



Article

Generation Z Romanian Students' Relation with Rural Tourism—An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: The subject of generations and their differences has been intensely analyzed and debated. Each generation has its own characteristics, regardless of the element that differentiates them. Gen Z's relationship with tourism has been approached in recent years from various perspectives by many scholars. For the current research, representative characteristics were identified as important for Gen Z: off-the-beaten-path locations and experiences. Off-the-beaten-path locations refer to small-scale destinations, under-tourism, local businesses, sustainability, and local traditions. All of the aspects mentioned before are typical of rural tourism. Experiences are introduced by various elements of rural attractiveness: material cultural heritage (MCH) and immaterial (ICH), the living human treasures program (LHT), wine tourism, products with a protected designation of origin (PDO), products with a protected geographical indication (PGI), culinary diversity, and other rural leisure facilities. Two purposes have been established: to identify the relationship between Gen Z and rural tourism and its components defined by cultural heritage and traditional gastronomy, and to construct a predictive model regarding Gen Z's behavior when traveling to rural destinations. For this, we performed a quantitative investigation among university students from Romania using an online survey. Using 280 Gen Z respondents from 323 valid responses, we performed a direct logistic regression. The results showed that they value local gastronomy and unique attractions, which we can include in MCH. The price represents an important element when choosing an accommodation unit. Due to the constantly increasing share of Gen Z in the tourism market, destinations and tourism operators will have time to prepare and adapt to new realities. Transversal research will benefit from the opportunity to compare Gen Z's preferences and changes over time.

Keywords: rural tourism; Gen Z; cultural tourism; traditional gastronomy; Romanian students; predictive model



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1. Introduction

The element of discrimination on the basis of which a person is considered to belong to one or another of the generations is the year of their birth. In the specialized literature, there is no clear consensus on the time frame that is specific to each individual generation. Some studies have presented information stating that individuals born between different years are considered part of Gen Z, such as between 1993 and 2005 [1], 1990 and 1999 [2], starting from 1995 [3], or between 1997 and 2012 [4]. As a result, it is generally noted that Gen Z comprises individuals born in either the last decade of the 20th century or the first decade of the 21st century.

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The importance of studying this generation has many aspects. Mannheim [5] high-lights the importance of studying generations in the early years because the events and context in which that generation lives will constitute a potential basis for the emergence of an innate and common way of experiencing life and the world. He postulated that new generations make contact with cultural norms and give them meaning in the unique social and historical context of their youth. Young people are at the forefront of social change because they are closer to present problems; they do not work on old assumptions but are willing to consider new ideas as they give meaning to their world [5].

Gen Z accounts for 13.48% of the EU outbound tourism market and will continue to grow in the next few decades. Eurostat's database reveals that in 2019, Gen Z (aged 15–24) in the European Union undertook around 42 million outbound trips, while the total number of outbound trips was approximately 311.4 million. On average, individuals from Gen Z make 2.5 trips per year [6,7]. Based on the mentioned data, we can form an idea about the importance of Gen Z in international tourism and, with certain limitations, in rural tourism. As they are at the initial stage of their travel experience, the market share of Gen Z is likely to increase in the future, with a growing number of people being able to travel independently.

Due to the characteristics mentioned above, this generation will change the face of tourism and have a significant impact on destinations. Mass tourism, which is characterized by large numbers of tourists visiting popular destinations, has faced several challenges in recent years due to a changing environment [8]. Factors such as over-tourism, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the need for more sustainable and responsible tourism practices. As a result, there has been a growing trend towards alternative forms of tourism, such as ecotourism, rural tourism, and cultural tourism, that focus on smaller, more authentic experiences and promote environmental and social sustainability. These changes will provide opportunities and challenges [9], especially in terms of digital and experiential experiences [10].

Based on the tourist preferences of Gen Z identified in scientific papers [11–22], the work focuses on rural tourism and tourist experiences in rural areas. Romania has inscribed in the UNESCO heritage six MCH, of which five are in rural areas (the wooden churches of Maramures, the churches of Moldavia, the villages and fortified churches in Transilvanya, the Dacian fortresses of the Orastie Mountains, and the monastery of Horezu). At the same time, the Danube Delta and the Ancient and Primeval Beech Forests of the Carpathians and Other Regions of Europe are two other elements of the UNESCO material heritage also located on the territory of Romania. To these are added nine elements of the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) entered so far on the representative list of the cultural heritage of mankind—Ritual of Călușului (2008), Doina (2009), Traditional ceramics of Horezu (2012), Caroling of men's fortress (2013), The virgin game in Romania (2015), Traditional techniques for making the bark (2016), Martisor—traditional practices associated with the day of 1 March (2017), The art of the traditional blouse with embroidery on the shoulder (altiță)—an element of cultural identity in Romania and the Republic of Moldova (2022), and Lipizzan horse breeding traditions (2022). These elements are specific and belong to rural areas. Part of ICH and still active in Romania, although UNESCO discontinued the program in 2003, the LHT program has 89 artisans awarded until 2022 [23].

