

Customer Experience Aspects of Gen Z in Tourism Travels

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Abstract

Customer experience in tourism travels has become a vital element in the management approaches of private and public specialist organizations. In order to stay highly competitive on the marketplace, the contemporary tourism industry has to constantly find out ways to improve the quality of customer experience. A successful way in this direction is to obtain the most relevant knowledge about the customer and his / her experience characteristics. Therefore, the research goal of this study is to reveal the key customer attitudinal and perceptual experience characteristics of Generation Z while planning, consuming and post reflecting their tourist travels. The attitudinal features of cognitive, affective, and conative consumer behavior are researched in relation with the sensory aspects of the individual's perceptions along with the standpoint of the company's value proposition.

Keywords: customer experience, cognitive, affective, conative, sensory, customer journey, Gen Z

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Introduction

At the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, tourism industry is facing dramatic challenges not typical for the previous times of its development. After the pandemic period and its unpredictable manifestations; in times of geo-political and economic disturbances in different parts of the world; the rapid use of virtual and augmented reality for customer purposes; the availability of AI and its expected invasion in people's life; the ongoing digitalization in every social field; the plenty of opportunities for virtual communication leading to considerable transformations of the marketing funnel pose many questions about the future of tourism travels. Considering the logical expectation that Generation Z is to become the leading tourist demand within the next 10 years, the management perspective has to be shifted in accordance to its specific characteristics. The existent technological opportunities about the tourist trip and its consumption are expected to enhance the relevant customer experience of Gen Z. On the other hand, the essence of a tourist travel is inherently dependent on the human factor in the production process. For that reason, in times of intense competition and dynamic market fluctuations in tourism the need for a significant human touch becomes even more decisive than before for obtaining optimal customer experience. In this regard the general goal of the current paper is to reveal the role of key customer experience characteristics of Gen Z in their tourist travels as a good rationale for efficient decision making on the topic. This research is a kind of an attempt for a short glimpse in the specific nature of customer experience that could be used for a successful management of the customer tourist journey of Gen Z people.

1. Customer experience and Gen Z in tourism

Over the last 70 years, the concept of customer experience has been outlined and developed in a versatile way in the scientific literature. One of the first theoretical attempts for conceptualization of customer experience took place in the 1950s, when emerged the general notion that customers not only desired consumption of products, but also sought satisfying experiences (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). During the course of time in the early 80s of 20th century in the consumer behavior literature started a process of rethinking the personality of the individual as a matter beyond his / her rational nature (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). In this relation the general delineation of customer experience from the classical consumer behavior models was initiated when

the *emotional aspects* of the individual were successfully opposed to the *information – process models* which were dominant at this time (Unger and Kernan, 1983). Following this in mind the phenomenological aspects of customer experience in tourism were set up by Cohen (1979) who differentiated the notion of tourist experience between the search of satisfaction on one hand and the search of life sense of the individual on the other. The phenomenological aspects of developing experimentality and existentiality through the tourist journey push the individual to search for his / her *authentic experience*. The theme of authenticity in tourism experience is discussed in detail by Wang (1999). The discussions mainly stem from the basic hypothesis that there is a contradiction between the tourist's search for authenticity of the experience on one hand and the so-called staged authenticity on the part of the companies within the destination of visit. According to Wang (1999), tourist experience could be developed on the basis of 3 types of authenticity, which nature is explained through the so-called *objective, constructive and postmodern (existential) approaches*.

From an etymological point of view, the category of experience has two types of definitions: 1/ the moment in time of something which is experienced; 2/ a valued experience by the individual, as an object of reflection and a category of an assigned meaning (Cutler, & Carmichael, 2010). In this regard, two decades earlier, Manel and Iso-Ahola (1987) have put to discussion three dominant perspectives on the study of leisure and tourist experience in terms the so-called: "definition approach", the "post-hoc approach to satisfaction" and the "immediate approach". The stand point of the "definition approach" is the identification of elements and dimensions of tourist experience. The "post-hoc approach" of tourist experience has its own focus on the psychological outcomes by researching the individual's motivation and satisfaction. Through the "immediate approach", the nature of on-site experiences within the tourist destination could be researched in a real time manner. The question of where the demarcation line between the post-hoc and the immediate approach passes is still debatable, since much of the customer experience research according to the "post-hoc approach" also takes place within the destination of visit, before the end of the tourist consumption.

