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Between the Beach, Social Media and Sustainability: Water Tourism Preferences of Generation Z

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BETWEEN THE BEACH, SOCIAL MEDIA AND SUSTAINABILITY: WATER TOURISM PREFERENCES OF GENERATION Z

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ABSTRACT:

Water-based tourism includes tourism activities taking place on, in, or alongside water and is gaining increasing importance in the context of digitalization, sustainability, and changing travel needs. This study examines the attitudes, motives, and expectations of Generation Z toward water-based tourism offers. The focus lies on the role of water in destination choice, preferred activities, information and booking behavior, and sustainability aspects.

The study is based on a standardized online survey conducted between December 2025 and March 2026 with 360 respondents born between 1995 and 2005, representing the older segment of Generation Z. The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods.

The findings show that water is particularly relevant as a feature of attractive destinations and for easily accessible leisure activities such as bathing, swimming, and beach-related recreation. Information and booking behavior are strongly shaped by digital channels, especially social media and online platforms. In addition, a majority of respondents (68.2%) expressed a stated willingness to pay a premium for sustainable water-based tourism offers.

The study provides exploratory, sample-specific insights into the water-tourism preferences of the older segment of Generation Z and suggests implications for target-group-oriented and sustainable water-based tourism offers.

KEYWORDS:

Generation Z; water-based tourism; travel behavior; sustainability; digital information channels

Wassertourismus umfasst touristische Aktivitäten am, im und auf dem Wasser und gewinnt vor dem Hintergrund von Digitalisierung, Nachhaltigkeit und veränderten Reisebedürfnissen zunehmend an Bedeutung. Der Beitrag untersucht die Einstellungen, Motive und Erwartungen der Generation Z gegenüber wassertouristischen Angeboten. Im Fokus stehen die Bedeutung von Wasser bei der Reisezielwahl, bevorzugte Aktivitäten, Informations- und Buchungsverhalten sowie Nachhaltigkeitsaspekte.

Die Studie basiert auf einer standardisierten Onlinebefragung von 360 Personen der älteren Generation Z (Geburtsjahrgänge 1995–2005), die zwischen Dezember 2025 und März 2026 durchgeführt wurde. Die Daten wurden mithilfe deskriptiver und inferenzstatistischer Verfahren ausgewertet.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Wasser insbesondere als Bestandteil attraktiver Destinationen und für leicht zugängliche Freizeitaktivitäten wie Baden, Schwimmen und Strandaufenthalte relevant ist. Informations- und Buchungsverhalten sind stark digital geprägt, wobei soziale Medien und Onlineplattformen eine zentrale Rolle spielen. Zudem äußerte eine Mehrheit der Befragten (68,2 %) eine erklärte Bereitschaft, für nachhaltige wassertouristische Angebote einen Preisaufschlag zu zahlen.

Die Untersuchung liefert explorative, auf die Stichprobe begrenzte Einblicke in die wassertouristischen Präferenzen der älteren Generation Z und zeigt Ansatzpunkte für die zielgruppengerechte und nachhaltige Weiterentwicklung wassertouristischer Angebote auf.

KEY WORDS:

Generation Z; Wassertourismus; Reiseverhalten; Nachhaltigkeit; digitale Informationskanäle

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1. Introduction

Water tourism refers to tourism activities connected with water, such as boating, kayaking, and beach tourism, that take place outside a person's usual environment for leisure purposes (Spiegel, 2024). Water tourism is an important field within the tourism industry. According to the German study "Reiseanalyse 2017", water plays a highly relevant role in travel decisions: 47% of the German-speaking population aged 14+ were classified as "water fans" who consider proximity to water important when choosing a holiday destination. Overall, 90% of holidaymakers engaged in at least one water-related activity during their main trip, highlighting the central role of water experiences in tourism (FUR, 2017). Existing research has addressed water tourism from perspectives such as product development (e.g. Orams, 1999), sustainability (e.g. Cater & Cater, 2007; Müller-Pfannenstiel & Kipping, 2022), and economic effects (e.g. Stahlhut & Marx, 2022). However, reliable evidence remains limited regarding how specific target groups perceive water tourism and engage in water-related tourism activities.

As demographic structures and consumer expectations continue to evolve, understanding generational differences has become increasingly important for both tourism research and practice. In particular, Generation Z is expected to significantly influence future tourism markets due to its growing purchasing power and increasing participation in travel activities (Marlina et al., 2026). Consequently, examining the characteristics, preferences, and travel behavior of this cohort is essential for anticipating future market developments.

Previous research identifies experiences, authenticity, social interaction, and digital communication as relevant dimensions of travel among younger tourists. Social media may influence destination discovery and the presentation of travel experiences, while travel motivations remain heterogeneous (Marques et al., 2025; Popșa, 2024; Pinho & Gomes, 2023; Robinson & Schänzel, 2019).

Water tourism overlaps with nature-based tourism, where landscapes, recreation, and personal experiences intersect (Spiegel, 2025, p. 4). Studies of younger tourists discuss the attractiveness of natural settings and the role of digital media, while also documenting constraints on environmentally oriented behavior (Canlas-Rivera et al., 2026; Marlina et al., 2026; Nemati et al., 2025).