In addition to these, we introduce in the analysis other elements specific to rural areas and their gastronomic proposals: wine tourism and PDO and PGI products. Gastronomy in rural areas also provides a unique opportunity for visitors to experience the local culture and traditions and has a unique charm and flavor that cannot be found anywhere else. The food in rural areas is typically based on locally grown and sourced ingredients, making it fresher and more authentic than what is available in urban areas. In addition, the food is often prepared using traditional techniques that have been passed down for generations, giving it a rich cultural heritage. Over the centuries, the former provinces that now form Romania have been at the confluence of the great European empires: Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman. This has influenced and enriched traditional gastronomy. At

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the same time, until the second half of the 20th century, Romania was a predominantly agrarian country. Forming a state after the Second World War, Romania still preserves in its traditional cuisine the influences of its former constituent regions. In this context, gastronomic diversity is the main element that characterizes traditional cuisine.

While some studies have produced contradictory results regarding their tourism preferences, others have identified common themes, such as the importance of tourist experiences, digitalization, a good experience-to-price ratio, and a desire to avoid mass tourism.

Romania has approximately 6 million people who belong to Gen Z, representing approximately 28.5% of the total population [24]. National statistics quantify, as of 2021, over 0.55 million students enrolled in undergraduate, postgraduate, master's, or doctoral programs. It is clear that the number of highly educated Gen Z is much larger, considering the fact that some have completed their studies, some will enter college in the coming years, and not all students belong to Gen Z. However, the national statistics do not provide data in a format that allows for obtaining a proportion of young people with higher education degrees within the total population of Gen Z.

Based on the national specifics represented by the predominant existence of ICH and MCH in rural areas, the high percentage of Gen Z in the total population, the history of traditional gastronomy, and the importance given to the study of Gen Z at the international level, this paper aims to identify the relationship between rural tourism and highly educated Gen Z. The second objective is to construct a predictive model related to the travel patterns of Gen Z in rural areas. By comparing the results with those of foreign counterparts, the research aims to identify both convergent and divergent points in the tourism behavior of Romanian Gen Z.

The article is divided into six parts, starting with an overview of the research goals. The literature review focuses on examining the travel habits of Gen Z and the types of tourism that they engage in, with a particular emphasis on rural tourism. The methodology utilized in the research leads to partially validating previous studies and also opens up new directions for future research. Although rural tourism and Gen Z are in the early stages of their relationship, there are immense possibilities for growth. The Discussion section compares the results of this research with previous studies found in the literature. Finally, the conclusions section discusses the implications of this relationship on various levels.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Tourism and Gen Z

Gen Z was born into an era of rapid technological advancement, innovation, and digitalization. The main characteristics of Gen Z, identified by researchers are being realistic, open-minded, determined, responsible, curious, and accustomed to the use of technology [25–28]. Although it is a generation that does not take risks [29] and tends to save money [30], Gen Z does not seem to be aware of some of the consequences of its actions [31]. Additionally, people in Gen Z prefer self-control [25]. They also tend to prefer escaping from routine and the monotony of everyday life [32], and this is partly due to their ability to access vast amounts of information quickly and easily through technology [33].

Another paradigm treated by specialized studies refers to the relationship between tourism and Gen Z through the tourist experience of Gen Z, influenced by technology [10,34,35], showing that the tourist experience of young people in Gen Z is influenced in one form or another by new technologies. Gen Z gets information about tourism activities and their planning through social media or other technological means [36]. In addition, as a technological generation, Gen Z uses the Internet to find holiday types, and Google is the most widely used search engine [37].

Furthermore, Gen Z participates in the preparation of the tourist trip only if they travel independently or with friends, and if they travel with their family, their participation in the preparation of the tourist trip is much less [36,38]. In other words, the travel plans of Gen Z are influenced by factors such as family and friends [16]. Gen Z designs its own unique experiences by avoiding traditional tourism attractions and services, is open-minded, and

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is independent [38]. Being open-minded, Gen Z is interested in experiences rather than possessions, prefers off-the-beaten-track locations, uses mobile phones and apps to plan trips, book accommodation and services, explore destinations, and share their experiences on social networks [6,39–41].

Robinson and Schänzel [14] conducted a comprehensive study of Gen Z tourism and travel behavior, specifically focusing on inbound travel to New Zealand. Through their research, they identified various patterns in the travel behavior of this demographic. They found that Gen Z tourists tend to be more adventurous and seek out unique experiences that are off the beaten path. They also tend to be more budget-conscious and look for affordable travel options that still offer high-quality experiences. In terms of accommodation, they prefer to stay in hostels or other low-cost options that allow them to connect with locals and other travelers. Additionally, Gen Z tourists are heavily influenced by social media, with many using platforms such as Instagram to research and plan their trips. From another point of view, it is in close connection with their financial status and the quest for value for money. Fares or travel costs have also always been a consideration for travelers, regardless of generation [16].

Gen Z seeks to have funny moments during the tourist experience and, contrary to expectations, shows modesty, but is not very familiar with the notion of sustainable tourism [38]. Gen Z may not be familiar with the theoretical concept of "sustainable tourism", but they are still concerned about the environment and the impact of tourism on local communities [11,42–45]. In fact, Gen Z tends to place more value on ecological values, the protection of resources, the consumption of resources, and contributions to the sustainable development of the society in which they live [46,47].

