



## VISIT EXPERIENCES OF GEN Z: AN EXPLORATION OF DESTINATION IMAGE OF HERITAGE AND NATURE-BASED TOURISM IN TANJUNG TUAN FOREST ECO PARK

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Received: 12 March 2024 • Accepted: 16 April 2024 • Published: 30 April 2024

### Abstract

*This paper explores the destination image of heritage and nature-based tourism visit experiences of Gen Z to Tanjung Tuan Forest Eco Park. Based on data gathered from 25 respondents, this study utilizes phenomenological semi-structured interviews to investigate the motivations and factors that influence the visit experiences of Gen Z. The results cast light on a number of significant factors that shape their experiences. Initially, internal drive emerges as a significant motivation, emphasising the significance of personal interest, curiosity, and a yearning for meaningful experiences. Secondly, the adaptability of convenience is identified as a significant factor, as Gen Z seeks experiences that are readily accessible and hassle-free. In addition, the study demonstrates that shifting conservation paradigms play a role in attracting this generation, as they prioritize sustainable practises and environmental awareness. Lastly, it is discovered that effective branding strategies have a significant impact on visitors' experiences, highlighting the importance of effective marketing and communication efforts. Understanding these factors can assist Tanjung Tuan Forest Eco Park's destination administrators and marketers in catering to the preferences and expectations of Gen Z, thereby enhancing their overall visit experiences.*

**Keywords:** Nature-Based Tourism; Gen; Visit Experiences; Tanjung Tuan Forest Eco Park

**Cite as:** Katahenggam, N., Sen, A.C.F., Das, K.D.S.J, (2024). Visit Experiences of Gen Z: An Exploration of Destination Image of Heritage and Nature-Based Tourism in Tanjung Tuan Forest Eco Park. *Asian People Journal*, 7(1), 180-190.

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism had extended beyond its traditional domain of visits of leisurely attractions to other facets such as nature-based tourism, ecotourism and even adventure tourism. In this regard, forests are becoming new attractions with added amenities being built to bring in greater interest, although these risks bringing in the question of development encroachment (Tisdell & Wilson, 2012). Nevertheless, the increase of nature-based tourism is igniting the interest of the younger generation to these destinations, especially among Gen Z. This generation is hyper-connected, with varying needs, capacity and the means of mobility to travel (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Hence, an understanding of the experiences and worldview of this generation on ecotourism and the heritage elements of nature-based tourism would contribute to the study on awareness and conservation.

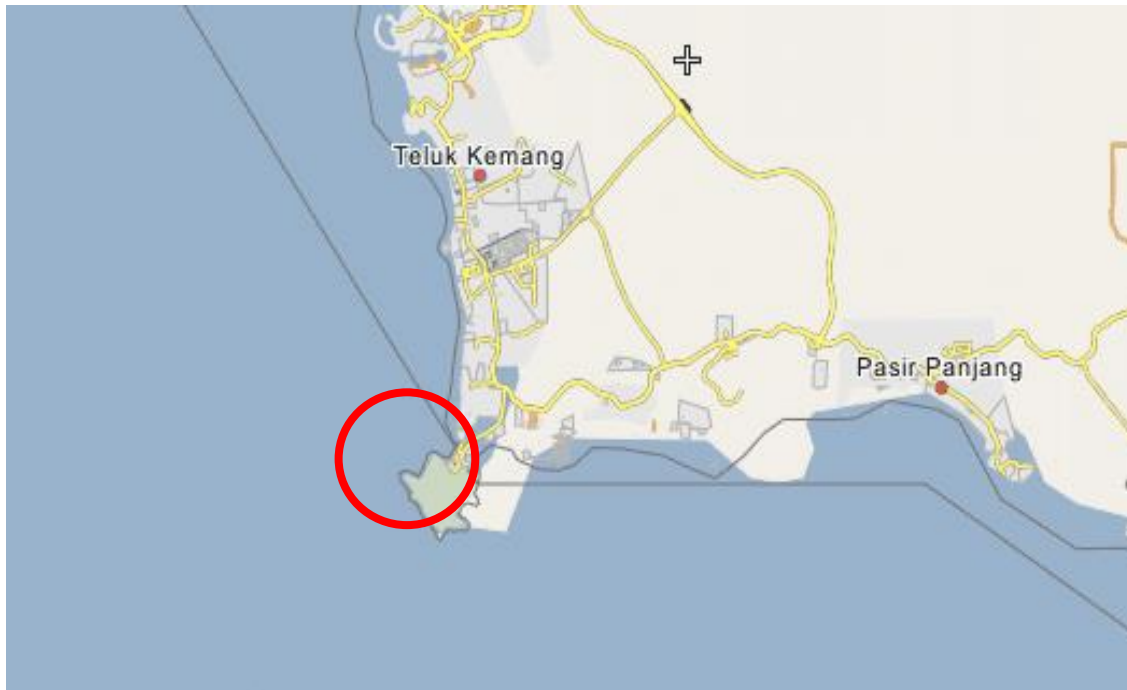
This paper intends to explore the worldview of the younger generation in Malaysia on nature-based tourism and forest parks from several perspectives. The paper will be focused on the Tanjung Tuan Forest Eco Park due to its unique position as a forest reserve centered on the historic Cape Rachado Lighthouse. First, the paper will explore the motivation and draw of the destination among Gen Z visitors at the site. Next, it will examine their visit experiences and attachment to the destination image of the site. Finally, this paper intends to identify the perceptions of Gen Z tourists on conservation and interventionist tourism activities at nature-based tourism attractions.