For water-based tourism, beach recreation, swimming, coastal walks, and scenic settings may appeal both as accessible leisure activities and as visually attractive travel experiences. Research also highlights the influence of social media and personal recommendations on destination-related decisions (Elsampurno & Nugroho, 2024; Kuslina & Kuswoyo, 2025; Marlina et al., 2026).

Existing studies thus provide useful insights into water-related recreation, digital information use, and sustainable travel considerations. However, it remains less clear how water-related destination preferences, information-seeking behavior, and booking choices are related within a defined sample of young travelers. The present study addresses this gap without claiming to isolate uniquely generational characteristics.

Against this background, the study examines the attitudes, preferences, and behavioral patterns related to water-based tourism among the older segment of Generation Z represented in the survey. Two research questions guide the analysis:

Q1: What water-based tourism preferences, attitudes, and behavioral patterns are reported by the surveyed older segment of Generation Z?

Q2: Which empirical patterns and relationships exist between water-related preferences, information-search behavior, and booking behavior among the surveyed Generation Z respondents?

To answer these questions, the study adopts a quantitative, exploratory approach covering water-related destination preferences, selected leisure activities, digital information use, and booking behavior. Stated willingness to pay for sustainable offers is reported as a complementary indicator; it is not treated as observed purchasing behavior.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Water Tourism

Water tourism can be approached from four complementary perspectives: spatial, tourism-related, activity-based, and nature-tourism-oriented (Spiegel, 2024). Together, these perspectives inform the operational definition used in the survey.

Spatial

The spatial perspective defines water tourism by its relationship to aquatic settings, including seas, coasts, lakes, rivers, canals, and adjacent shore areas (Jennings, 2007a, 2007b; Orams, 1999; Tuohino, 2015). Some approaches also include nearby land-based activities when water shapes the destination experience (Antz, 2001).

Tourism-related

The tourism-related perspective distinguishes water tourism from everyday recreation: water forms a relevant travel motivation, and activities take place outside the usual environment, during day trips or overnight stays (Köchling, 2021; Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Technologie, 2012).

Activity-based

The activity-based perspective includes water sports and boating as well as bathing, cruising, and passive or shore-based activities such as promenades and walking along waterways (Spinelli & Benevolo, 2022; Sousa et al., 2022; Campón-Cerro et al., 2020; Spiegel, 2022). This breadth is important for distinguishing activity-oriented from scenic or recreational water preferences.

Nature tourism

The nature-tourism perspective emphasizes aquatic landscapes and their ecological, scenic, and recreational qualities. Water may influence destination attractiveness even when travelers do not participate in specialized water sports (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2019; Saad et al., 2023; Sulistyorini et al., 2022).

Accordingly, this study understands water tourism as travel outside the usual environment in which water, waterscapes, or water-related activities are relevant to destination choice or travel experience. Both active and passive forms of engagement are included. This broad definition underpins the questionnaire and the subsequent distinction between active water orientation and the visual appreciation of water (Spiegel, 2024).

2.2 Generation Z: Key Characteristics and Travel Behaviour

Generational labels summarize shared historical and social experiences, but they do not imply uniform behavior within a cohort. Generation Z is commonly defined as those born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Otegui Carles et al., 2023). This study investigates only its older segment (birth years 1995–2005), making life stage and cohort boundaries important for interpretation.

Research on younger travelers highlights digital technologies, social media, peer communication, and prior experience as potential influences on destination discovery and travel decisions (Robinson & Schänzel, 2019; Grenčíková et al., 2025). These factors interact with personal motivations and social circumstances rather than operating as a single generational mechanism (Marlina et al., 2026).

Previous travel experiences and perceived travel stress can shape confidence and travel intentions. The autonomy involved in planning and booking may also vary by life stage and circumstances (Grenčíková et al., 2025); this is relevant when delimiting an empirical sample within a broad generational cohort.

Social media, peer-generated content, online reviews, and personal recommendations can contribute to inspiration and information search, while digital channels also enable sharing and self-presentation (Pitanatri et al., 2024; Pricope Vancia et al., 2023). The survey therefore distinguishes information channels from the channel used to book the most recent trip.

Research further discusses experience seeking, social interaction, and personal development as travel motivations among younger travelers (Popșa, 2024). Sustainability adds a potentially competing consideration, since intentions may not translate into choices when cost, convenience, or accessibility matter (Pinho & Gomes, 2023). These dimensions guide interpretation but are not assumed to be exclusive to Generation Z.

Table 1 summarizes selected theoretical lenses relevant to the survey: enjoyment and meaning, authenticity and presentation, individuality and social belonging, and digital versus direct experience. These are analytical dimensions rather than empirically demonstrated traits unique to Generation Z.

Table 1: Travel-related patterns discussed in the literature on Generation Z (Author's own elaboration based on Belk, 1988; Filep, 2009; Giddens, 1991; Larsen, 2008; Lo & McKercher, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

Key behavioral dimension influencing Gen Z travel behavior	**Definition**	**Characteristics among GEN Z**
Hedonic and Eudaimonic Travel Motivations	Hedonistic motives refer to the pursuit of pleasure, enjoyment, and positive emotions, whereas eudaimonic motives focus on meaning, personal growth, and self-actualization	Generation Z combines both dimensions by seeking memorable and enjoyable experiences while also pursuing personal development and meaningful encounters. Travel therefore serves both short-term emotional satisfaction and long-term identity formation, with experiences often shared through social media for self-expression and social recognition.

