Article

Unveiling the Motivational Factors behind Generation Z's Conference Attendance for Sustaining Future Participation

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Abstract: This study addresses the motivations behind Generation Z's attendance at conferences and aims to contribute to a better understanding of their conference participation behavior. The study identified six latent factors that influence conference attendance motivation: Green and Digital Conference Experience, Educational and professional opportunities, Conference costs, Destination and conference stimuli, Stimulating factors, and Conference accessibility. These factors align with Generation Z's unique characteristics and preferences, such as their environmental consciousness, reliance on digital technologies, desire for continuous learning, career advancement, and experiences. The study also found that destination characteristics and educational and professional opportunities are significant motivators for Generation Z's conference attendance across different cultural contexts. Additionally, Generation Z's strong interest in sustainability and financial challenges highlights the need for eco-friendly practices and affordable registration fees to make conferences more appealing and accessible. The study further explores the impact of socio-demographic characteristics, revealing the gender and past conference attendance differences in motivation. Finally, the study discusses the implications for the conference industry and suggests areas for future research to enhance the understanding of conference attendance motivation among Generation Z.

Keywords: Generation Z; Conference motivation; Attendees' decision-making; Conference industry

1. Introduction

Business tourism, also known as MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) tourism, has emerged as a significant contributor to the global travel and tourism industry in recent years. The growth of business tourism can be attributed to the rise of globalization and technological advancements that have made it easier for companies to conduct business on a global scale. In addition, business events have become a vital platform for knowledge exchange, networking, and business development. As a result, destinations, particularly emerging ones, are investing heavily in developing their MICE infrastructure to attract business travelers and capture a share of this lucrative market [1].

In developing economies, business travel is often a key contributor to the growth of the wider travel and tourism sector [2]. By attracting business events and visitors, these economies can boost their overall tourism industry, generate significant long-term benefits for the host community [3] and lead to increased brand recognition. Hence, many emerging destinations are making a concerted effort to attract business travelers and grow their business tourism sector. As Generation Z is becoming an influential consumer group and a growing cohort in business tourism, understanding the driving factors that influence Generation Z's participation in business events, such as conferences, is becoming

increasingly crucial for the success of MICE tourism sector [4]. Consumer behaviour, purchasing decision-making styles and travel characteristics of Generation Z have been the subject of several previous academic and commercial research [5; 6; 7]. However, there is a significant research gap in the business events sector when it comes to Generation Z, with most relevant commentary limited to industry-related media instead of academia [4]. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the factors that influence Generation Z's motivations for attending conferences. The study will concentrate on Generation Z in Serbia, a developing economy in southeastern Europe, where MICE tourism is regarded as a high-priority tourist product according to the latest Strategy on Tourism Development of the Republic of Serbia 2016-2025. The Strategy recognizes MICE tourism as an essential driver of economic growth, job creation, and regional development, with a particular emphasis on attracting international business events and conferences to the country. In recent years, the country has hosted several high-profile international events, which have helped to boost its profile as a MICE tourism destination [8].

The study aims to address the following research questions:
- R1 What are the dimensions of Generation Z's conference attendance motivations?
- R2 Are there differences in terms of respondents' gender, level of education, employment status, and previous conference attendance concerning the dimensions of Generation Z's motivation for attending conferences?

This study has important implications for the conference industry in general, and particularly for Serbia, as it provides valuable insights that can help organizers and destinations to attract more Generation Z participants and enhance their conference experience.

2. Literature review

Understanding the factors that influence conference attendance decision-making is crucial for conference organizers and host destinations to effectively attract potential attendees and derive maximum benefits from their participation [9; 10; 11; 4]. While there has been increasing interest in exploring the motivation behind conference attendance, only a limited number of studies have specifically focused on the factors that drive Generation Z's motivation to attend conferences.