Aho (2000) proposes a typology of tourism experience based on four main components which are related to the individual's personality, like: receiving emotions; receiving new information; developing practical knowledge and skills; transforming the state of mind, body or lifestyle of the individual as a subject of the experience. Kim and others (2012) argue that significant importance in customer experience research should be given to *memory* as a key mediating component of the individual's travel intention. Here the main assumptions are that: 1) remembered experiences significantly influence the future behavior of individuals, i.e. when people decide to travel and search for information about a destination, they first remember and rely on their previous experiences; 2) people perceive their previous experiences as highly credible; 3) the individual's levels of motivation and commitment are high when he / she relies on memories of his / her previous experiences; 4) remembered experiences are the best indicators of an individual's willingness to travel in the future. In this regard, Kim and others (2012) insist on the importance of unleashing the potential of the so-called a *memorable tourist experience*. In the same direction La Tour and Carbone (2014) critically discuss the role of different types of memory in shaping the customer's decision to obtain a *meaningful experience*. In the context of experience management, La Tour and Carbone (2014) suggest that firms, as *experience designers* have to identify the so-called key traces (events) that are sufficiently salient and could be successfully registered and remembered by customers for some longer period of time. In this regard, the psychological division of the human long-term memory into three types serves as a reference base for their research in terms of: *semantic memory* which reflects the general knowledge of the individual; *episodic memory* - associated with knowledge achieved on the basis of the individual's social experience; *procedural memory* - defined for skills and routines in the individual's life. A company's first step to manage the total customer experience is to identify the key traces (events) which have to be delivered to customers (Carbone, Berry and Haeckel, 2002). The key traces have a contextual

character and are generally divided into *mechanistic* and *humanistic* ones (Carbone, L. and Haeckel, S., 1994). The mechanistic traces include: sights, smells, tastes, sounds and textures generated by things such as landscaping, graphic images, aromas, recorded music, surfaces of objects, etc. In contrast, humanistic traces originate from people, and are relevantly designed by companies in the process of shaping the desired behaviors of employees involved in customer interactions.

According to Pine and Gilmore (1998), an experience occurs when the company intentionally uses services as a *stage* and goods as *props* to engage the individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event. While the classic provision of goods and services is external to the buyer, experiences are inherently personal, existing only in the mind of the individual who is engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, and even on a spiritual level. Thus, according to Pine and Gilmore (1998), two people can hardly have the same experience, because each experience results from the interaction between the organized event (similar to a theatrical play) and the state of mind of the individual. For that reason, the main role of a tourist company is to become an *experience stager* towards its customers and their personal preferences.

Generation Z which was born between 1995 and 2009 is briefly described as: ambitious, pragmatic; realistic; “digital native”; self-confident; overstressed; multi-modal in lifestyle; the first that have grown up with mobile devices; aspiring to work in the tech industry; engaged with the global climate change, environmental concerns and gender versatility; inclination to live in multicultural families (Popova, 2023). Other research studies reveal Gen Z people as: relatively positive; having extreme faith in technology and education; having anxieties about earning money; not happy at school; strongly supporting the equal treatment between men and women; having insufficient physical and emotional wellbeing; having not enough faith in religion; standing for immigrants for their better living; mostly pessimistic about the future (What the world’s young....). Gen Z also relies on convenience when it comes to mobile applications and digital products; they practice dieting, weight loss, healthy eating and like sleeping; demand technologies that could be tailored for specific needs; they are much influenced by sponsored ads on social media but do not have enough belief in virtual shopper assistants; classical advertising is not an option to convince them buy products and services; they seek positive reviews in social media for inspirations about product purchases and generally do not complain through this media; it takes them several seconds to decide whether the message content is relevant and whether or not to engage with a brand; when influenced by social media they put *travels* on a third place in a row after fashion and technology; for their travels Gen Z declares to be mostly influenced by family members and friends and they also prefer to stay with them during the trip in value hotels or in an all-inclusive resorts (PWC, 2020). Gen Z people considerably prefer summer seaside holidays, city breaks, sports activities, events and festivals, while the reasons for their returns within a particular destination are the natural sightseeing, cultural and historic places, the quality level of accommodation units, the price levels of products and the accessibility level of activities and services they demand (Ministry of tourism, 2020).