Key behavioral dimension influencing Gen Z travel behavior	Definition	Characteristics among GEN Z
Authenticity versus Staged Experiences	Authenticity refers to the search for genuine experiences, meaningful encounters, and personal self-discovery, whereas staging describes the deliberate construction and presentation of experiences for social recognition	Generation Z values authentic travel experiences but simultaneously engages in their digital presentation through social media. Travel experiences are therefore not only lived but also curated, shared, and socially validated, creating a tension between genuine self-expression and performative practices
Individuality versus Sense of Belonging and Social Connectedness	Individuality refers to the pursuit of self-expression, personal freedom, and uniqueness, whereas group belonging reflects the desire for social connection and recognition	Generation Z uses travel to express personal identity while simultaneously aligning with trends, peer groups, and digital communities. Thus, travel represents a balance between differentiation and belonging, as individual experiences are often shaped and validated within social frameworks
Digital Representation versus Real-Life Experiences	Digital representation refers to the documentation, sharing, and social validation of travel experiences through digital media, whereas real experiences focus on direct and authentic engagement with the destination	Generation Z integrates both dimensions by not only experiencing travel physically but also curating and presenting experiences online. Digital visibility influences travel choices, creating a tension between genuine experiences and self-presentation in social media environments

2.3 Generation Z and Sustainable Travel Behaviour

Sustainable travel is characterized by a well-documented attitude–behavior gap: positive environmental attitudes or intentions do not necessarily translate into actual booking and travel choices (Higham et al., 2014; Kleiser et al., 2023). This discrepancy should not be treated as a unique feature of Generation Z. Individual travel choices are influenced by price, access, perceived effectiveness, convenience, and social context.

Comparative evidence also questions claims that younger travelers are consistently more sustainability-oriented than older groups. The German Reiseanalyse 2024 monitoring report, based on the 2023 survey results, found similar shares with a positive sustainability attitude toward holidays among 14–29-year-olds (68%), 30–59-year-olds (68%), and those aged 60 and above (66%) (Schmücker et al., 2024, p. 72). These age categories do not correspond exactly to Generation Z; nevertheless, they caution against interpreting sustainability awareness as a distinctive generational trait.

Studies focused on Generation Z nevertheless identify tensions between environmental concerns and actual travel preferences. Competing priorities, cost concerns, and social influences may constrain pro-

environmental choices (Kleiser et al., 2023; Stengel & Brysch, 2024). The extent to which sustainability matters in practice therefore depends on specific situations, rather than on generational identity alone.

Overall, sustainability is best understood here as one potential consideration in travel decisions, not as an inherent defining feature of Generation Z. The present survey measures stated willingness to pay for sustainable water-based offers; it does not measure actual premium payments or establish differences between generations.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Data Collection

This study is based on a standardized online survey conducted between December 2025 and March 2026. The questionnaire captured travel behavior, water-related holiday preferences, information seeking, and stated willingness to pay for sustainable water-based tourism offers. Although the literature commonly defines Generation Z as those born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, the present analysis deliberately concentrates on respondents born between 1995 and 2005. Birth cohorts 2006–2010 were excluded from the analytical sample. This life-stage-oriented restriction sought to focus on respondents who are, on average, at a more advanced stage of transition toward independent travel planning, booking, and consumption decisions. Research on emerging adulthood describes the gradual development of autonomy during this transition (Arnett, 2000). Tourism research also shows that holiday decisions are socially embedded in family roles and negotiations (Therkelsen, 2010), and that parental and peer influences may persist among young adults (Therkelsen et al., 2026). The 2005/2006 cut-off is an operational choice rather than a validated threshold for independent travel decisions; independence was not directly measured.

Respondents were recruited in the German-speaking region through social-media channels, including Instagram, yielding a non-probability online sample. This recruitment strategy may favor frequent social-media users and therefore inflate the observed importance of social media as a tourism information channel. It does not support representative estimates for Generation Z as a whole.

The final analytical sample comprised 360 valid cases from the 1995–2005 birth cohorts. The sample was strongly skewed toward female and student respondents. These characteristics, as well as the exclusion of younger Generation Z members, restrict the population to which the findings may be transferred. The results should be regarded as exploratory, sample-specific patterns rather than estimates for the entire generation.

3.2 Survey Instrument and Measures

In this study, water-based tourism is understood broadly as tourism in which water, water landscapes, or water-related activities form part of the destination choice, travel experience, or holiday motivation. The questionnaire included both sociodemographic and tourism-related items. Respondents were asked about their year of birth, gender, current occupational status, travel frequency during the previous twelve months, travel companions, and the booking channel used for their most recent tourist trip. The survey distinguished between travel frequency during the previous twelve months and questions referring to the most recent tourist trip.

In addition, the survey captured water-related preferences, including the perceived importance of water and water-related activities for the choice of the most recent holiday destination, the selection of specific activities associated with water-based tourism, and general attitudes toward the role of water in holidays. Furthermore, respondents were asked about the information channels they use for holiday and leisure offers related to water, as well as their willingness to pay a price premium for sustainable water-based tourism offers.