In addition, some aspects are important, at different levels, to all age groups. Gastronomy has become increasingly important for all generations as people seek to explore local cuisines and food experiences. Safety and location have always been important considerations for travelers, while the availability of an internet connection is becoming increasingly important as people rely on technology for travel planning and communication while on the go. At the same time, Gen Z prefers to visit destinations they have never visited before [48]. Gen Z's favorite activities include eating local dishes and drinks, documenting urban culture, and participating in cultural activities [49]. This substantiates the fact that young people are on a constant search for new things and experiences.

Gen Z is a newly emerging generation that is grounded in both the present and the past. While they are deeply immersed in modern technologies and social media, they still hold fast to traditional values that have been passed down through previous generations. These values include respect for others, trust, family, authenticity, and other timeless values. This combination of old and new values reflects the unique perspective of Gen Z and their desire to embrace the best of both worlds.

In summary, it can be concluded that Gen Z is a highly informed and engaged generation that places a strong emphasis on authenticity while also being budget-conscious and digitally savvy. These aspects can be influenced by the heterogeneity of Gen Z. In other words, these aspects fit Gen Z if it does not come from communities that are marginalized on various criteria such as ethnicity [50], poverty, or others. This generation is highly social and active and values unique experiences that are meaningful and genuine. Given their familiarity with technology and digital tools, Gen Z is uniquely positioned to find a balance between the traditional and the new, using technology to enhance and enrich their experiences while also prioritizing authenticity and meaningful connections. As this generation continues to come of age and gain more purchasing power, it is likely that their travel behavior will continue to shape and influence the tourism industry in new and innovative ways.

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2.2. Rural Tourism—The Perfect Mix of Culture and Gastronomy

2.2.1. Rural Tourism

Rural tourism began to develop starting in the 19th century and is described by the fact that it is practiced in rural localities with a population of less than 10,000 inhabitants, involves contact with rural society and rural natural and cultural heritage, includes agritourism, and aims to ensure sustainability for rural communities [51]. Rural tourism has the following general definition: tourism activity that can create experiences related to products based on nature, agriculture, lifestyle, and fishing, which are found in the countryside [52]. In terms of the number of overnight stays (between 1 and 3 overnight stays), at the level of Romania, rural areas occupy the third place, while mountain areas occupy the second place, and the towns occupy the first place [53]. Bearing in mind that agriculture is the economic activity specific to the rural environment, while tourism can be an additional factor of income consolidation, it can be admitted that the essence of rural tourism is agritourism.

According to various studies [48,54], Gen Z tends to travel for a variety of reasons, including to spend their free time, seek peace and quiet, and relax. As far as rural tourism is concerned, Gen Z young people associate it mainly with tranquility and contact with nature [16]. In some way, young people from Eastern Europe, of which Romania is a member, prefer activities related to nature and wildlife [55,56].

Although holidays in rural areas do not occupy the first place on the list of preferences of Gen Z [36,57], the literature also deals with the relationship between rural tourism and Gen Z, more precisely, what makes Gen Z practice rural tourism [58] or the level of awareness of rural tourism among Gen Z [17].

In Lebanon, one study highlighted the fact that young people visit rural areas to enjoy nature and biodiversity, and older people are more attracted to the history, culture, and traditions of the rural area [19]. Furthermore, assuming that young visitors (18–25 years old) are more interested in physically demanding activities while older visitors (31–39 years old) are more interested in less demanding ones, the results revealed that there is no relationship between tourist age, level of income, and preference for specific tourism activities in the rural environment [19].

A study carried out in Azerbaijan, whose target group was made up of students aged between 18 and 25 years, highlighted that the level of perception and knowledge of rural tourism is higher for young women, young people living in cities, and young people whose parents are domestic or hardworking and not civil servants or pensioners [17]. The important things that young people do on holiday are to relax and have fun, discover new things, visit relatives, get to know new cultures, and adopt new hobbies [17].

Jiang et al., (2022) [12] indicate that factors such as education, entertainment, aesthetics, authenticity, and hedonism play a significant role in enhancing the engagement and delight of Gen Z tourists in rural tourism experiences. The authors suggest to rural tourism managers to: offer access to local arts and crafts and promote them as a selling point to showcase the unique cultural heritage of the region; provide opportunities for tourists to engage in farming activities and work with local craftsmen and farmers to create a more authentic experience; launch festivals based on indigenous agricultural products to provide an authentic and hedonic experience.

The national approach of Gen Z and its relationship with tourism are almost nonexistent. In general, rural tourist destinations are chosen based on several factors. In order of importance, among the factors that determine Romanian tourists choice of a rural tourist destination are: the variety of services, the diversity of entertainment possibilities, the price of the accommodation service, tourist attractions (especially among young people), the distance from home, hiking trails, cultural attractions, ecotourism facilities, possibilities to visit farms, and religious attractions [20]. In one of the most visited rural destinations in Romania, Bran commune, Gen Z prefers to practice the following activities: escape room, tubing, biking, bowling, swimming pool, climbing, cinema, table tennis, zip line, hiking, and adventure parks [18]. From a touristic perspective, only in one study could we identify the tourist activities that Gen Z prefers [55]. In order of importance, these are: authentic

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activities, modern activities, entertainment activities, cheap activities, traditional activities, non-classical activities, basic activities, and expensive activities [55]. As a result, we can conclude that Gen Z, when traveling to rural destinations, favors services and activities in rural destinations that improve their physical, mental, and social conditions and increase the well-being of the environment [18].