A lot more features could be stated for Gen Z people but from a management perspective it’s necessary to build up a more precise vision about their customer experience characteristics in tourism travels. Within the wide plethora of customer experience explanations (some of them commented above) we decided to focus our research perspective on the process of *customer journey*. This process has 2 types of manifestations in the customer relations management (CRM) system. The first one is about the nature of the customer journey starting from the *acquisition of customer* through *customer retention* till the stage of *customer enhancement* which is also known as the level of *total customer care*. This kind of customer journey is intentionally managed by the company from strategic to analytical and operational levels. In order to do this the company is trying to collect and organize data about its customers into a specific CRM way and by use of data base resources if necessary. On the other hand, customer experience management is inherently subdued to the CRM system, so for that reason the *customer journey* is tightly envisioned through

the sequential process of *pre-consumption stage* via *during the consumption stage* until the *post-consumption stage* (Fig. 1)

The linear development of *customer journey* is cross sectioned by 3 *attitudinal components* (cognitive, affective, conative) and 1 *perceptual component* (sensory characteristics) that have to be additionally researched about Gen Z customer experience in tourism travels.

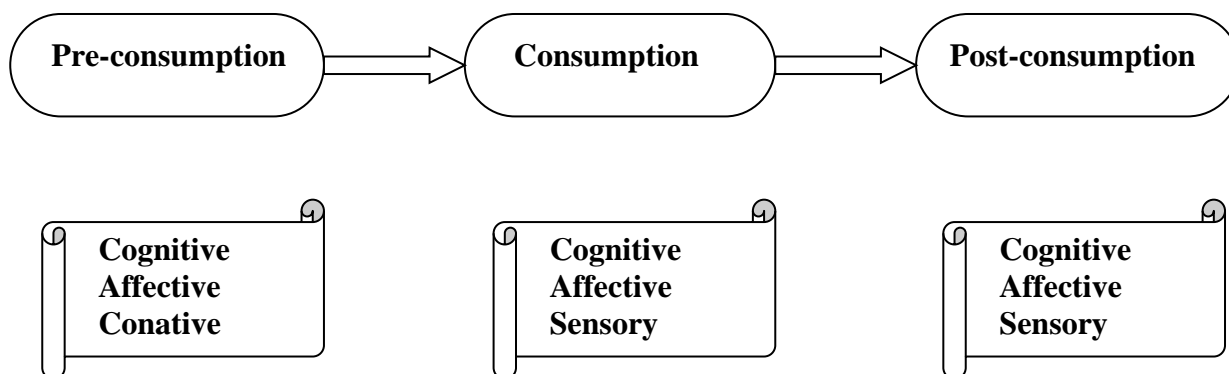


Fig. 1 Customer experience through the customer journey

Source: based on the idea of Godovykh, M. and Tasci, A. (2020)л

The *cognitive* characteristic of customer experience is based on thinking and taking decisions more or less logically available in all stages of the customer journey. The *affective* component is related with all types of mental characteristics like emotions, feelings, beliefs and values and it is also a subject for research in all stages of the customer journey. The conative component as a driver for undertaking actions towards a purchase is relevant for research only within the first stage of the customer journey. The *sensory* component reveals customer experience according to its perceptual nature and its inherent manifestation in the second and third stages of the customer journey. Sensory perceptions are fundamental for the creation of a long-term memory about customer experience.

2. Methodology of the empirical research

The empirical research is based on the presumption of the separate influence of four groups of factors on the customer experience of Gen Z travelers i.g. *cognitive*, *affective*, *conative* and *sensory*. The influence of those factors is jointly researched within the process of customer experience deployment, considering the *pre-consumption*, *during the consumption* and *post-consumption* stages of the customer journey.