The term young generation had been paraded freely as the future decisionmakers, however the definition of Gen Z, is described as those born after 1995 by Rue, (2018) or 1997 by Dimock, (2019). The group, categorized as either youth or young adult were expected to represent a major opportunity for the tourism industry with over 300 million youth travelers in 2020 (UNWTO, 2016). Gen Z is the first generation to have been born after the invention of the Internet, and as a result, the attitudes and values of this generation are primarily reflective of diverse people, countries, and even time periods (Desai & Lele, 2017). Made up from various geographic, gender, socio-economic background and social setting, the youths from this group identified more with their peers in the same demographic range as opposed to those who spoke their language (GWI, 2022). The growth of this generation, aided by global demographic trend favoring the young would also transform global travel pattern, as more will be affluent with greater mobility to travel (Verma et al., 2023). Increased urbanization had also contributed to the growth of nature-based tourism and the rise of nature-based tourist experiences.

This study centers on the experiences of Gen Z visitors to Tanjung Tuan Forest Eco Park in conjunction with the annual Raptor Watching event. Tanjung Tuan Forest Eco Park borders the state of Negeri Sembilan and Melaka. Tanjung Tuan was established in the 16th century following their occupation of Melaka, its rocky peak was named Cape Rachado and served as a guide for sailors traversing the Straits of Melaka (Murali, 2020). In 1890, the British established the Rachado Light House as part of their effort to build lighthouses along the straits. In 1921, over 122 ha of Tanjung Tuan Forest Reserve was gazette as Virgin Jungle Reserve by the Melaka State Government. In the 1990s, plans were afoot to degazette a portion of the forest reserve for high-end housing development (Murali, 2015). To increase awareness on the importance of the lighthouse and the surrounding forest, the Malaysian Nature Society initiated the Raptor Watching annual event in 2000.

This event is intended to showcase the importance of conserving the Tanjung Tuan Forest Reserve for migratory birds crossing the Straits of Melaka. Due to its location at the narrowest land point towards Sumatra, raptors gain altitude around the forest reserve before flying away in their route. The annual event attracts hundreds of visitors, from birdwatchers to school children and university students who get to observe the birds while being

exposed to the forest trains and nature-based attractions. The choice of this destination for a study of visit experiences of a forest eco park is justifiable from two perspectives. First, the site is perfect example of a symbiotic relationship between nature parks and heritage attractions in the form of the Cape Rachado Lighthouse. Second, the park provides various tracks with different difficulty level, making it accessible to the novice visitor and also provide adventure to the more experienced hiker.



Source: Wikimapia, (2023)

Figure 1: The Location of Tanjung Tuan Forest Eco Park



(a) Source: GoogleMaps, (2023)



(b) Source: Author's Collection

Figure 2: Cape Rachado Lighthouse and Tanjung Tuan Forest Eco Park Trails

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a consistent group of millennials that are pointedly motivated by self-transcending values and that look to the travel experience as an opportunity to learn and understand other people's culture in-order to create a better world for themselves and others (Cavagnaro et al., 2018). Decidedly, this group is open to a sustainable tourism offer and represents an opportunity for the tourism industry to grow without jeopardizing its own future. In a narrative research by Haddouche and Salomone, (2018), Gen Z seems to show great modesty during their tourist experiences. The results also indicate that sustainable tourism is not a key concept driving the visit motivation of the young people interviewed.