However, due to the fact that Gen Z is a new generation and a new segment in terms of tourism demand, specialized studies from this point of view on the explicit relationship between Gen Z and its components are few.

2.2.2. Cultural Tourism and Gen Z

Studies on Gen Z's preferences for specific forms of tourism present varied findings. Some studies indicate that young people in Gen Z prefer cultural tourism over other forms, such as coastal tourism [36]. However, other studies suggest that Gen Z individuals actually favor coastal tourism over historical, cultural, or religious tourism [16]. Furthermore, for Gen Z, culture is an average factor in terms of motivation to travel, with the first two positions occupied by experimenting with something new and relaxing. The cultural elements that make Gen Z choose a particular destination are largely tourist attractions and architecture, followed by food and events [59].

Gen Z's interest in as many and as diverse experiences as possible can be mediated by technology in relation to cultural tourism. As a result, Gen Z believes that cultural heritage sites need considerable modernization to generate transformative experiences [35]. In this case, the upgrade refers to the use of mixed reality technology [35]. Moreover, for Gen Z, being a digital generation, technology is somewhat a form of culture.

The practice of cultural heritage tourism by Gen Z is influenced by its attitude towards cultural heritage tourism, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control [60]. Regarding the choice and visit of a tourist destination abroad, it was found that the cultural intelligence of tourists and cultural heritage represent two more pronounced influencing variables in the case of Gen Z compared to Gen X [61]. On another note, Gen Z pays more attention to cultural heritage compared to previous generations.

In addition, to the best of our knowledge, only one study has been conducted on the awareness of the UNESCO MCH and ICH by Gen Z. An empirical study focusing on Gen Z Indians' intention to visit heritage sites [11] revealed that Gen Z Indians: have a positive attitude towards visiting heritage sites and view it as a fun and enjoyable activity; are interested in environmentally friendly activities; and show concerns about the environment. The study concluded that Gen Z Indians are concerned about environmental issues and are likely to consider environmental factors when making travel decisions.

The relationship between tourism and MCH/ICH has multiple aspects. MCH/ICH can be a source of attraction itself or a complement to other tangible attractions. Where there is a strong connection between the natural environment and culture, MCH/ICH can be seen as a tool for conservation. Additionally, ICH can trigger culturally and naturally sensitive behavior in visitors [62]. From a marketing point of view, MCH/ICH can be seen as a unique selling point for local communities. In contrast, too much marketing can threaten its authenticity and undermine successful transmission. ICH artisans see authenticity as a holistic concept and agree that there is a positive relationship between tourism promotion and the ability to transmit their own knowledge to future generations [63].

2.2.3. Gastronomy and Gen Z

In addition to tranquility, contact with nature, and leisure activities, rural tourism offers tourists the opportunity to taste local dishes and wines. Gen Z is also interested in gastronomic tourism [15], and the preference for food in the sphere of gastronomic tourism can be influenced by social media [64]. Orea-Giner and Fusté-Forné (2023) [13] showed that Gen Z travelers are interested in engaging with local food experiences as a way to connect with the culture of the destination they are visiting. They view it as a form of cultural preservation and appreciate the opportunity to learn about the local cuisine and

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its history. However, the price of dining services is also a consideration, as many young travelers are budget-conscious and may opt for cheaper options over more sustainable ones. It ultimately depends on the destination and the options available to them.

Considering the location they travel to and the experiences they can enjoy in that location, Gen Z is more interested in experiences than location, seeking authentic ones [15]. On the other hand, Gen Z places more value on the location and less on the food offering of the location, but strictly related to the food offering of the location, they seek a variety of culinary experiences [15], trying at least one or two traditional products [65]. The variety of culinary experiences refers to the fact that Gen Z is interested in tasting a little bit of each dish, trying new and even bizarre dishes, tasting dishes with a high reputation, benefiting from food establishments where they can socialize, eat, and drink, and even participating in food festivals and tasting local dishes [15]. Furthermore, on tourist trips, Gen Z is more likely to spend more money on food services compared to accommodation services [15].

The relationship between food and Gen Z is also somewhat mediated by technology in that, compared to previous generations, Gen Z is the most likely to take pictures or videos of food during a tourist trip and then share them on social networks [66]. This is a must-have for Gen Z [66]. Thus, Gen Z can easily become the biggest advertiser for food tourism.

One form of tourism that mediates the relationship between tourism and Gen Z is wine tourism, and specialized studies deal with the experience offered to Gen Z in wine tourism [21,67] or the attitude of young people toward wine tourism [22], also presenting the activities that young people carry out in wine tourism. Young people are interested in wine but have little knowledge of it [21,22]. Among the activities specific to wine tourism, young tourists prefer to visit wine cellars, buy wine, visit vineyards, taste wines, participate in cultural activities, visit wine museums, and participate in oenoturistic events [22]. For Gen Z, visiting a winery is not necessarily based on wine consumption, but on opportunities to enjoy the scenery, have fun, socialize, and taste local food [21]. Furthermore, to attract young people to rural areas through wine, wine cellars should implement the suggestions offered by Gen Z, more precisely, the promotion to be carried out more in an online format, the packaging of wine to be attractive, to create educational opportunities, to have affordable prices in tasting rooms, to offer free samples, and to develop healthier wine options [68].