The water-related attitudinal items were mainly measured using six-point Likert scales. Depending on the item wording, the scales ranged from low to high agreement or from low to high perceived importance. Multiple-choice items were dichotomously coded, distinguishing between selected and non-selected response options. Willingness to pay for sustainable water-based tourism offers was measured using a four-point response scale.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using quantitative statistical methods. First, descriptive analyses were performed to report frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, and medians. Frequency distributions were calculated for categorical variables, while measures of central tendency and dispersion were reported for ordinal and metrically interpretable scale variables. Due to item-level non-response, valid case numbers vary slightly across individual analyses and are reported where applicable.

Associations between categorical variables were examined using chi-square tests. For binary multiple-choice items, effect sizes such as ϕ and Cramér's V were additionally considered. Associations between ordinal variables were analyzed using Spearman's rank correlation. For group comparisons involving ordinal dependent variables, non-parametric procedures were applied. Mann–Whitney U tests were used for comparisons between two groups, while Kruskal–Wallis tests were used for comparisons involving more than two groups. Where statistically significant group differences were identified and were substantively meaningful, post hoc comparisons were examined cautiously.

In addition to p-values, effect sizes were reported to assess the practical relevance of the findings. Since multiple statistical tests were performed, the Benjamini–Hochberg procedure was applied to control the false discovery rate. The analyses were exploratory and aimed at identifying systematic associations between water-related travel attitudes, selected activities, information channels, and booking behavior. Accordingly, inferential results are interpreted as evidence of statistical associations, not as causal effects.

The internal consistency of selected water-related attitudinal items was assessed using Cronbach's alpha to examine whether the items could be combined into a common index. Reliability results are reported in Section 4.

4. Results

A total of 360 valid cases were included in the analysis. The sample consisted exclusively of respondents who could be assigned to the defined birth-year range of Generation Z. The largest proportion of

respondents was born between 2001 and 2005 (74.2%), followed by those born between 1995 and 2000 (25.8%). The sample was predominantly female: 74.4% of respondents identified as female, 24.4% as male, and 1.1% as diverse. With regard to occupational status, students clearly dominated the sample (78.1%), while 13.1% were employed. Smaller proportions were apprentices, school students, job seekers, self-employed individuals, or belonged to other categories. These characteristics indicate a sample bias toward female and student respondents.

Overall, the respondents showed a high level of recent travel experience. Only 3.9% stated that they had not taken any tourist short trip with an overnight stay or holiday trip during the previous twelve months. The most frequently reported travel frequencies were three trips (23.3%), two trips (22.5%), and four trips (19.2%). Thus, the surveyed sample was largely characterized by current tourist travel experience.

Table 2: Travel frequency during the previous twelve months

Travel frequency	n	Percentage
No trips	14	3.9%
Once	40	11.1%
Twice	81	22.5%
Three times	84	23.3%
Four times	69	19.2%
Five times	29	8.1%
More than five times	43	11.9%

Note. Valid n = 360.

The respondents' most recent tourist trips were mainly undertaken in social contexts. The most frequently reported travel companion was a partner (33.1%), followed by friends (30.6%) and family (27.2%). Solo travel played a comparatively minor role, accounting for only 8.1% of responses. Within the present sample, tourist travel was therefore primarily organized and experienced collectively.

Booking behavior was clearly shaped by digital channels. The largest share of respondents booked their most recent trip via online travel portals or comparison platforms such as Booking.com, Skyscanner, or Expedia (45.3%). A further 29.7% used providers' websites or apps. Traditional brick-and-mortar travel agencies were mentioned by 7.2%, while 6.4% stated that they did not book the trip themselves. Thus, within the sample, the majority of bookings were made through digital channels.

Table 3: Booking channel used for the most recent tourist trip

Booking channel	n	Percentage
Online travel portals / comparison platforms	163	45.3%
Providers' websites / apps	107	29.7%

Booking channel	n	Percentage
Traditional brick-and-mortar travel agency	26	7.2%
Did not book independently	23	6.4%
Mobile apps with integrated booking function	14	3.9%
Other booking option	14	3.9%
Online travel agency	7	1.9%
Spontaneously on site	6	1.7%

Note. Valid n = 360.

When choosing holiday regions, respondents mainly referred to easily accessible and traditional water-related activities. The most frequently selected activity was bathing or swimming (58.6%), followed by sunbathing on the beach (46.1%) and beach walks or coastal hikes (30.3%). More specialized water sports such as surfing, sailing, diving, or rafting were selected considerably less often. Notably, 19.2% of respondents indicated that none of the listed activities had influenced their choice of holiday region.

These results indicate that water-based tourism, in this sample, was not primarily defined by specialized sports-oriented offers. Instead, everyday, recreational, and easily accessible water experiences dominated. Water therefore functioned mainly as a scenic, atmospheric, and leisure-related component of destination choice.

Table 4: Most frequently selected water-related activities influencing the choice of holiday region

Activity	n selected	Percentage
Bathing / swimming	211	58.6%
Sunbathing on the beach	166	46.1%
Beach walks / coastal hikes	109	30.3%
None of the activities	69	19.2%
Nature walks along rivers or lakes	31	8.6%
Cruises	28	7.8%
Diving / snorkeling	27	7.5%
Boat trips	27	7.5%
Harbor tours / excursion boats	22	6.1%
Thermal baths / hot springs	21	5.8%

Note. Multiple responses were possible; percentages refer to valid cases (n = 360).

