



Original paper

From interaction to sustainability: An exploratory study of Serbian Generation Z conference design preferences

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ABSTRACT

This study examines conference design preferences among Generation Z participants, with a particular focus on technology-related and sustainability-oriented attributes. As this generational cohort becomes increasingly influential within the business events sector, understanding their expectations is essential for the future development of conferences. Survey data were collected from 257 Generation Z respondents in Serbia, specifically university students, all of whom had prior conference attendance experience. Exploratory factor analysis was applied to identify the underlying dimensions of conference design preferences. The results reveal a four-factor structure comprising experiential and personalized learning, sustainability and social responsibility orientation, technology-enhanced conference interaction, and virtual participation and networking. The findings indicate that Generation Z strongly values interactive digital technologies that enable real-time engagement with speakers and flexible participation formats. In addition, sustainability-related practices, including environmentally responsible and socially conscious initiatives, emerge as a distinct and influential dimension shaping conference attractiveness. The study concludes that technology integration and sustainability are central determinants of conference appeal for Generation Z rather than peripheral features. These findings offer practical recommendations for conference organizers and destination stakeholders seeking to design future-oriented conferences that align with the expectations of this emerging and increasingly important market segment.

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INTRODUCTION

Business tourism, also referred to as meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE) tourism, has become an increasingly significant contributor to the global travel and tourism industry. The growth of this sector is largely driven by globalization and technological advancements, which have facilitated international business operations (Davidson, 2019). In addition, business events serve as vital platforms for knowledge exchange, networking, and business development (Mair et al., 2018). Consequently, destinations, particularly emerging

ones, are investing heavily in MICE infrastructure to attract business travelers and capture a share of this lucrative market (Del Chiappa, 2012).

In developing economies, business travel often plays a key role in stimulating the broader tourism sector. By attracting business events and visitors, these economies can enhance overall tourism, generate long-term economic benefits for host communities, and strengthen their brand recognition as attractive destinations (Getz and Page, 2016). Recognizing the potential of MICE tourism, several emerging destinations have prioritized its development to foster regional growth and increase global visibility.

As Generation Z emerges as an influential consumer group and an increasingly important cohort in business tourism, understanding their preferences regarding conference design is crucial for the sustained success of the MICE sector (Pavluković et al., 2023). While prior studies have examined the consumer behavior, travel characteristics, and decision-making patterns of Generation Z (Damanik et al., 2023; Nikolić et al., 2022), there remains a notable research gap in the context of business events. Pavluković et al. (2022) highlighted the increasing importance of examining Generation Z's expectations and preferences regarding conference design.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore and identify the underlying dimensions of conference design preferences among Generation Z participants in Serbia, a developing economy in southeastern Europe, where MICE tourism is recognized as a driver of economic growth and regional development. The study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of Gen Z's expectations for conference experiences, thereby informing more effective and appealing conference designs. Its findings have practical implications for conference organizers and destinations, particularly in Serbia, by offering guidance on how to attract and engage Generation Z participants while enhancing the overall conference experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Events are planned and organized gatherings that bring individuals together in physical or virtual spaces to participate in shared experiences, spanning educational conferences, business expos, cultural festivals, and sporting events (Getz & Page, 2016). Designed to fulfil purposes such as knowledge exchange, promotion, networking, or celebration, events are critical to stimulating tourism flows and feature prominently in destination development and marketing strategies (Mair & Whitford, 2013). Within the broader event taxonomy proposed by Getz and Page (2016), business events represent a rapidly expanding segment, encompassing meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE), and contributing significantly to economic growth and regional prosperity (Lee et al., 2019).

Conferences play a central role in the MICE industry as platforms for disseminating research, sharing best practices, and fostering collaborative

networks (Pavluković et al., 2023). They offer structured programmes that include keynote presentations, workshops, and panel discussions, facilitating both academic advancement and professional development. Academic conferences, in particular, are essential for advancing disciplinary knowledge while providing opportunities for peer feedback and career networking (Mair et al., 2018).