The first model that addresses the decision-making process of potential conference attendees was proposed by Oppermann and Chon [12]. Their model identified influencing variables and categorized them into four factors: personal/business factors, association/conference factors, location (destination) factors, and intervening opportunities. Zhang et al. [12] built upon Oppermann and Chon's model and refined it further. They used the original model as a foundation framework and introduced some modifications. In their revised model, they identified four main dimensions that influence conference participation decision-making: association/conference factors, personal/business factors, location factors, and total cost factors. Yoo and Chon [14] developed a measurement scale to examine factors influencing convention participation decision-making. Their study involved members from international tourism and hospitality-related associations. They identified five underlying dimensions of convention participation decision-making: destination stimuli, professional and social networking opportunities, educational opportunities, safety and health situation, and travel ability. These factors align with the models proposed by Oppermann and Chon [12] and Zhang et al. [12] despite different labeling.

Mair and Thompson [15] focused on the UK association conference attendance decision-making process and identified six important components: networking, personal and professional development, cost, location, time and convenience, and health and security. In the research conducted by Malekmohammadi et al. [16], four dimensions of conference motivations were identified: professional and prestige, pleasure-seeking, destination factors, and conference factors. The pleasure-seeking factor, which included aspects like getting away from home, seeking new experiences, and visiting new destinations, and the

conference factor, encompassing the quality and topic of the conference, networking opportunities, and renowned speakers, were found to have the most significant influence on conference participation decision-making. Jung and Tanford [10] conducted a meta-analysis of convention and meeting articles in academic journals. Their findings emphasized that networking opportunities and educational benefits were the primary contributors to convention attendees' satisfaction and their likelihood of returning for future events. Liang and Latip [17] investigated the factors influencing convention attendees' participation decision-making in Malaysia. Their study focused on association/conference factors, location factors, total cost factors, and personal factors. The results revealed that location and total cost factors significantly influenced convention attendees' decision-making process. Mair et al. [18] emphasize that one of the main motives for academics to attend conferences is the opportunity for creating and expanding networks. However, they also mention the challenges faced by academics due to budget constraints on conference attendance. Aktas and Demirel [19] conducted a study specifically focusing on the conference participation decision-making process among academics in Turkey. Their findings align with earlier studies, indicating that academic development, including improving knowledge and skills, and networking opportunities are the most influential factors in academic conference participation. The research also highlights that academics value free time for leisure and recreational activities within conference programs, suggesting the importance of balancing professional and personal aspects during conferences. In Stuart et al.'s [20] study among student participants of a regional conference, the results demonstrated that intrinsic factors, such as personal interest and educational enrichment opportunities, were considerably more influential in determining conference attendance compared to extrinsic factors such as cost and networking opportunities. Pavluković and Cimbaljević [11], in their study conducted in Serbia, identified six factors that played a role in the decision-making process of conference participation: destination stimuli, costs and accessibility of the destination, educational and professional opportunities, intervening opportunities, location factors, and conference factors.

Scott et al. [21] conducted a study to examine the diversity within different age subgroups of the Millennial generation. The research focused on their preferences, motivations, and preferred communication channels when it comes to attending events, conferences, and conventions. An exploratory factor analysis revealed that the motivation of Millennials to attend conferences and conventions includes factors such as career development, environmental consciousness, socialization, personal benefit, familiarity, and timing. Consistent with prior research, Lopez Bonila et al. [22] found five motivating factors for attending conferences: destination and leisure, academic and professional development, networking, travel ability and cost. Notable gender disparities were observed in the first four factors, with female conference attendees assigning greater significance to these factors compared to their male counterparts.

In one of the few studies conducted among members of Generation Z, students from China, three factors that influence conference attendance decision-making were found: destination stimuli, educational and professional opportunities, and conference facilitators [4]. This research reveals that destination characteristics (costs, attractiveness, leisure activities) and opportunities for education and professional growth play significant roles in motivating Generation Z to attend conferences, which align with the current body of literature, albeit not specifically related to Generation Z. Moreover, Generation Z within the Chinese context expects conferences to incorporate elements of edutainment, interactivity, shorter sessions, technological integration, and the inclusion of sustainability practices in event design. While limited research has been conducted in this area to date, Pavluković et al. [4] emphasize that there is growing recognition of the need to explore the motivations, unique expectations and preferences of Generation Z when it comes to conference design.