Information seeking for water-related holiday and leisure offers was primarily shaped by digital and social channels. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube were mentioned by 79.1% of respondents, making them the most important information channel. The second most frequently mentioned source was recommendations from friends or family (70.7%), followed by online travel portals (55.3%). AI-supported assistants or chatbots were used by 29.1% of respondents. Influencers and blogs were selected by 22.9%, while travel agencies played a comparatively minor role as an information channel (11.7%).

These findings indicate that information behavior in the sample was strongly shaped by both digital platforms and interpersonal recommendations.

Table 5: Information channels for water-related holiday and leisure offers

Information channel	n selected	Percentage
Social media	283	79.1%
Recommendations from friends / family	253	70.7%
Online travel portals	198	55.3%
Chatbots or AI-supported assistants	104	29.1%
Influencers / blogs	82	22.9%
Online or brick-and-mortar travel agency	42	11.7%

Note. Multiple responses were possible; percentages refer to valid cases (n = 358).

The water-related attitudinal items indicate that water played an important role in the holiday orientation of the surveyed respondents. The statement “I deliberately choose destinations located near or featuring water” received the highest level of agreement, with a mean value of M = 4.57 on a six-point scale. The importance of water for the choice of the most recent holiday destination also exceeded the scale midpoint, with M = 3.96. By contrast, agreement with the statement that it is sufficient to enjoy water only visually was lower (M = 3.09). The statement that water activities are central to travel planning reached M = 3.31.

This pattern indicates that water was generally an important element of tourist preferences within the sample, while different forms of water orientation can be distinguished. The deliberate choice of water-related destinations appeared particularly pronounced, whereas purely visual enjoyment of water and activity-oriented water engagement represented different motivational patterns.

Table 6: Water-related attitudes

Item	n	M	SD	Median
Importance of water for choosing the	360	3.96	1.63	4.0

Item	n	M	SD	Median
most recent holiday destination				
Deliberate choice of destinations located near or featuring water	360	4.57	1.25	5.0
Visual enjoyment of water is sufficient	360	3.09	1.45	3.0
Water activities are central to travel planning	360	3.31	1.48	3.0

Note. Items were measured on six-point scales. Higher values indicate stronger agreement or higher perceived importance.

Respondents' willingness to pay for sustainable water-based tourism offers was generally positive. Based on valid responses, 244 out of 358 respondents (68.2%) expressed a general willingness to pay a premium. Of these, 14.5% stated that they would definitely be willing to pay more, while 53.6% responded with "rather yes." By contrast, 22.1% responded with "rather no" and 9.8% with "no."

This finding should be interpreted as an indicator of stated acceptance and sustainability-related attitudes rather than as evidence of actual payment behavior in concrete booking situations.

Table 7: Willingness to pay for sustainable water-based tourism offers

Response	n	Percentage
Yes, definitely	52	14.5%
Rather yes	192	53.6%
Rather no	79	22.1%
No	35	9.8%

Note. Valid n = 358. Percentages are based on valid responses.

The inferential statistical analyses revealed consistent associations between general water orientation, specific water-related activities, and the perceived importance of water for travel planning. The strongest ordinal correlation was found between the deliberate choice of destinations located near or featuring water and the statement that water activities are central to travel planning (Spearman's $\rho = 0.580$; FDR-adjusted $p < 0.001$). This association can be interpreted as large. Medium-sized positive associations were also found between the importance of water during the most recent trip and the

deliberate choice of water-related destinations (ρ = 0.487; FDR-adjusted p < 0.001), as well as between the importance of water during the most recent trip and the centrality of water activities for travel planning (ρ = 0.487; FDR-adjusted p < 0.001).

By contrast, the statement that visual enjoyment of water is sufficient was negatively correlated with the centrality of water activities (ρ = -0.391; FDR-adjusted p < 0.001). A negative association was also found with the deliberate choice of water-related destinations (ρ = -0.286; FDR-adjusted p < 0.001). These findings indicate that a passive visual orientation toward water should not be equated with active water-related travel behavior.

Table 8: Key Spearman correlations between water-related attitudes

Association	ρ	FDR-adjusted p	Interpretation
Deliberate choice of water-related destinations × water activities central	0.580	< 0.001	Large positive association
Importance of water during most recent trip × deliberate choice of water-related destinations	0.487	< 0.001	Medium positive association
Importance of water during most recent trip × water activities central	0.487	< 0.001	Medium positive association
Visual enjoyment sufficient × water activities central	-0.391	< 0.001	Medium negative association
Deliberate choice of water-related destinations × visual enjoyment sufficient	-0.286	< 0.001	Small negative association

Note. FDR-adjusted p-values are reported. Associations are interpreted descriptively according to effect size.

The selection of specific activities was clearly associated with the perceived importance of water in holidays. The strongest difference was observed for bathing / swimming. Respondents who selected bathing or swimming rated the importance of water for choosing their most recent holiday destination higher than those who did not select this activity. The median among those selecting the activity was 5.0, compared with 3.0 among those who did not; the effect was large (r_rb = 0.512; FDR-adjusted p < 0.001).