One way to guarantee the uniqueness of preparations is to certify them as PDO or PGI products. In some European countries, such as Italy, Spain, France, Belgium, Norway, or Poland, the degree of knowledge of the PDO concept is 68.1%, and the degree of knowledge of the PGI concept is 36.4%. Furthermore, a high degree of knowledge of the concepts of PDO and PGI is found among consumers over 50 years of age [69]. The chances of knowing the logo of PDO products increase through middle age and then decrease [70]. In other words, a young consumer is more likely to know the logo of a PDO product and less likely to know the PDO product itself compared to an older consumer. The younger generation does not distinguish between certified agrifood products (PDO and PGI) [71], while older consumers show a high preference for certified products [72]. In other words, not distinguishing between certified products means that young people have a lower level of knowledge about PDO and PGI products. The level of trust in the logo of PGI products influences Gen Z to buy them, and the level of trust is based on the following aspects: quality, safety, culture, and traditions [73]. It seems that there is some variation in the degree of knowledge and perception of PDO and PGI concepts and logos among different age groups and countries. In general, older consumers tend to have a higher level of knowledge and preference for certified agrifood products, while younger consumers may not distinguish between certified products. However, younger consumers may be more likely to recognize the logo of a PDO product than older consumers. The level of trust in the logo of PGI products appears to be an important factor that influences Gen Z consumers to buy them based on aspects such as quality, safety, culture, and traditions.

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Some questions were raised about the cross-cultural and cross-border generational cohort validity of shared attitudinal patterns. Gen Z has more in common with their international peers than any other generation before in terms of digitalization and social behavior [74], but these contrasting findings highlight that the preferences of Gen Z tourists for different types of tourism can differ not only from country to country but also from one continent to another.

3. Materials and Methods

In order to obtain the necessary data, a survey was used as a research method. We designed a structured questionnaire, and the sampling method used was convenience sampling. The questionnaire was composed of two sections, one of which was dedicated to collecting data on the information from the established objectives, and the second was allocated for the collection of sociodemographic data.

It included questions of several types: dichotomous, multichotomous, closed, demographic (gender, age, and profession), opinion, and content. It was used as a semantic differential reference scale. The data collection phase took place between 20 November and 15 December 2022, through the online platform isondaje.ro. 448 questionnaires were filled in, resulting in 323 valid questionnaires following the cleaning stages.

Recruitment was generated by posting the URL for the survey on social media network pages and by announcing the study at different universities in Romania. Additionally, we included a preamble in the questionnaire stating that 'All data collected is confidential and will be used strictly for academic purposes'.

Binary logistic regression was used, similar to the one presented by Wilson and Lorenz (2015) [75]. When building the predictive model, the following methodological considerations were taken into account: the elaboration of a relationship scheme in which to include as few variables as possible; the pertinent selection of the variables included in the model; and the size of the predictive capacity of the built model.

Description of the predictive model

VD (Dependent Variable):

Gen Z membership.

VI (independent variables):

The respondent's gender;

q2—Awareness of UNESCO's program on natural sites;

q4—Degree of familiarity with PDO (protected designation of origin) or PGI (protected geographical indication) products;

q6—Frequency of wine tourism practice;

q72—The price of accommodation;

q73—Culinary diversity;

q79—Elements of uniqueness offered;

q86—Purchase of products with PDO or PGI;

q93—Interest in the existence of resources included in the UNESCO material heritage (crafts, churches, etc.).

For this purpose, we have selected the variables included in the model, taking into account the statistical significance of the interactions between them, and we have verified the significance of the main statistical factors that characterize the veracity of the model and its predictive capacity (testing the proposed explanatory model using: the G2 test of likelihood ratios—the main indicator that shows us to what extent the proposed explanatory model is or is not statistically significant) [76], Hosmer and Lemeshow test (tests the null hypothesis according to which the observed data are generated by the proposed explanatory model), Bayesian criterion adjusted information—BIC (can be used to test a particular model, but especially to compare two different models), as well as to establish the explanatory efficiency of the model using statistical indicators that indicate to what extent the independent variable influences the dependent variable: R² of Cox and Snell, R² of Nagelkerke, Pseudo-R², R² of McFadden, R² of McFadden (adjusted).

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The study carried out in the present work was aimed at members of Gen Z with higher education in Romania. It is obvious that they represent only a part of the national Gen Z and an even smaller part of the global Gen Z.

In carrying out the research, we wanted to determine the interest of Gen Z in the unique elements of attraction of a destination and the attachment to traditional values, as well as the factors that determine Romanian tourists choice of a rural tourist destination. Hypotheses were formulated based on the main questions in the questionnaire.

Regarding Gen Z's interest in rural tourism, we have formulated the following hypotheses:

- 1. Tourists who are part of Gen Z are attracted by the unique elements offered by rural areas.
- 2. Tourists who are part of Gen Z are attracted by the culinary diversity of rural areas.
- 3. The price of accommodation is one of the key elements in choosing a rural tourist destination.
- 4. Tourists who are part of Gen Z know and purchase products with PDO or PGI.
- 5. Tourists who are part of Gen Z are interested in the UNESCO initiative LHT.
- 6. Tourists who are part of Gen Z are interested in wine tourism.