The business events industry is shaped by global trends such as technological convergence, demographic change, and increasing emphasis on sustainability (Davidson, 2019). Among these, generational differences have emerged as a significant determinant of attendee preferences and behaviours, as individuals from distinct cohorts share unique cultural, economic, and social experiences that influence their values, expectations, and participation choices (William & Page, 2011).

The post-pandemic business events sector has experienced significant transformation, particularly in event formats, digital integration, and sustainability practices. A key development is the adoption of hybrid conference models, combining in-person and virtual participation. Initially a response to COVID-19, hybrid events have become a strategic feature of contemporary conferences, enhancing accessibility, geographic reach, and flexibility for attendees (Santos et al., 2024). Beyond these benefits, hybrid formats also support sustainability goals by reducing long-distance travel and resource-intensive on-site operations. Tao et al. (2021) found that hybrid or virtual conferences can cut carbon footprints by up to two-thirds, highlighting their role as a climate-conscious strategy in event management. Parallel to structural changes in event formats, the rapid evolution of digital technologies has transformed expectations regarding conference interaction and engagement. Advances in digital platforms, mobile applications, artificial intelligence, real-time polling systems, and immersive technologies have reshaped how participants interact with speakers, content, and fellow attendees (Chen et al., 2025).

These transformations are particularly relevant when examined through a generational lens. Generation Z, commonly defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012 (Wood, 2013), represents the first fully digital-native cohort (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018). Having grown up in an environment characterized by smartphones, social media ecosystems, and constant connectivity, Gen Z conference attendees exhibit strong preferences for

technology-enhanced interactions, hybrid engagement options, and interactive learning environments. Their short-form attention patterns, comfort with digital interfaces, and desire for real-time interaction shape their expectations for contemporary conference design (Pavluković et al., 2022).

Prior research confirms Generation Z's proclivity for technology integration, sustainability commitment, and experiential engagement in business events (Pavluković et al., 2022). Pavluković et al. (2023) identified six latent motivational dimensions underlying Gen Z's conference attendance, including green and digital conference experience, educational and professional opportunities, conference costs, destination and conference stimuli, stimulating factors, and conference accessibility, highlighting the intersection of digital reliance, environmental consciousness, continuous learning, and experiential motivations in this cohort.

Supporting this, research among Chinese Gen Z students found that destination attractiveness and educational/professional opportunities significantly motivate their conference attendance. Furthermore, these students expressed explicit expectations for edutainment, interactivity, shorter sessions, technology use, and sustainability practices to be embedded in conference design, reinforcing the centrality of these features for Gen Z attendees globally (Pavluković et al., 2022).

These findings align with broader consumer behaviour research demonstrating Generation Z's strong sustainability orientation and preference for responsible practices (Francis & Hoefel, 2018), as well as their tendency to seek personalization, immediacy, and networking opportunities in experiential contexts (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). In the context of business events, such preferences manifest through expectations for waste reduction initiatives, ethical sourcing, inclusive programming, transparent sustainability communication, interactive workshops, peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, digital matchmaking platforms, and flexible participation modalities. Such characteristics distinguish Gen Z from earlier cohorts and underscore the importance of generationally tailored event design.

Collectively, literature indicates a convergence of three interrelated dynamics shaping modern conference design: (1) the structural shift toward hybrid and digitally integrated event formats, (2) the institutionalization of sustainability as a core organizing principle in conference management, and (3) the

growing influence of Generation Z as an emerging and increasingly influential attendee segment. Understanding how these dynamics intersect is essential for anticipating future demand patterns within the MICE sector. The integration of technology and sustainability should therefore not be viewed as peripheral enhancements but as central strategic pillars in designing conferences that resonate with Generation Z's evolving expectations in the post-pandemic business events landscape.

Based on theoretical background on Generation Z's profile, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1: Generation Z participants show a strong preference for conferences that incorporate digital and interactive technologies (e.g., live tweeting, virtual interaction with speakers, online attendance options).

H2: Generation Z participants prefer conferences that incorporate sustainability practices (e.g., zero-plastic policies, paperless materials, use of local products, donation programs).