Sunbathing on the beach was also associated with a higher perceived importance of water. The median among those selecting this activity was 5.0, compared with 3.5 among those who did not (r_rb = 0.385; FDR-adjusted p < 0.001). Conversely, the response option “none of the activities” functioned as a clear negative indicator: this group rated the importance of water during the most recent trip substantially lower, with a median of 2.0 compared with 5.0 among the remaining respondents (r_rb = -0.644; FDR-adjusted p < 0.001).

Specialized activities such as surfing, diving, or sailing showed partly high effect sizes; however, findings based on small subgroups should be interpreted with caution, as effect estimates may be unstable.

Table 9: Selected associations between activities and the perceived importance of water

Activity	Outcome	n selected	Median selected	Median not selected	Effect
Bathing / swimming	Importance of water during most recent trip	211	5.0	3.0	r_rb = 0.512
None of the activities	Importance of water during most recent trip	69	2.0	5.0	r_rb = -0.644
Sunbathing on the beach	Importance of water during most recent trip	166	5.0	3.5	r_rb = 0.385
Bathing / swimming	Deliberate choice of water-related destinations	211	5.0	4.0	r_rb = 0.331
Sunbathing on the beach	Deliberate choice of water-related destinations	166	5.0	4.0	r_rb = 0.329
Surfing / windsurfing / kitesurfing	Water activities central to travel planning	17	5.0	3.0	r_rb = 0.564

Note. Effects are rank-biserial correlations from group comparisons. Findings based on small subgroups should be interpreted cautiously.

Booking channel differed significantly with regard to the importance of water during the most recent trip (Kruskal–Wallis H = 25.57; df = 7; FDR-adjusted p = 0.018; $\varepsilon^2 = 0.053$) and with regard to the deliberate choice of destinations located near or featuring water (H = 22.07; df = 7; FDR-adjusted p = 0.037; $\varepsilon^2 = 0.043$). However, the effect sizes were small. Post hoc comparisons indicated differences between selected booking channels; due to small subgroup sizes, particularly for online travel agencies, these results are treated as exploratory and are not interpreted further in detail.

A clear categorical association was found between booking channel and the use of travel agencies as an information channel (Cramér's V = 0.549; FDR-adjusted $p < 0.001$). Substantively, this finding is plausible: respondents who use travel agencies as an information source are also more likely to book through travel agency-related channels. This association therefore points less to a specific water tourism effect than to a consistent channel preference.

The binary association analyses between the multiple-choice activity items revealed several recurring activity patterns. The strongest association was found between bathing / swimming and sunbathing on the beach ($\phi = 0.653$; FDR-adjusted $p < 0.001$). These activities frequently occurred together and thus form a classic beach- and bathing-tourism activity cluster.

Further associations point to thematic offer clusters. For example, a medium-sized association was observed between thermal baths / hot springs and spa treatments near water ($\phi = 0.416$; FDR-adjusted $p < 0.001$), indicating a wellness-oriented water-based tourism segment. Boat trips also showed associations with sailing and diving.

The three items measuring the general role of water should not be combined into a single scale without further examination. The reliability analysis across all three items yielded an insufficient Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = -0.167$. This is substantively plausible, as the item "Visual enjoyment of water is sufficient" reflects a more passive visual orientation toward water and was not reverse-coded into an active water orientation index. Instead, it was treated as a separate attitudinal dimension.

By contrast, a two-item solution capturing active water orientation proved more suitable. This index consisted of the deliberate choice of destinations located near or featuring water and the centrality of water activities for travel planning. The two-item scale reached an acceptable reliability level of $\alpha = 0.729$. Given that this index consists of only two items, the result should be interpreted as preliminary evidence of internal consistency rather than as a comprehensive scale validation.

Overall, the findings show that water-based tourism played a relevant but differentiated role for the Generation Z respondents surveyed. Water was particularly important as a feature of attractive destinations and as a setting for easily accessible activities such as bathing, swimming, sunbathing, and beach walks. At the same time, activity-oriented and passive visual forms of water orientation could be distinguished. Active water orientation was especially pronounced among respondents who deliberately chose destinations located near or featuring water and who regarded water activities as central to their travel planning.

Within the surveyed sample, information about water-based tourism offers was obtained primarily through social media, personal recommendations, and online travel portals. Sustainable water-based tourism offers were generally met with approval, as more than two thirds of valid respondents reported

a willingness to pay a premium for such offers. Given the exploratory design, non-probability sampling, and the strongly female and student-dominated sample composition, these results should be interpreted as sample-specific empirical patterns rather than as representative conclusions for Generation Z as a whole.

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that water plays a relevant but differentiated role in the travel preferences of the surveyed older segment of Generation Z. The observed links among leisure activities, information channels, and travel choices are consistent with several themes in the literature; however, the cross-sectional survey contains no comparison group from other generations and therefore cannot establish that these patterns are specific to Generation Z.

A first important result concerns the generally high travel activity within the sample. Most respondents had taken several trips during the previous twelve months, indicating that tourism is a meaningful part of their lifestyle. This is consistent with literature describing Generation Z as a cohort for whom travel is not merely occasional recreation, but also part of identity formation, leisure consumption, and social experience. At the same time, travel in this sample was predominantly undertaken with partners, friends, or family, while solo travel played only a minor role. This finding supports the view that travel among Generation Z is often socially embedded and relational. It may also reflect the life-stage characteristics of many respondents, who were students and therefore likely to travel within existing peer and family networks.