When it comes to travelling behavior, Gen Z can be categorized as "digital tourists" as they are highly dependent on and intensively use technologies such as gadgets, social media, and the Internet (Setiawan et al., 2018). When travelling, they are more likely to utilize online media than conventional travel agencies to search for information and make reservations. During their trip, Gen Z tends to obtain "direct contact" with local people, having an interest in culture and culinary areas. In addition, whether a location is "Instagramable" or not is a very important factor as most of their activities involve documenting images or videos and publishing these on their social media accounts (Barbe & Neuburger, 2021). In the case of Malaysia, a study based on planned behavior unearthed attitude, subjective norm and electronic word of mouth as factors influencing Gen Z's behavioural intention significantly toward travel (Yhing, 2020).

The travel pattern of this generation is also vast, covering culinary discovery tourism, entertainment tourism, eco-tourism, religious-spiritual tourism, sports tourism, resort tourism, and Islamic tourism (Loan & Hoang, 2023).

### Motivation of Gen Z

Interestingly, the motivation of the generation is largely driven by physiological needs (Qiu et al., 2022). Physiological needs are the basic needs that travelers expect destinations to meet, although it is not confined to the Gen Z (Aina & Ezeuduji, 2021). These requirements include various facilities provided to travelers during their stay at destinations. Destinations can attract increasing numbers of visitors only if they provide a safe, secure environment in which travelers feel protected from any threats during their stay. However, although the need for facilities are important, it is still moderated with budgetary limits (Aina & Ezeuduji, 2021). They need to devise certain strategies to cope with this. In this regard, escapism from everyday life is their most important motivation in travel.

### Branding and Attachment

Branding and marketization of destinations to the younger generation had proved challenging due to the varying demands and generational demand. In their study, Lewis et al., (2021) focused on the generational theory to test whether factors assumed to be the draw by planners resonate with the younger generation. The conclusion that communication to understand the needs of the younger generation being difficult is also supported by (Xiong, 2022).

In the study, a myriad of factors such as information relevance, timeliness, comprehensiveness, factored into the needs for destination branding, however respondents were not in favor of expertise at destinations, disfavoring the presence of tour guides. In studies focusing on voluntourism, destination attachment features prominently in the younger generation's choice of location (Pangaribuan et al., 2021).

The research also finds that perceived risk has a significant moderating role on the relationship between voluntourism and destination attachment. Hence, greater efforts are needed to improve the image of the place by highlighting the characteristics of the locations. At the same time, it is necessary to put considerable effort to alleviate unfavorable conditions by creating safe environment surrounding the destination (Puiu et al., 2022). This would then shift their attachment of the sites from external ownership to collective responsibility (Salinero et al., 2022). Volunteers would see increased sense of ownership of the destination leading to higher Tourist Environmentally Responsible Behavioral Intentions (TERBI) (Qiu et al., 2022).

Safety aside, tourism management plans designed to meet the needs of Gen Z should emphasize the following, the opportunity to increase their intellectual level; the broadening of their worldview; tolerance for different cultures, religions, and traditions; the ability to perceive the beauty of the surrounding world; the development of communication skills, self-discipline, and adaptation to modern life conditions; and the ability to perceive the beauty of the surrounding world (Entina et al., 2021). There is an urgent need for state and local budget programmed to improve the management of tourism transformation processes to co-finance domestic travel for young people.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research takes on a phenomenological qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions involving participants from the Gen Z category. The use of such mixed qualitative method is suitable for its capability of respondent validation (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Over 25 participants took part in the interview and focus group discussions. The age group of participants ranged from 16-20, comprised of high school and college students. The definition of Gen Z as defined by the Pew Research Centre (Dimock, 2019), which includes anyone born from 1997-2012 into this group.