METHODOLOGY

From September to November 2025 an online survey was administered to members of Generation Z, specifically targeting students from Serbia who were born in 1995 or later. Considering the increasing interest among conference organizers in second-tier destinations, this study holds significant importance, as it specifically focuses on Serbia, an emerging economy with considerable potential for hosting international conferences and various types of business events and host of specialized exhibition EXPO 2027.

EXPO 2027 represents a landmark international event for Serbia, expected to significantly enhance the country's global visibility, strengthen its destination image, and accelerate investments in infrastructure and event facilities. In the context of the MICE sector, it serves as a catalyst for capacity-building, international networking, and long-term positioning of Serbia as a competitive host of large-scale business and professional events.

The survey questions used in this research were adapted from a study conducted by Pavluković et al. (2022), which focused on exploring the China Generation Z's personal preferences and expectations regarding conference design. The survey was divided into two sections. In the first section, there were 30 items that aimed to assess a broad range of attitudes toward conference formats, technology use,

interaction styles, sustainability practices, and destination-related features. Items were measured on a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The second section of the survey focused on gathering sociodemographic information about the respondents, including gender, age, employment status, and their conference attendance within the past five years.

A link with an invitation to participate in the research was distributed to students attending the University of Novi Sad, one of the major universities in Serbia, using the university's social media accounts (Facebook) and university email addresses. All students aged up to 27 were invited to complete the survey. Students, particularly those in economics, tourism, management, IT, engineering, and related fields, frequently participate in academic and professional events that fall within the broader MICE domain. Examples include student scientific conferences, youth entrepreneurship forums, start-up and innovation competitions, career fairs, industry congresses with student tracks, Erasmus+ events, and specialized workshops organized by professional associations. Such events represent an entry-level segment of business tourism, where participants engage in knowledge exchange, networking, and professional development activities similar to those of traditional conference attendees. The selection of students as representatives of Generation Z is justified by their demographic relevance and their growing presence in the future workforce and business event market. As digital natives with distinct preferences regarding technology integration, sustainability, experiential value, and social impact, Generation Z is expected to significantly shape the future demand patterns of the MICE sector. Students constitute an accessible and relatively homogeneous sub-group of this generation, enabling systematic data collection and clearer interpretation of generational attitudes. Participation in this research was completely voluntary and anonymous. The respondents were familiar with the goals and purposes of the research. A total of 257 valid questionnaires were collected and valid for further analysis. This sample size exceeds commonly recommended thresholds for exploratory factor analysis (EFA) (Pallant, 2011). The obtained data were processed by the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 23, which was used for EFA calculus.

RESULTS

Study sample characteristics

The study sample consisted of 257 participants within the Generation Z age range. Females represented the majority, accounting for 59% of respondents. A substantial portion of participants were either unemployed (65%) or engaged in postgraduate studies (56%). Notably, all participants reported having attended at least one conference within the past five years.

EFA - Generation Z conference design preferences

An EFA was conducted to examine Generation Z preferences regarding conference design. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.797, indicating good suitability for factor analysis, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(276) = 1388.377$, $p < 0.001$), confirming sufficient correlations among items. Principal component analysis with oblimin rotation was employed. Eleven items were removed from further examination due to not meeting the minimum criteria for retention. A communalities threshold of 0.40 was applied, and items falling below this cut-off were excluded as they did not sufficiently contribute to the extracted factors. In addition, several items demonstrated non-salient loadings, either by failing to load at ≥ 0.40 on any factor or by exhibiting cross-loadings of similar magnitude across multiple factors, which prevented clear interpretability. These items also showed limited conceptual coherence with the remaining factor structure. For these reasons, and in line with established EFA procedures, the eleven items were omitted to ensure a stable, parsimonious, and theoretically meaningful final factor solution. The final

Table 1. EFA of conference design preferences (factor loadings and Cronbach's alpha)