3. Methodology

From June 2021 to January 2022, 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.

The survey questions used in this research were derived from a study conducted by Pavluković et al. [4], which focused on exploring the motivations of Generation Z for attending conferences. The survey was divided into two sections. In the first part, there were 37 items that aimed to assess the factors influencing the decision-making process for attending conferences. Respondents were required to rate the importance of these items on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important). The second part of the survey focused on gathering sociodemographic information about the respondents, including gender, age, current program of study, employment status, and a question regarding their conference attendance within the past five years.

The link with an invitation to participate in the research was distributed to students using a university's social media accounts. Participation in this research was completely voluntary and anonymous. The respondents were familiar with the goal and purpose of the research. A total of 208 students participated in the survey.   The obtained data were processed by Statistical Package for Social Sciences Version 23 – SPSS, which was used for EFA calculus, and for the CFA analysis authors applied R and RStudio (lavaan, semPlot, psych and semTools packages). For the final analysis, Independent T-test and One-way ANOVA authors again used Statistical Package for Social Sciences Version 23 – SPSS..

4. Results

3.1. Study Sample Characteristics

The sample size comprises 208 participants who fall within the Generation Z age range. The sample is majority female, accounting for 61% of the respondents. Furthermore, a significant proportion of the participants are unemployed (67.8%) and pursuing postgraduate studies (60%). It is noteworthy that over two-thirds of the respondents have prior experience attending conferences within the last five years.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents (N = 208).

	z1	%
Gender		
Male	79	38
Female	127	61
Prefer not to say	2	1
Age		
19-21	41	19.7
22-24	106	51.0
25-27	61	29.3
Current programme of study		
Undergraduate	86	41.3
Postgraduate degree	108	60
Doctoral studies	14	6.7
Currently employed?		
Yes	67	32.2

No	141	67.8
Attendance at a conference in the past five years		
Yes	151	72.6
No	57	27.4

3.2. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) - Generation Z conference attendance motivations scale

To explore dimensions of Generation Z conference motivations, a principal component analysis (PCA) was carried out with Varimax rotation. To test the assumptions for conducting the PCA, the Kaiser's measure of sampling adequacy and the Barlett's test of sphericity suggested that the data were suitable for factor analysis, whereupon it is KMO=0.775, p=0.000. The optimal number of factors was determined by a range of cut-off criteria such as eigenvalue near to one, percentage of variance, item communalities, factor loadings and parallel analysis [23]. Items with loadings lower than 0.5 or with cross-loadings were discarded from the further analysis [24]. Based on the parallel analysis and scree plot suggestions, 10 items with the factor loadings lower than 0.5 were extracted from the further analysis and six factors solution for Generation Z motivation was suggested which explained 51.17% of the variance (Table 2). The results present a clean factor structure with relatively higher loadings on the appropriate factors. The Cronbach's alpha for the six motivation factors varied from 0.589 to 0.887, suggesting high internal consistency. Factors were labeled based on the core variables that constituted them.

Table 2. Results of EFA for Generation Z conference attendance motivations scale

Label	Factor loading	Eigen-value	Vari-ance ex-plained	Alpha
F1 – Green and Digital Conference Experience		7.029	18.997	0.744
	0.749			
Strong Internet/social media presence of conference	0.641			
	0.610			
Conference marketing and programme	0.566			
is available online rather than hardcopy	0.546			
Conference embraces 'green' practices	0.507			
Conference provides an environment for generating and sharing my ideas				
Well-known, reputable speakers				
Environmental impact of traveling to the conference				
F2 – Educational and professional opportunities		3.547	9.588	0.820
	0.738			
Opportunity to learn and gain new	0.717			
knowledge	0.705			
Professional advancement/development	0.666			
New contacts with colleagues	0.623			
Interesting conference theme	0.596			
Interesting conference program	0.570			
New contacts with keynote speakers				
Self-achievement				
F3 – Conference costs		2.796	7.557	0.887
Transportation cost	0.870			
Accommodation cost	0.864			