4. Results

4.1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

- For the responses we obtained, we had the following distribution of subjects:
- By gender, 124 (38.4%) males and 199 (61.6%) females;
- 167 (51.7%) enrolled in bachelor's programs, 127 (39.3%) in master's programs, 4 (1.2%) in PhD programs, and 25 (7.7%) finished their studies;
- 227 (70.3%) are students at Bucharest University of Economic Studies; 88 (27.2%) are students at other universities in Romania; and 8 (2.5%) are students at other universities in Bucharest;
- The average income per family member is under 400 euros for 102 (31.6%), between 400 and 1000 euros for 175 (54.2%), between 1001 and 2000 euros for 39 (12.1%), and more than 2001 euros for 7 (2.2%);
- Considering the limit for being part of Z Gen at 27 years, we used in our analysis only 280 responses (86.7%) out of 323 valid;
- 251 of the respondents are under 24 years old, being students in bachelor's and master's programs in the normal life cycle.

4.2. Model Validation

Independent variables that showed a significant association in the bivariate analysis (p < 0.05) were introduced into the model using the "Enter" method (in which the variables are entered in the block—only one equation is estimated).

After running the model in SPSS, the chi-squared test indicates that the independent variables included in the model are important, or, in other words, it helps us significantly predict the chances that a Gen Z person will develop a certain type of tourist behavior (Table 1).

The G2 test of the verosimility ratios is statistically significant: G2(12) = 96.363 for p = 0.00 < 0.05. The Hosmer and Lemeshow test as a match measure is statistically insignificant (p = 0.251 > 0.05; χ^2 (8) = 10.207). The Bayesian adjusted information criterion (BIC) is negative (-27.03108968). The explanatory efficiency of the model (evaluation of the degree of association between VI and VD) is given by the values of the following parameters:

- R^2 for him, Cox, and Snell = 0.258;
- Nagelkerke's $R^2 = 0.474$;
- Pseudo- $R^2 = 1 (-2LLmodel/ -2LLnull) = 0.380252977$ (LL—represents the abbreviation from log likelihood, a logarithm calculated by iterations using the maximum veracity method).

So, the final model predicts a probability of 38.02% of belonging to Gen Z.

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 $\textbf{Table 1.} \ \ \textbf{Variables that are statistically significant with Gen } Z \ \ \textbf{membership/non-participation}.$