The research sample of convenience is organized in a questionnaire survey conducted with 117 respondents from Bulgaria within the age interval between 18 and 29 years old who belong to Gen Z and have already completed domestic and/or outbound tourism trips. The questionnaire survey was administered within the period July – November 2023 in a traditional way by conducting personal interviews. In order the validity of all answers to be entirely controlled the questionnaire survey was actually executed in a face to face manner with the targeted respondents who were addressed on the basis of convenience while meeting the requirements for age limitations. The researched age interval is divided into 3 subintervals including: 18 – 21 years old of finished high school respondents and bachelor degree students (24,8% of the survey sample); 22 – 25 years old respondents of mostly master degree students (65,8% of the survey sample) and of 26 – 29 years

old graduated university respondents and active professionals in different working fields (9,4% of the survey sample). Due to maturity requirements the lowest age for including respondents within the sample was 18 years. The gender ratio consists of 29,9% males and 70,1% females. The most experienced respondents who have completed more than 7 tourist travels at the time of the survey execution form the largest share of the sample (66,7%); 23,1% of the respondents confirm their medium levels of travel experience, having completed between 4 and 7 trips, while 10,3% of the respondents seem to be the least experienced travelers, who have completed less than 4 trips.

In order the questionnaire response data to be set as comparable in terms of meaning and degrees of importance, the respondents were asked to base their answers on chosen personal trips which have already been completed by them in some previous point of time. For that reason every respondent was asked to provide some sort of naming or a short description of the chosen trip that actually served as a reference base/a starting point for answering the questionnaire form. As far as the empirical research is aimed to reveal certain degrees of attitudes and inclinations the research sample is statistically constructed as a non-representative one and the obtained results are expected to provide general orientation characteristics as a basis for taking optimal managerial decisions by tourist private and public organizations about customer experience aspects of Gen Z.

The most frequently used words by the respondents in their short descriptions of trips in the questionnaire forms are: “trip” (36 times); “Bulgaria” (33 times); “Turkey” (19 times); “Italy” (9 times), “France” (7 times), “Spain” (6 times), “tour” (6 times), “holiday” (5 times) “village” (5 times), while the most frequently mentioned national tourist destination is “Paris” (6 times). The average length of a respondent’s travel description consists of 4,1 words and its relatively low vocabular density - 0,454 (196 used unique word forms out of 432 total words) reveals a small number of syntactic repetitions. Only 12% of the respondents prefer Bulgaria as a destination for tourist travels, 31,6% point out foreign countries as their destinations for travels, while 56,4% equally prefer Bulgaria along with foreign countries for undertaking tourist trips.

A considerable share of respondents (69,2%) states that their tourist trip in question was personally organized by themselves; 25,6% of the respondents used the professional support of travel agents or tour operators at hand and only 5,1% used the help of other peer-to-peer travelers.

Customer experience in the *pre-consumption stage* is researched by use of a set of questions, revealing *cognitive-affective characteristics* and one separate set of questions addressing the *conative characteristics*.

The research part during the *consumption stage* is focused on the clarification of *cognitive, affective* and *sensory* characteristics of customer experience. Definitely in a similar way is constructed the research part of the *post-consumption stage*.

3. Empirical results and discussion

Customer experience in the pre-consumption stage

The *cognitive-affective* aspects of customer experience in the pre-consumption stage are presented as descriptive results in table 1. Within this set of indicators, the affective component “excitement from the anticipated event” is leading the list of elements and relevantly takes first place in significance. Then the opposite “logical decision about the trip” comes on the second place in a rank of the most significant cognitive characteristics but having a mean value less than 4,5. Almost similar characteristics are evident about the “self-consideration of the respondent’s personal way of life”, his/her “engagement with the organization of the trip” and the desire “to share his/her intentions to travel”. No matter the highest modal values of 5 in “exchanging tips with other people” and “taking opinions from other users/travelers”, those cognitive characteristics do not seem very typical for the respondents’ experience in the pre-consumption stage. Respondents of Gen Z on average do not make spontaneous decisions about the tourist trips they undertake.

Therefore we may conclude that this affective customer experience characteristic is not quite relevant for their generation.