Semi-structured interview sessions were conducted on site at various points in the forest reserve during the annual Raptor Watch event while focus groups discussions were held after a week for participants to reflect their experiences. The questions developed to understand the visit experiences of Gen Z who participated in this study was based on two main indicators developed from the literature, namely, (i) Motivation, (ii) Branding and Attachment. The interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. Using thematic analysis, undertaken with Atlas.ti, several themes were developed to be analysed further.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The analysis of the transcript from interview and observation from the researchers unearthed several representations of the perspectives and views of Gen Z on the destination image of Tanjung Tuan. Several key themes were developed from the analysis:

### **Internal Drive as Motivators**

On the issue of motivating factors driving the participants to the site, several reasons were posited which includes the option given by the school or university to participate and the lure of raptor watching as an incentive. Exploring further, several participants noted that their voluntary choice of the forest visit and a chance to watch the raptors were motivated by the desire for the safer exposure.

Participant 1: *I have never been hiking to forest, but the teachers told us that there are roads and guides if we want to explore the forest, so we are safe from getting lost or falling down...*

The statement was probed further in the focus group discussions, where participants shared their preconceived notion about forest and nature-based visits as being dangerous without proper guidance and safety measure. In this regard, the guarded behavior became more pliable with the support structure of friends and other guides.

From another angle, the participants had established pre-conceived ideas about the lighthouse and the raptor watching activities, hence their involvement to validate it. Interestingly, the participants developed their imagery of the site from two angles. First, the image of the lighthouse were built from their exposure from media, expecting a large lighthouse apart from the forest. Secondly, the eco-park was assumed to be a virgin jungle without supporting facilities such as roads and jungle tracking trails. The desire to question this image was unearthed during the focus group discussions. In this case, the pre-visit expectations had largely changed post-experience. In this instance, the destination image of nature parks in the eyes of Gen Z visitors tend to be built upon various media exposure. The change and validation of the new image serves as a new motivation and changing worldview towards other similar visits as well. For example, one of the respondents narrated her shifting image forest eco-parks from her previous experience.

Participant 2: *I have been to Sepilok Orang Utan Conservation Park, it was difficult to travel and was challenging. I came here expecting same thing, but surprised the visit is so much easier, and safer to go. If more forest visits are like this, its easier.*

### **Flexibility in Convenience**

Based on the works of Lewis et al., (2021), Gen Z is described as a challenging audience to market natural attractions especially with their higher expectations of familiar facilities. In the work of Verma et al., (2023), the facilities described includes access to social media through mobile coverage, Instagramable spots and access to charging facilities. However, the motivating factor of the respondents were receptive of the limitation of the destination.

Participant 3: *We don't really mind there's no phone coverage here. It's good sometimes to not check phone, we can be with nature.*

Participant 4: *We want to pose with the lighthouse, the birds and the forests behind us, it's not important for forest trails to have photo booths, but if have its nice, memorable.*

In this regard, the expected difficulty in managing the motivational aims of Gen Z to visit destinations can be seen from a regional perspective. The younger generation exposed to the convenience of the city seek a break in the respite accorded by natural tourism destinations that provide them with escapism (İlhan et al., 2023). Although previous research often contends that Gen Z is often looking for familiarity in terms of convenience (Corbisiero et al., 2022; Robinson & Schänzel, 2019), they are also seeking new aesthetics and authenticity in their experience (Setiawan et al., 2018). As such, this generation is flexible when it comes to availability of convenience in the destinations that they visit. In the case of Tanjung Tuan, the destination provides an authentic forest experience, yet still within easy access to amenities favorable to the generation.

### The Lure of Branding

From another perspective, branding accorded to nature-based attractions influences its image among the younger generation. For instance, one of the respondents noted that the poster of the event created a positive impression of the activities at the site and enticed the participant to join.

Participant 5: *We saw the poster for the event, it had pictures of the lighthouse and raptors flying around green forest. It was interesting because it's not just forest, you have the raptors and the lighthouse as well to see, so, there's more attraction we can enjoy.*

In this regard, visual appeal is an important element as a marketing or branding awareness tool with Gen Z. Various research, focusing on marketization of products and services emphasizes on the appeal of digital branding using visual tools when engaging with the younger generation (Anjum et al., 2020; Barbe & Neuburger, 2021; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). The role of influencers for example had tapped into the impulsive tendencies of Gen Z from visual aid used for marketing. Here, the use of more corroborative images for nature-based tourism attraction would lead to greater visibility of the sites among the younger generation.