Variable		Gen Z M	Iembership
variable		Of	Right Away
	Masculin	35.0%	60.5%
Respondent's gender	Feminine	65.0%	39.5%
		$p = 0.001; \chi^2(1) =$	10.220; Phi = -0.178
	very good	38.6%	72.1%
Awareness of UNESCO's programme on	Of Masculin 35.0% Feminine 65.0% $p = 0.001; \chi^2$ (1) very good 38.6% Somewhat 40.4% Not at all 21.1% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = 1 very good 36.4% Somewhat 27.5% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = 2 very good 41.4% Somewhat 29.6% Not at all 28.9% $p = 0.014; \chi^2$ (2) = 2 very often 27.1% Sometimes 19.3% Never 53.6% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = 1 very important 23.6% unimportant 23.6% unimportant 23.6% unimportant 24.6% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = 3 very important 46.1% Unimportant 24.6% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = 1 very important 46.1% Unimportant 25.0% Unimportant 25.0% Right away 83.2% Of <td>14.0%</td>	14.0%	
natural sites	Not at all	21.1%	14.0%
_		$p = 0.000; \chi^2(2) = 17.$.725; Cramer's V = 0.234
	very good	36.4%	72.1%
The degree of knowledge of unesco	Somewhat	36.1%	9.3%
intangible heritage	Not at all	27.5%	18.6%
_		$p = 0.000; \chi^2(2) = 20.$.852; Cramer's V = 0.254
	very good		65.1%
Familiarity with PDO (protected	Somewhat	29.6%	16.3%
designation of origin) or PGI (protected — geographical indication) products	Masculin 35.0% Feminine 65.0% $p = 0.001; \chi^2$ (1) very good 38.6% Somewhat 40.4% Not at all 21.1% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = 1 very good 36.4% Somewhat 36.1% Not at all 27.5% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = 2 very good 41.4% Somewhat 29.6% Not at all 28.9% $p = 0.014; \chi^2$ (2) = 3 very often 27.1% Sometimes 19.3% Never 53.6% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = 1 very important 23.6% unimportant 23.6% unimportant 23.6% very important 46.1% unimportant 24.6% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = 1 very important 40.4% quite important 25.0% Unimportant 34.6% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = 1 Right away <td>18.6%</td>	18.6%	
		Of Masculin 35.0% Feminine 65.0% $p = 0.001; \chi^2$ (1) very good 38.6% Somewhat 40.4% Not at all 21.1% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = very good 36.4% Somewhat 27.5% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = very good 41.4% Somewhat 29.6% Not at all 28.9% $p = 0.014; \chi^2$ (2) = very often 27.1% Sometimes 19.3% Never 53.6% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = ery important 23.6% unimportant 23.6% unimportant 24.6% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = ery important 46.1% Unimportant 24.6% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = ery important 25.0% Unimportant 25.0% Unimportant 25.0% Unimportant 25.0%	522; Cramer's V = 0.162
	very often		48.8%
	Sometimes	19.3%	32.6%
Frequency of wine tourism practice —	Never	53.6%	18.6%
	Masculin 35.0% Feminine 65.0% $p = 0.001; \chi^2$ (2) very good 38.6% Somewhat 40.4% Not at all 21.1% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = very good 36.1% Not at all 27.5% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = very good 41.4% Somewhat 29.6% Not at all 28.9% $p = 0.014; \chi^2$ (2) = very often 27.1% Sometimes 19.3% Never 53.6% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = very important 23.6% quite important 23.6% unimportant 23.6% very important 46.1% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = very important 40.4% quite important 25.0% Unimportant 25.0% Right away 33.2% Of 16.8% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = very important 36.1% quite important 36.1% </td <td>$p = 0.000; \chi^2(2) = 18.$</td> <td>.278; Cramer's V = 0.238</td>	$p = 0.000; \chi^2(2) = 18.$.278; Cramer's V = 0.238
	very important	52.9%	9.3%
_	quite important	23.6%	62.8%
Accommodation price —	unimportant	23.6%	27.9%
_		$p = 0.000; \chi^2(2) = 35.$.230; Cramer's V = 0.33
	very important	<u> </u>	60.5%
_	quite important	46.1%	23.3%
Culinary diversity —	Unimportant	24.6%	16.3%
-		$p = 0.000; \chi^2(2) = 16.$.455; Cramer's V = 0.226
	very important	40.4%	67.4%
-	quite important	25.0%	20.9%
The unique elements offered —		34.6%	11.6%
-	Masculin 35.0% Feminine 65.0% $p = 0.001; \chi^2$ (1) very good 38.6% Somewhat 40.4% Not at all 21.1% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = 1 very good 36.4% Somewhat 36.1% Not at all 27.5% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = 2 very good 41.4% Somewhat 29.6% Not at all 28.9% $p = 0.014; \chi^2$ (2) = 2 very often 27.1% Sometimes 19.3% Never 53.6% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = 2 very important 23.6% unimportant 23.6% very important 29.3% quite important 24.6% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = 3 very important 46.1% Unimportant 25.0% Unimportant 25.0% Right away 83.2% Of 16.8% $p = 0.000; \chi^2$ (2) = 3	.725; Cramer's V = 0.198	
	Right away	,	41.9%
Purchase of products with PDO or PGI		16.8%	58.1%
			= 36.801Phi $= -0.338$
	very important	,	23.3%
Interest in the existence of resources			25.6%
included in the UNESCO material — heritage (monasteries, churches, etc.)			51.2%
nernage (monasteries, churches, etc.)	F		

Source: own determination based on the results of the survey.

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- R^2 to him: McFadden = 1 (LLmodel/LLnull) = 1 1.189035931 = 0.189035931;
- McFadden's R^2 (adjusted) = 1 [(LLmodel df)/LLnull] = -0.370735733.

In the first phase (Block 0), the prediction is made only on the basis of the constant, the coefficients of the equation being all considered zero.

A correlation between the actual VI values and the predicted values is only based on the constant. In our case, an 86.7% percentage of correct classification was obtained solely on the basis of the constant.

Table 2 shows the Wald test for the initial stage of construction of the regression model, based only on the constant, whose calculated value in this first step is 130.850.

Table 2. Variables in the equation.

	В	S.E.	Forest	Df	Itself.	Exp(B)
Step 0 Constant	-1.874	0.164	130.850	1	0.000	0.154

Source: own determination based on the results of the survey.

The Wald test is one of the significance tests for individual variables in logistics regression. When the test is significant (p< 0.05), that parameter is different from zero, and the model that includes it can be accepted. In our case, the value sig. = 0.000 (< 0.005) allows rejecting the null hypothesis and confirming the model in the initial phase.

The Exp(B) value is the ratio of the probability of achievement to the probability of failure of the reference event (Gen Z membership).

Table 3 contains coefficients for the variables included in the model. The values in the Sig column (<0.05) indicate a significant contribution from each variable. On the overall statistics line, we have the chi-squared test for the residual value of the model (88.005), which is statistically significant (<0.05). This tells us that variables that were not included in the model differ significantly from zero, which means that one or more of these variables can help increase the prediction power of the model.

Table 3. Variables not included in the model.

			Score	Df	Itself.
		q5.1 Degree of familiarity with PDO products (protected designation of origin) or PGI (geographical indication protect	6.228	1	0.013
		q6.1 frequency of wine tourism practice	15.876	1	0.000
	-	q2.1 Awareness of UNESCO's natural sites programme	10.631	1	0.001
		q4.1 Degree of knowledge of the UNESCO initiative HUMAN TREASURES	0.088	1	0.766
		q72 The price of accommodation	12.961	1	0.000
		q73 Culinary diversity	16.455	2	0.000
Step 0	Variables	q73 Culinary Diversity(1)	16.282	1	0.000
этер о		q73 Culinary diversity(2)	7.915	1	0.005
		q79 Uniqueness elements offered	12.725	2	0.002
		q79 Unique elements offered(1)	11.100	1	0.001
		q79 Unique elements offered(2)	0.334	1	0.563
		Respondent's gender	10.220	1	0.001
		q86 Purchase of products with PDO or PGI(1)	36.801	1	0.000
		q93 interest in the existence of resources included in the UNESCO material heritage (monasteries, churches, etc.)	11.986	1	0.001
		Overall Statistics	88.005	12	0.000

Source: Own determination based on the results of the survey.

