would positively influence my loyalty to the facility
Mann-Whitney U	32919.000
Wilcoxon W	54034.000
Z	-2.678
Asymptotic significance (two-tailed)	0.007

Source: Own study, n=575.

The presented results highlight a positive attitude towards pro-environmental initiatives among Generation Z customers. While most respondents show support for this kind of initiatives, the data reveal differences in willingness to participate and incentivization preferences between women and men.

Women demonstrate a stronger inclination towards eco-friendly accommodations and are more responsive to incentives, which could guide tailored marketing strategies in the hospitality sector. These insights underscore the potential for integrating pro-environmental initiatives to not only enhance customer satisfaction but also foster brand loyalty and contribute to broader ecological advocacy.

5. Discussion

Both theoretical and empirical research presented in this article reveal a strong alignment between pro-environmental initiatives and brand loyalty, among consumers from Generation Z. This constitutes a statement that pro-environmental initiatives not only meet ethical standards but also serve as strategic tools for fostering customer loyalty from this cohort.

This connects with the findings of other researchers analyzing Gen Z' approach to sustainability in the hospitality industry (Han, Kim, and Kiatkawsin, 2017; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2023) as well as those that analyzed the attitudes of this cohort in a broader perspective, not limited to the hospitality (Lisboa, Vitorino, and Antunes, 2022; Dragolea *et al.*, 2023; Kara and Min, 2024).

For the hospitality sector, research findings offer numerous opportunities not only to enhance brand image but also to position businesses as leaders in the industry. By offering unique, pro-environmental experiences—such as accommodations that focus on renewable energy, waste reduction and local sourcing—hotels can meet the desire of Generation Z travelers for memorable and environmentally responsible stays.

This implication aligns with other research highlighting the implementation of pro-environmental practices as a source of competitive advantage in the hospitality industry (Edgell, 2006; Goffi, Cucculelli, and Masiero, 2019; Amatulli, Angelis, and Stoppani, 2021; Wang, 2022).

Research findings underline the importance of adapting sustainability initiatives to meet the specific expectations of Generation Z, a demographic that is likely to influence the industry's future. By focusing on pro-environmental initiatives and transparent communication, the hospitality sector can cultivate long-term brand loyalty within this cohort, creating a mutually beneficial relationship that supports both business objectives and environmental goals.

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