### Changing Paradigms on Conservation

The issue of conservation of natural attractions and forests had always received attention from the younger generation, who tend to be in favour of conservation ethos (Olson & Ro, 2021). The generation's profound respect for the inherent worth of the environment is one essential component of the viewpoint that members of Gen Z have on the preservation of natural areas and forests (Çalışkan, 2021). They view the natural world not only as a resource to be exploited but rather as an essential component of the ecosystem of the earth, which is worthy of respect and protection. Gen Z is there for associated with higher level of ecological cognition in several studies (Görpe & Öksüz, 2021; Pinho & Gomes, 2023). Nevertheless, it can also be argued that positive responses towards pro-environment policies may be driven by general eco-consciousness, notwithstanding the loss of opportunities (Douglas et al., 2022).

The participants responded positively towards conservation of the forest ecopark. However, with probing questions on the economic viability and job opportunities from commercialization of parts of the natural attraction for tourism, several respondents took on a more guarded response. The researcher queried on the perspective of the respondents on the prospect of allowing a resort to be built within the forest reserve.

Participant 6: *We should not build anything into the forest area, since it would ruin the place for animals, but if people can get jobs, then care must be made so there's still ample space for the forest.*

Nevertheless, several of the respondents elaborated on the importance of financial incentives in conservation.

Participant 7: *To preserve something needs money, if we just want to preserve a site but there's business benefit then it's difficult. I think we need to balance, need to have business, job opportunities if we want to preserve something.*

This view is based on a developmental perspective, where growth takes the centerstage (Woo, 2018). It can be argued that Gen Z is also aware of the need for strong state intervention when it comes to conservation. In this regard, the awareness that a more hybrid form of approach with balanced development and conservation is understood by the participants when probed further. The laddering questions explored the theme of development as opposed to conservation. Participants weighed in on the issue of the need for development as an incentive for

conservation. Hence, Gen Z, while being pro-environment do consider the development and job opportunity prospect in forest conservation.

The consumption pattern of Gen Z visitors to nature-based attractions are dependent on localized factors. As evidenced in this study, conformity with previous literature on Gen Z consumption factors of tourism sites vary. Motivation of the younger generation to visit nature-based attractions are driven by the need for escapism and explore something that is decidedly new. The creation of additional support structure to bring in the younger generation through investments in amenities would bring in additional layer of incentive. Nevertheless, the expectation that the destination is authentic, with reduced artificial enhancements such as photo booths and other facilities are also dominant. As such, destination branding of natural attractions should place minimum emphasis on visually dominant features such as photo booths and rest areas that does not blend in with the surrounding.

In addition, exposing Gen Z to jungle trails, nature-based attractions and the raptor watching event is also expected to further increase awareness on conservation of similar sites. The exposure to new experiences and the tendency of the younger generation to rely on social media for engagement can be enlarged with e-WoM, instead of traditional word of mouth dissemination of information.

In terms of motivation, the exposure and opportunity given creates new avenue for the newer generation to explore similar places. The link with nature etc, usual argument that social-media is a great tool engages Gen Z can be expanded to e-WoM (Barbe & Neuburger, 2021). The destination image theory is applicable here, where images built not necessarily from visual sight but is also experienced. The role of agencies, especially non-governmental agencies and tourism marketing agencies involved in conservation is important in creating an alternative image to destinations, beyond what is described in nature-based tourism brochures.

Additionally, Gen Z uses their technological and communication skills to raise awareness about the need to preserve natural areas such as forests. Social media platforms have developed into powerful tools that can be used to disseminate information, coordinate environmental initiatives, and foster a sense of community among those who share similar values and perspectives. Gen Z uses technology to amplify their voices and exert influence over governmental decisions, thereby reinforcing their commitment to the preservation of forests and other natural areas of the planet.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the principles of social justice and intergenerational equality are intrinsically linked to Gen Z members' perspectives on the preservation of natural areas and forests. They believe that the current environmental challenges are inextricably linked to broader social and economic issues. Gen Z attempts to address environmental issues through an intersectional lens, advocating for equal access to natural spaces and sustainable practises.

This is in acknowledgement of the disproportionate impact environmental degradation has on marginalised populations. Also, when it comes to conservation and preservation of natural areas, Gen Z are pragmatist. From this study, it can be concluded that the generation's pro-environmentalist views are also weighed on the need for job growth and development of supporting structure for nature-based tourism.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research is part of the Sustainable Tourism Impact Lab (STIL) initiative by Taylor's University Malaysia.

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