Digital channels were prominent in the surveyed sample: online portals and providers' websites or apps were widely used for booking, while social media was the most frequently reported source of information about water-related offers. This pattern is consistent with literature on digitalized tourism communication (Pitanatri et al., 2024; Pricope Vancia et al., 2023). However, recruitment via Instagram and other social-media channels may have disproportionately attracted respondents already using these platforms. The high reported relevance of social media must therefore be interpreted partly in light of the recruitment method and should not be taken as an unbiased estimate for the wider cohort.

In interpreting these findings, social media may serve several functions, including inspiration, information seeking, peer exchange, and the presentation of travel experiences. Visually attractive water destinations could provide shareable content; however, the survey does not directly test self-presentation motives or platform mechanisms. These interpretations therefore remain plausible theoretical explanations rather than demonstrated effects of social media on destination choice.

At the same time, the activity patterns found in the survey point to a rather specific form of water tourism preference. The most influential activities in destination choice were bathing/swimming, sunbathing on the beach, and beach walks or coastal hikes. More specialized forms of water tourism such as surfing, sailing, diving, or rafting were much less frequently selected. This suggests that, for this sample, water tourism is not primarily defined through high-skill or adventure-oriented activities, but through easily accessible recreational practices requiring little specialized skill. In theoretical terms, this supports an understanding of water tourism as a broad phenomenon that can be approached from

spatial, tourism-related, and activity-based perspectives. Water appears less as a niche product and more as a general destination attribute that enhances attractiveness, relaxation, and experiential quality.

This finding also strengthens the conceptual link between water tourism and nature tourism. Respondents did not primarily seek technically demanding aquatic activities; rather, they seemed to value water as part of a pleasant natural environment and as a setting for embodied but relatively simple leisure experiences. Beach walks, coastal hikes, and the preference for destinations near water indicate that water landscapes are attractive not only because of direct interaction with water, but also because of their scenic, emotional, and restorative qualities. In this sense, water functions both as an activity space and as a landscape resource. This dual role is consistent with theoretical approaches that define water tourism as an interface between environmental setting, tourist practices, and experiential meaning.

The attitudinal findings further underline this differentiated role of water. The strongest agreement was found for the deliberate choice of destinations located near or featuring water, whereas the centrality of water activities for travel planning was less pronounced, and pure visual enjoyment of water occupied an intermediate position. This pattern suggests that water is highly relevant at the destination-selection level, but not necessarily as the central driver of planned activities. In other words, respondents often want to be near water without always organizing their entire trip around specific water-based activities. This distinction is important conceptually because it shows that water orientation cannot be reduced to one single dimension.

The correlation analyses support this interpretation. Deliberately choosing water-related destinations and considering water activities central to travel planning were strongly associated, forming a plausible dimension of active water orientation. In contrast, the idea that visual enjoyment of water is sufficient was negatively associated with both active planning and deliberate destination choice. This indicates that passive appreciation of water should not be conflated with an activity-oriented or strongly water-motivated travel style. Theoretically, this differentiation is useful because it shows that water tourism preferences among Generation Z include at least two distinct orientations: an active orientation centered on water-related planning and engagement, and a more passive or atmospheric orientation in which water is appreciated as scenery rather than as the basis for action.

The group comparisons by selected activities provide further support for this distinction. Bathing/swimming and sunbathing on the beach were clearly associated with a higher subjective importance of water in destination choice, whereas selecting none of the listed activities was a strong negative indicator. This means that even easily accessible practices are meaningful markers of water orientation. Water tourism in this sample therefore seems to be structured less by specialization and more by accessibility and experiential immediacy. Within this sample, this may reflect the broader consumption logic described in the literature: experiences are valued when they are enjoyable, easy to access, emotionally rewarding, and socially shareable.

More than two thirds of the surveyed respondents expressed a willingness to pay more for sustainable water-based tourism offers. This result concerns stated intentions, not observed transactions or the amount of any actual premium. It should also be situated alongside contrasting empirical findings: Pulido-Fernández et al. (2024) reported substantially lower willingness to pay for a more sustainable

destination among Generation Z visitors in a Spanish coastal setting. Differences in samples, destinations, and question wording prevent a direct quantitative comparison. Moreover, Reiseanalyse 2024 findings suggest that positive sustainability attitudes do not clearly distinguish younger age groups from older ones (Schmücker et al., 2024). Together, these observations reinforce the need to distinguish intentions from choices and avoid describing sustainability sensitivity as a unique trait of Generation Z.

The combination of accessible recreation, scenic enjoyment, and stated openness to sustainability points to multiple, potentially competing motivations in this sample. These patterns can be interpreted through hedonistic and meaning-oriented theoretical perspectives, but the survey does not establish their causal drivers or their uniqueness to a generational cohort. Affordability, social context, and practical accessibility remain plausible influences on concrete choices.