Table 1. Customer’s cognitive – affective characteristics in choosing the tourist trip

Type of customer activity	Mean	Standard deviation	Mode	Rank
Logical decision about the trip	4,35	0,967	5	2
Exchanging tips with other people	3,872	1,095	5	7
Taking opinions from other users/travelers	3,974	1,17	5	6
Excitement from the anticipated event	4,717	0,641	5	1
Taking into account his/her own lifestyle	4,188	0,991	5	3
Engaging with making the trip	4,179	1,118	5	4
Sharing his/her intention to travel	4,171	0,94	5	5
Having spontaneous decisions about the trip	3,291	1,225	3	8

From a customer experience conative standpoint, Gen Z respondents perceive the purchase process of their tourist trips as “friendly enough”, “relatively easy going” and “almost done on time” according to the desired manner (table 2). The respondents definitely state that they usually do not use the help of professionals from the side of the tourist industry.

Table. 2 Customer’s conative characteristics in purchasing the tourist trip

Purchase process	Mean	Standard deviation	Mode	Rank
Timely/Fast	4,077	1,043	5	3
Easy going	4,231	0,885	5	2
Customer friendly	4,418	0,768	5	1
Backed up by professionals in tourism field	2,846	1,517	1	4

Customer experience during the consumption stage

During the consumption stage the respondents’ affective characteristics of their customer experience like “obtained emotion” and “obtained value” from the tourist trip dominate in significance the relative cognitive characteristics “organization of the tourist product” and “provided elements of the tourist product” (Table 3.). At the same time the acquired knowledge from the tourist trip seems to be the least important characteristic into the respondent’s perceptions of his / her customer experience.

Table 3. Customer’s cognitive-affective characteristics in the consumption of the tourist product

Product characteristics	Mean	Standard deviation	Mode	Rank
Organization	4,444	0,855	5	3
Provided elements	4,418	0,734	5	4
Obtained emotion	4,821	0,5019	5	1
Obtained value	4,581	0,697	5	2
Acquired knowledge	4,325	0,917	5	5

Customer’s cognitive perceptions of the provider’s performance according to the supplied contract elements of the tourist product are enlisted as descriptive results in Table 4.

Table 4. Customer’s cognitive perceptions of the provider’s performance according to the contract elements of the tourist product

Provider’s performance	Mean	Standard deviation	Mode	Rank
Full provision of the product	4.418	0,801	5	3
Timely provision of the product	4,436	0,855	5	2
Provision at the right place / destination	4,624	0,666	5	1
Provision of a product with expected quality	4,282	0,839	5	4

The desired “exact place” or “destination of visit” is the most appreciated contract element received by respondents during the consumption stage of their experience with the tourist trip. Relatively high degrees of assessments, supported by the highest modal values of 5, respondents give to the “timely provision of the product” along with the “full provision of the product”. The receipt of “a product with expected quality” is given the lowest assessment result within the relatively high significance range regardless again its high modal value of 5.

Table 5. Customer’s sensory characteristics at the time of consumption of the tourist product

Sensory characteristics	Mean	Standard deviation	Mode	Rank
Sound characteristics	3,88	1,009	4	3
Tactile characteristics	4,043	0,941	4	2
Taste characteristics	4,418	0,931	5	1
Odor characteristics	3,821	1,055	4	4

Within the set of questions about the sensory characteristics of customer experience at the time of consumption of the tourist product, “taste” is dominant (even not at the highest possible degree) over the other 3 perceptual senses of “tactility”, “sound” and “odor” (Table. 5). “Visual” characteristics are not included in the empirical research due to their existence by default. The descriptive results reveal that as a whole the researched 4 perceptual channels are relatively active for the provision of the necessary sensory characteristics of the customer experience considering the mean values of their significance above 3,5.

The affective characteristics at the “moment of truth” of the customer experience are presented in a descriptive way in table 6.

Table 6. Customer’s affective perceptions about the contact staff’s performance

Contact staff’s performance characteristics	Mean	Standard deviation	Mode	Rank
Positivity	4,624	0,715	5	1
Responsiveness	4,547	0,782	5	2
Empathy	4,299	0,893	5	5
Engagement	4,359	0,905	5	4
Willingness to help	4,418	0,931	5	3

The received “positivity” and “responsiveness” are the most valued affective characteristics by respondents of the contact staff’s performance. Almost very highly appreciated is the staff’s “willingness to help” in different situations and cases during the customer experience. Relatively close position is given to the staff’s “engagement” for the optimal provision of elements of the

tourist product, while staff's "empathy" towards the respondents is evaluated on the very last place in the row of these affective characteristics.