Items/factors	F1 Alpha 0.786	F2 Alpha 0.776	F3 Alpha 0.671	F4 Alpha 0.618
I like PowerPoint presentations			0.639	
I like sessions where I can Tweet the speaker			0.799	
I want to interact with the speakers during a session through technology			0.703	
I like conferences where I am intellectually challenged	0.646			
I like to meet in person keynote speakers and VIP delegates	0.534			
I like interactive sessions at conferences	0.685			
Being visually stimulating is just as important for conference sessions as having stimulating verbal content	0.634			
Conference programs should be highly personalized	0.580			
I expect to be consulted on what the actual content of the conference should be	0.583			
Given the chance to watch a conference online, rather than actually attend it in person, I would often go for the online option				0.797
I prefer virtual communication to in-person communication at conferences				0.787
I prefer "green" conferences		-0.773		
I prefer paperless conferences		-0.619		
I prefer zero plastic conferences		-0.821		
I prefer conferences where locally produced food is served		-0.667		
I prefer conferences with donation programs		-0.560		
I like to interact with the local community at the conference destination	0.572			
I like to participate in service projects - projects in local community where conference is held	0.522			
I like to have peer-to-peer networking at conferences				0.445

solution comprised 19 items, all exhibiting acceptable communalities and clear factor loadings. Based on eigenvalues greater than one, scree plot inspection, and interpretability of the solution, a four-factor structure was retained. This solution accounted for 53.15% of the total variance. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.618 to 0.786. While two factors exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, the remaining factors demonstrated acceptable internal consistency for exploratory research. Lower alpha values can be attributed to the limited number of items per factor and the exploratory nature of the study (Hair et al., 2019). The factors were labeled based on the core variables that constituted them: F1 Experiential and Personalized Learning, F2 Sustainability and Social Responsibility Orientation, F3 Technology-Enhanced Conference Interaction and F4 Virtual Participation and Networking.

F1 Experiential and Personalized Learning captures Generation Z's preference for intellectually stimulating, interactive, visually engaging, and highly

customized conference experiences, as well as their interest in social and community engagement at the destination. This factor reflects a strong emphasis on experience-driven and participatory learning.

F2 Sustainability and Social Responsibility Orientation comprises items related to environmentally responsible practices and ethical considerations, including green policies, zero-plastic initiatives, paperless formats, and support for local communities. This factor highlights sustainability as a salient dimension of conference design for Generation Z.

F3 Technology-Enhanced Conference Interaction reflects preferences for digital tools that support interaction and engagement during conferences, such as social media use, technology-mediated communication with speakers, and digital presentation formats.

The fourth factor, Virtual Participation and Networking, represents an orientation toward online and virtual conference participation, including a

preference for virtual communication and remote attendance options. Although this factor demonstrated a slightly lower reliability coefficient, it was retained due to its theoretical relevance and alignment with Generation Z's digital nativity.

The EFA results reveal a multidimensional structure of conference preferences among Generation Z participants, emphasizing experiential learning, sustainability, technological integration, and virtual engagement.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examined the underlying dimensions of conference design preferences among Generation Z participants in Serbia, with particular emphasis on technological integration and sustainability-related attributes. The findings reveal a coherent four-factor structure comprising: (1) Experiential and Personalized Learning, (2) Sustainability and Social Responsibility Orientation, (3) Technology-Enhanced Conference Interaction, and (4) Virtual Participation and Networking. Together, these dimensions underscore the multifaceted expectations of Generation Z and align closely with prior research on this cohort's motivations and preferences in the context of business events (Pavluković et al., 2022; Pavluković et al., 2023).

The results provide strong empirical support for H1, which proposed that Generation Z participants exhibit a strong preference for conferences incorporating digital and interactive technologies. Two technology-related dimensions, Technology-Enhanced Conference Interaction and Virtual Participation and Networking, emerged as distinct and meaningful factors. These dimensions capture preferences for live social media engagement, technology-mediated interaction with speakers, digital presentation formats, and online or hybrid participation options. Such findings are consistent with the concept of digital nativity, which characterizes Generation Z as a cohort (Bhalla et al., 2021), that has grown up immersed in digital environments and expects seamless technological integration across educational and professional experiences. In this sense, digital tools are not viewed as optional enhancements but as fundamental components of an attractive and effective conference experience.