Conference registration cost	0.852			
F4 – Destination and conference stimuli		2.165	5.852	0.740
Attractive conference destination	0.749			
Scenery/sightseeing/shopping opportu-nities at the conference destination	0.724			
Weather at the conference destination	0.676			
Fun social events as part of conference	0.572			
F5 – Stimulating factors		1.880	5.080	0.756
Previous experience of the conference	0.745			
Previous destination experiences	0.716			
Family support / family responsibilities	0.683			
Personal recommendation by a friend/colleague/family member	0.576			
Conference reputation	0.563			
F6 – Conference destination accessibil-ity		1.518	4.104	0.589
Easy to access to the conference destina-tion	0.725			
Time required to travel to the conference destination	0.722			
Location close to home	0.520			
Safety and security at the conference destination	0.502			

3.3 Confirmatory factorial analysis (CFA)

The latent factors measurement model was estimated to check for innate construct validity and reliability using CFA. Initial model fit indices were showing good results and good fit indices, except RMSEA which was above threshold (CFI = 0.873 (>0.9), TLI = 0.857 (>0.9), RMSEA = 0.085 (<0.08), SRMR = 0.100 (<0.08), df = 378, p<0.000), thus revealing potential problems associated with the model. Therefore, the modification indices needed to be used. Six items in total with high residuals were excluded (M22 - Well-known, reputable speakers, M23 - Interesting conference theme, M29 - Fun social events as part of the conference, M19 - Family support/family responsibilities, M10 - Time required to travel to the conference destination, M11 - Location close to home), thus defining a model with the satisfactory fit (CFI = 0.942, TLI = 0.932, RMSEA = 0.069, SRMR = 0.080, df = 253, p<0.000). The final scale for Generation Z conference attendance motivation included six latent factors with 23 items in total.

Factor one "Green and Digital Conference Experience" (F1) captures the idea that the conference is environmentally responsible and digitally connected, with a strong online presence and digital program materials. It also suggests that the conference provides a rich and collaborative environment for sharing and generating ideas. Factor two "Educational and professional opportunities" comprised of six items related to knowledge and experience that an individual can gain through the conference program and in contact with other participants (F2). The third factor describes "Conference costs", including transportation costs, accommodation costs and conference registration costs (F3). Factor four "Destination and conference stimuli" (F4) refers to conference destination attractiveness/scenery/sightseeing/shopping opportunities and weather, which can stimulate an individual to attend a conference. Factor five "Stimulating factors" (F5) is associated with the set of social components and previous experiences which can encourage an individual to participate in the conference. The last factor "Conference accessibility" is presented

through two variables (F6) related to spatial accessibility of the conference and safety at the destination.

The convergent validity of each dimension was examined by calculating the score of the average variance extracted (AVE) [25]. A substantial convergent validity is achieved when all item-to-factor loadings are significant and the AVE score is higher than 0.50 within each dimension, but AVE higher than 0.40 is still acceptable if composite reliability (CR] is higher than 0.60 [25; 26]. Results showed that all dimensions had AVE higher than .40 and CR higher than .60 (Table 3) which indicates good convergent validity.

Table 3. Reliability of the instruments

Discriminant validity was then checked by comparing the square root of each average variances extracted (AVEs) with the correlation coefficients for each latent construct. Fornell and Larcker [25] noted that the discriminant validity is guaranteed when the square root of each AVE is greater than the correlation coefficients estimate.

Table 4. Discriminant validity

	F1	**F2**	**F3**	**F4**	**F5**	**F6**
F1	*0.64*					
F2	0.51	*0.74*				
F3	0.038	0.193	*0.9*			
F4	0.459	0.14	0.165	*0.74*		
F5	0.539	0.426	0.171	0.511	*0.7*	
F6	0.408	0.445	0.456	0.499	0.54	*0.64*

Note: Italics indicate square root of each average variances extracted (AVEs).