Customer experience in the post-consumption stage

The sensory features of the respondents' memory almost entirely match the relevant perceptual characteristics from the consumption stage (Table 7). In the post-consumption stage "tactility" is much closer to "taste" and considerably ahead of "sound" as a sensory characteristic. The significance of "odour" takes again the very last place in the ranking but additionally fades compared to the result of the same sensory category within the consumption stage.

Table 7. Customer's sensory characteristics (sensory memory) after the consumption of the tourist product

Sensory characteristics	Mean	Standard deviation	Mode	Rank
Sound characteristics	3,823	1,226	5	3
Tactile characteristics	4,128	1,095	5	2
Taste characteristics	4,427	0,931	5	1
Odor characteristics	3,752	1,209	5	4

Customer's affective characteristics after the consumption of the tourist product are led by his/her "satisfaction" on first place, followed by desires for "sharing the experience" and "repeating the experience" within the highest significance levels (Table 8). The "willingness for recommendation of the trip" is very close as a position to the leading 3 affective characteristics but having almost high degree of significance. "Nostalgia" is quite below ranked taking the very last place in the customer experience during the post-consumption stage.

Table 8. Customer's affective characteristics after the consumption of the tourist product

Customer's affective characteristics	Mean	Standard deviation	Mode	Rank
Satisfaction	4,744	0,632	5	1
Nostalgia	3,752	1,319	5	5
Desire for repeating the experience	4,521	0,826	5	3
Desire to share the experience	4,564	0,781	5	2
Willingness to recommend the trip	4,41	0,842	5	4

Customer's cognitive perceptions about the value proposition of the tourist trip are empirically researched by separately differentiating them into 4 components (Table 9).

Table 9. Customer's cognitive perceptions about the value proposition of the tourist trip

Customer's cognitive perceptions	Frequency	Percent	Rank
Mainly prefer the low price	-	-	
In the balance of quality-price ratio	69	59	1
Getting everything from the trip regardless of cost	35	29,9	2
Obtaining sufficient volume of a tourist product at a reasonable price level	13	11,1	3

The modal value is evident in the "balance of quality-price ratio", represented by 59 % of the respondents' replies. Almost 30 % of the respondents share their willingness to "get everything from the tourist trip regardless of cost", while 11,1 % are satisfied to "obtain sufficient volume of a

tourist product at a reasonable price level”. It’s interesting to note that no one of the respondents has pointed out his/her preference to purchase a tourist trip mostly due to the low-price levels of its supply.

Conclusion

Marketing challenges for managing customer experience are much related to the level of its optimal understanding. Nowadays it has become a delicate task for companies and other types of tourist organizations to finely tune their marketing strategies in order not only to efficiently sale products and services, but also to enhance the experience of their customers and accordingly to increase the level of their loyalty. The completed research about key customer experience characteristics of Gen Z provides some issues for a possible effective management in this direction.

In the pre-consumption stage, the emotional characteristics of excitement about the potential travel are leading the customer in his/her product choice in comparison with the logical and pragmatic decisions about its planning and organization. Gen Z people are extremely independent when organizing their travels and almost have no need for any help from professional tourist organizations. Spontaneity is not a typical feature for Gen Z in making choices about travels. During the consumption stage, the emotional and value characteristics of Gen Z are also more explicit than the cognitive ones. Gen Z highly evaluate the contact staff’s performance characteristics in their affective mode. They show good sensory memory for their travel experiences about the taste and tactile elements of the consumed products which in turn is a good rationale for productive long-term memory. Their high satisfaction of the experience makes them strongly positive to repeat the travel and to share and recommend it to other people. Nostalgia is not a good managerial option to influence Gen Z people who are quite stable on the ground by searching for an optimal balance of the quality–price ratio of their travel experiences. Possibly companies and tourist organizations should stay on this path and to devise their value propositions on the premises that Gen Z’s pragmatism is well mixed with emotions and mentality.

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