Similarly, the findings offer clear support for H2, confirming that sustainability-related practices play a central role in shaping conference preferences among

Generation Z. The Sustainability and Social Responsibility Orientation factor encompasses environmentally responsible initiatives (e.g., zero-plastic policies and paperless formats) as well as broader social sustainability elements, such as local food sourcing, donation programs, and engagement with local communities. This indicates that Generation Z evaluates conferences not only in terms of content and interaction but also based on ethical values and social impact. These results reinforce existing evidence that sustainability is a defining characteristic of Generation Z's consumption (Djafarova & Foots, 2022) and participation choices, extending beyond everyday behavior into professional and educational travel contexts (Pavluković et al., 2023).

From a broader perspective, these findings resonate with contemporary discussions on emerging trends in management and event-related research, which emphasize the growing importance of digital transformation, ethical responsibility, and sustainable practices across organizational contexts (Vujičić et al., 2025). As highlighted in this emerging body of literature, integrating technological innovation with responsible and value-driven design is becoming a defining feature of future-oriented management and event practices.

From a theoretical perspective, the study supports generational cohort theory by demonstrating how shared formative experiences, particularly digital immersion and heightened environmental awareness, translate into distinct and structured preferences within the business events domain. By empirically validating these dimensions in a developing economy context, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on Generation Z in business tourism and conference participation, an area that remains underexplored relative to leisure travel research.

From a practical standpoint, the findings carry important implications for conference organizers, destination management organizations, and MICE stakeholders, especially in emerging destinations such as Serbia. Conferences targeting Generation Z should prioritize interactive digital tools, including live polling, social media integration, and hybrid participation formats, while ensuring high levels of personalization and experiential engagement. At the same time, sustainability should be treated as a core design principle rather than a peripheral feature, clearly communicated and visibly implemented throughout the event. Sustainability measures, such as zero-plastic

initiatives, paperless communication, local sourcing, and community engagement programs, are likely to enhance conference attractiveness and participant satisfaction. More broadly, destinations should align conference offerings with broader sustainability and innovation strategies, positioning conferences not only as knowledge-exchange platforms but also as socially responsible and future-oriented experiences. Investment in green infrastructure, digital connectivity, and partnerships with local communities can enhance destination competitiveness and strengthen long-term appeal to this generational cohort.

Finally, from a strategic perspective, understanding Generation Z's preferences enables stakeholders to future-proof the conference industry, as this cohort is expected to become an increasingly dominant segment of the business events market. Conferences that successfully combine technological innovation with sustainability and meaningful engagement are likely to achieve higher satisfaction, stronger loyalty, and sustained participation among Generation Z attendees.

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to some limitations. First, the sample was restricted to Generation Z participants in Serbia, specifically university students from a single higher education institution. This sampling approach may constrain the generalizability of the findings to other cultural, national, and institutional contexts. Although the results provide valuable insights into the expectations of the student segment of Generation Z in Serbia, caution is warranted when extending these findings to the broader population of young professionals. Differences in income levels, work experience, organizational responsibilities, and decision-making authority may significantly influence conference participation motives, evaluation criteria, and destination choice. Therefore, the findings are most directly applicable to the early-career and student segment of Generation Z and should be interpreted as indicative trends rather than fully generalizable conclusions for all young professionals or international contexts. Second, the use of self-reported survey data may be subject to response bias, including social desirability and subjective evaluation effects. Third, while exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was appropriate for identifying underlying dimensions of conference design preferences, future research could apply confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on larger and more diverse samples to validate and refine the proposed factor structure.

Future research could extend this work by conducting cross-cultural comparisons to examine whether Generation Z conference preferences differ across regions and levels of economic development. Longitudinal studies may also be valuable in assessing how these preferences evolve over time as Generation Z becomes more established in professional and academic careers. Finally, integrating behavioral data, such as actual conference participation or choice modeling, could provide deeper insights into how stated preferences translate into real-world decision-making.

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