The square roots of AVE values were all higher than the correlation values of constructs compared to all other constructs, thus, results confirm that all dimensions have sufficient discriminant validity Table 4 [25; 27].

3.4 The role of socio-demographic variables

One of the objectives of the study was to examine the impact of various socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents on the extracted factors related to conference participation decision-making, as perceived by members of Generation Z. To achieve this goal, the authors utilized the independent sample t-test to explore differences in gender, employment, and past conference attendance experience. Additionally, an ANOVA test was conducted to assess differences in education levels.

Independent t-tests showed certain differences in responses based on gender and past conference attendance experience. Females are more motivated by F2 Educational and professional opportunities (t=-3.114, p=0.002) and F4 Destination and conference stimuli (t=-2.347, p=0.02) than male respondents. Respondents who attended conference(s) in the last 5 years are more motivated by F1 Green and Digital Conference Experience (t=2.264, p=0.029) and F2 Educational and professional opportunities (t=3.946, p=0.000) than those who didn't. Regarding the employment status, there are no statistically significant differences between respondents in the importance of the extracted factors of conference participation decision-making.

The results of the One-way ANOVA and Post Hoc LSD Test showed significant differences in the responses concerning the level of education for factors F2 Educational and professional opportunities and F4 Destination and conference stimuli. Undergraduate

students are the most motivated by F2 and F4, while postgraduates are moderately motivated and least motivated are doctoral students (F=6.301, p=0.02; F=3.479, p=0.33).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The present study was undertaken to address the current need for research that delves deeper into the factors driving Generation Z's attendance at conferences [4]. By examining these motivations, the study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the conference participation behavior among members of Generation Z.

The results of the study revealed six latent factors that contribute to conference attendance motivation: Green and Digital Conference Experience (F1), Educational and professional opportunities (F2), Conference costs (F3), Destination and conference stimuli (F4), Stimulating factors (F5), and Conference accessibility (F6). These factors encompass various aspects, including environmental responsibility, digital connectivity, knowledge acquisition, networking, cost considerations, destination attractiveness and accessibility. The findings align with previous studies on motivation factors [28]. in the context of conference attendance, though not specifically related to Generation Z. Additionally, the dimensions identified in this study can be closely linked to the core characteristics of Generation Z. For instance, the focus on green and digital conference experiences aligns with Generation Z's heightened environmental consciousness [6] and reliance on digital technologies [5]. The emphasis on educational and professional opportunities resonates with their desire for continuous learning and career advancement. Furthermore, the consideration of destination attractiveness reflects Generation Z's desire for experiences and social connections. By establishing these connections, the study reinforces the relevance and applicability of the identified dimensions to Generation Z's unique characteristics and preferences. While past studies have predominantly employed exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to investigate the dimensions of conference attendees' motivation, this study, to the best of the authors' knowledge, is the first to utilize confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to capture the underlying constructs of Generation Z's conference attendance motivation. By employing CFA, this study aims to provide a more robust and confirmatory examination of the latent factors influencing Generation Z's motivation to attend conferences.

It is intriguing to note that destination characteristics, such as attractiveness, leisure activities, costs, and safety, along with educational and professional opportunities, have emerged as significant motivators for Generation Z's conference attendance in both Serbia (the present study) and China [4]. This similarity in findings across different cultural contexts suggests that these factors hold universal importance in shaping the motivation of Generation Z when it comes to attending conferences. This further emphasizes the significance of considering these factors when organizing conferences and targeting Generation Z attendees, regardless of the specific location.