The findings are subject to several limitations. First, recruitment through social media may have selected respondents with above-average platform engagement, particularly affecting estimates of information-channel use. Second, women (74.4%) and students (78.1%) were overrepresented; gender, educational and employment situation, budget constraints, and life stage could influence preferences, media practices, and stated willingness to pay, although the direction or size of these potential biases cannot be established from the present analysis. Third, the deliberate restriction to the 1995–2005 birth cohorts excludes younger members of Generation Z and limits the study to its older segment. Fourth, no respondents from other generations were surveyed, so the study cannot determine whether the reported patterns are specifically generational. Finally, retrospective self-reports and stated intentions should not be equated with observed choices, and the exploratory associations do not imply causation. The study therefore offers insights into variation within its specific sample rather than representative or generationally distinctive estimates.

6. Conclusion

The findings indicate that water-based tourism is relevant to the surveyed older segment of Generation Z, but not solely through specialized water sports. Within this sample, water served as a destination characteristic, scenic resource, and setting for accessible activities such as swimming, beach recreation, and coastal walking.

Travel information search and booking in the sample relied heavily on digital channels, including social media and online booking platforms. Because recruitment also occurred through social media, the prominence of these channels may be partly sample-dependent and should not be generalized to all members of Generation Z or interpreted as a difference from older generations.

A majority of respondents expressed a willingness to pay more for sustainable water-based tourism offers. This is an intention measure, not evidence of actual payment behavior. Overall, the findings point to overlapping recreational, digital, and sustainability-related considerations within the surveyed sample, rather than to an exclusive generational profile.

Several practical implications can be derived from the findings for destinations, tourism providers, and marketing organizations:

- **Position water as an accessible experience, not only as a sport product.**
  Since respondents primarily associated water-related travel with swimming, beach use, and walking, tourism actors should not focus exclusively on specialized water sports. They should also develop and communicate inclusive and easily accessible water experiences.
- **Emphasize scenic and atmospheric qualities of water landscapes.**
  Water is attractive not only as an activity space but also as a visual and emotional resource. Destination marketing should therefore highlight coastal, lakeside, and riverside atmospheres, relaxation, and everyday forms of enjoyment.
- **Use social media strategically and authentically.**
  As social media is the dominant information channel, tourism providers should create visually compelling, platform-adapted, and credible content. Short-form videos, authentic user perspectives, and peer-like communication styles are likely to be more effective than highly formal advertising.
- **Encourage shareable but meaningful experiences.**
  Generation Z appears responsive to experiences that are both enjoyable and socially communicable. Tourism actors should create offers that combine aesthetic appeal with genuine experiential value rather than relying on superficial “Instagrammability” alone.
- **Make sustainability visible, concrete, and easy to understand.**
  Since many respondents expressed willingness to pay more for sustainable offers, providers should communicate sustainability measures clearly and transparently. This includes practical aspects such as water protection, reduction of environmental impacts, local sourcing, soft mobility, and responsible visitor management.
- **Reduce the attitude–behavior gap through smart design.**
  If sustainable options are to be chosen in practice, they should be easy to book, clearly labeled, trustworthy, and not overly complex. Sustainability should be integrated into the default offer rather than framed as an inconvenient add-on.
- **Leverage peer recommendation mechanisms.**
  Because recommendations from friends and family are highly influential, destinations and providers should encourage user-generated content, reviews, referral mechanisms, and community-based communication strategies.

Beyond these general implications, the findings suggest several actionable priorities for destination management and tourism providers. In communication, destinations should translate the visual and social relevance of water-based experiences into short-form digital content, authentic visitor stories, and user-generated content that supports both inspiration and peer-to-peer recommendations. For product development and marketing, sustainability should be made tangible through transparent information on specific measures and their benefits, rather than relying on general sustainability claims. Providers could also make sustainable options easier to identify and book by using clear labels, transparent pricing, and accessible information on the benefits of each offer. These recommendations represent practical starting points for testing and adapting target-group-oriented strategies, rather than universally generalizable prescriptions.

The present study suggests several directions for future research. More diverse and probability-based samples, including younger Generation Z birth cohorts excluded here (2006–2010), would help assess the transferability of these results across gender, education, employment, income, and life stages. Research including other generations could additionally test whether the observed patterns are cohort-specific or reflect broader tourism trends.

Second, future research should investigate the internal heterogeneity of Generation Z in more detail. The results suggest that not all young travelers relate to water in the same way. Segment-oriented analyses could distinguish, for example, between active water-oriented travelers, scenic-relaxation-oriented travelers, sustainability-driven travelers, and highly digitalized inspiration-seekers.

Third, future research should address the influence of recruitment mode on measured digital information practices. Comparing social-media recruitment with other sampling channels could help separate platform-related selection effects from respondents' actual information behavior. Studies could also test the different roles of social media as information source, inspiration, peer exchange, or self-presentation.

Fourth, the relationship between stated sustainability attitudes and actual booking behavior should be tested more rigorously. Experimental designs, booking simulations, or field studies could examine under which conditions willingness to pay more for sustainable water tourism actually translates into concrete choices.

Fifth, the conceptual overlap between water tourism and nature tourism should be explored further. The present findings suggest that young travelers often experience water not as an isolated product category, but as part of broader nature-based and place-based experiences. Future work could therefore analyze how water, landscape, climate, wellbeing, and outdoor recreation interact in destination choice.

Finally, the measurement of water orientation itself could be refined. The study indicates that active and passive forms of water orientation should be distinguished analytically. Future research should develop and validate multidimensional scales that capture the scenic, recreational, activity-related, symbolic, and sustainability-related meanings of water in tourism.

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