The present study confirms that Generation Z has a strong interest in sustainability. Therefore, conferences that incorporate eco-friendly practices, and address social and environmental issues can create a more engaging and meaningful experience for Generation Z attendees. Moreover, as Generation Z is mostly comprised of students who are often faced with financial challenges, the costs of attending conferences emerged as an important factor in the present study, as well as in previous studies on conference attendees' motivations [17; 18]. Hence, in order to appeal to Generation Z and encourage their participation, conference organizers should consider offering affordable registration fees, providing discounted rates specifically for students, or even extending travel and accommodation assistance. These measures can help alleviate financial barriers and make conference attendance more accessible and appealing to members of Generation Z.

The importance of studying Generation Z's motivations lies in their unique characteristics and expectations compared to previous generations. As a generation that grew up with advanced technology, Generation Z has distinct requirements that need to be considered when designing conferences. Factors such as networking opportunities,

technological integration, personalization, sustainability, and cost-effectiveness are likely to influence their decision to attend conferences. They also prioritize networking and seek opportunities to connect with industry professionals, keynote speakers. Technology plays a significant role in their lives, so incorporating social media integration and interactive applications, can enhance their conference experience. Also, Generation Z is an important demographic to consider when targeting young MICE attendees. As they are currently building their careers through professional and educational activities, they represent a significant portion of the young workforce. Capturing the attention and loyalty of Generation Z attendees can have long-term benefits. When they form positive experiences and associations with events and organizations early on in their careers, they are more likely to continue their patronage and participation in the future. By establishing a strong connection with this demographic now, event organizers and businesses can potentially foster a long-lasting relationship that extends well into the next decade and beyond.

The study also investigated the impact of socio-demographic characteristics on conference attendance motivation. The independent sample t-tests revealed gender and past conference attendance experience differences in motivation. Female respondents showed higher motivation in terms of Educational and professional opportunities (F2) and Destination and conference stimuli (F4) compared to male respondents. These findings align with similar studies conducted by Lopez Bonila et al. [22] and Pavluković and Cimbaljević [11], which also discovered a gender-based difference in motivation among conference attendees. These consistent results suggest that gender may play a significant role in shaping the motivational factors related to conference participation decision-making, particularly in relation to educational and professional opportunities, as well as destination and conference stimuli. Additionally, respondents who had attended conferences in the last five years exhibited higher motivation in Green and Digital Conference Experience (F1) and Educational and professional opportunities (F2) compared to those who hadn't attended conferences. Regarding employment status, no statistically significant differences were found in the importance of the extracted factors for conference participation decision-making.　The One-way ANOVA results demonstrated significant differences in motivation based on the level of education for factors F2 (Educational and professional opportunities) and F4 (Destination and conference stimuli). Undergraduate students exhibited the highest motivation, followed by postgraduates, while doctoral students demonstrated the lowest motivation. These findings suggest that employment status may not significantly differentiate Generation Z in terms of conference attendance motivation, primarily due to the fact that the current composition of this generation primarily consists of students. As a result, factors such as gender, past conference attendance experience, and level of education may play a more substantial role in shaping the motivation of Generation Z to attend conferences compared to their employment status. However, it is important to note that as Generation Z transitions into the workforce, their employment status may become a more influential factor in their conference attendance motivation.

Overall, this study sheds light on the complex factors that shape Generation Z's motivation to attend conferences, as well as the impact of socio-demographic variables on this process. The results hold relevance for various stakeholders in business tourism, including convention bureaus, destination marketing organizations, destination management companies, professional conference organizers, meeting planners, and venues. Particularly in the current challenging times where increasing attendance is a common struggle, the findings of this research could prove valuable to these intermediaries and suppliers.

However, it is important to note that the findings are based on self-reported data from a specific sample of Generation Z respondents – students from Serbia, which may limit generalizability. Future research could explore additional socio-demographic factors and employ a larger and more diverse sample to further enhance the understanding of conference attendance motivation among Generation Z. It is worth noting that motivations identified in this study may vary among individuals within Generation Z, as they

are a diverse group. Conducting further research specifically targeting Generation Z's motivations towards conference attendance, particularly in different countries or geographic regions, can provide deeper insights and help conference organizers and host destinations cater to their unique needs and maximize the benefits derived from these events.

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