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In the next step, if the justification for switching from the constant-only model to the addition of other variables (if $p \le 0.05$) is tested, the passage is justified. Table 4 shows the results of the materiality tests carried out.

Table 4. Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients.

		Chi-Square	Df	Itself.
	Step	96.363	12	0.000
Step 1	Block	96.363	12	0.000
	Model	96.363	12	0.000

Source: own determination based on the results of the survey.

Model: tests the overall significance of the regression model (if $p \le 0.05$, the model is significant).

Table 5 shows the coefficients R² of Cox and Snell and R² of Nagelkerke.

Table 5. Model Summary.

Step	−2 Log Likelihood	Cox & Snell R Square	Nagelkerke R Square
1	157.055 a	0.258	0.474

Source: own determination based on the results of the survey. a. Estimation terminated at iteration number 7 because parameter estimates changed by less than 0.001.

In our case, the percentage of variation of the VD values is explained by the variation VI used, which indicates a fairly close relationship between the predictors and the criterion. It can be stated that the predictors included in model 1 explain approximately between 25.8% and 47.4% of the variation in the VD's probability of being 0 or 1 (that is, whether or not to belong to Gen Z).

The Hosmer and Lemeshow test divides subjects into deciles based on predicted probabilities, after which a chi-squared test is calculated for observed and theoretical frequencies. In the case of this test, if its probability is less than or equal to 0.05, the null hypothesis is accepted, and the existence of a difference between the observed and predicted values is rejected. Correspondingly, if the probability of the test is greater than 0.05, we conclude that the prediction model is appropriate in relation to the research data. In our case, p = 0.251, which certifies the statistical significance of the prediction model (Table 6).

Table 6. Hosmer and Lemeshow Test.

Step	Chi-Square	Df	Itself.
1	10.207	8	0.251

Source: own determination based on the results of the survey.

The correspondence between the observed values of the criterion and those predicted is 90.4%, which indicates a fairly high efficiency of the prediction model.

Preachers are selected based on their predictive power. Therefore, the best predictor is selected first, after the necessary adjustments are made, then the best predictor is chosen from among the remaining ones, and so on. In step 0 of the model, the intercept of the regression equation. One by one, the most powerful predictors are then introduced:

- q5.1—The degree of familiarity with PDO products (protected designation of origin) or PGI (geographical indication protected);
- q6.1—Frequency of wine tourism practice;
- q2.1—Awareness of UNESCO's Natural Sites Program;
- q4.1—Awareness of the UNESCO HUMAN TREASURES initiative;
- q72—The price of accommodation;
- q73—Culinary diversity;

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- q79—Elements of uniqueness offered;
- The respondent's gender;
- q86—Purchase of products with PDO or IGP(1);
- q93—Interest in the existence of resources included in the UNESCO material heritage (monasteries, churches, etc.).

Table 7 contains the final results of the prediction model for each of the predictor variables).

Table 7. Logit coefficients and opportunity ratio for predictors of the logistics regression model.

	Variables in the Regression Equation									
		n	C.F.				E (D)	95% C.I.for EXP(B)		
		В	S.E.	Forest	Df	Itself.	Exp(B)	Lower	Upper	
	q5.1 Degree of familiarity with PDO products (protected designation of origin) or PGI (geographical indication protect	-0.212	0.307	0.477	1	0.490	0.809	0.443	1.476	
	q6.1 frequency of wine tourism practice	-0.994	0.291	11.684	1	0.001	0.370	0.209	0.654	
	q2.1 Awareness of UNESCO's natural sites programme	-0.899	0.315	8.121	1	0.004	0.407	0.219	0.755	
	q4.1 Degree of knowledge of the UNESCO initiative HUMAN TREASURES	0.715	0.298	5.762	1	0.016	2.045	1.140	3.668	
	q72 The price of accommodation	0.465	0.308	2.276	1	0.131	1.591	0.870	2.910	
	q73 Culinary diversity			8.576	2	0.014				
Step 1a	q73 Culinary Diversity(1)	1.459	0.623	5.484	1	0.019	4.301	1.269	14.586	
	q73 Culinary diversity(2)	0.289	0.657	0.194	1	0.660	1.335	0.368	4.841	
	q79 Uniqueness elements offered			2.829	2	0.243				
	q79 Unique elements offered(1)	0.785	0.622	1.590	1	0.207	2.192	0.647	7.426	
	q79 Unique elements offered(2)	-0.063	0.696	0.008	1	0.928	0.939	0.240	3.677	
	Respondent's gender	-0.981	0.432	5.165	1	0.023	0.375	0.161	0.874	
	q86 Purchase of products with PDO or PGI(1)	-1.918	0.476	16.258	1	0.000	0.147	0.058	0.373	
	q93 Interest in the existence of resources included in the UNESCO material heritage (monasteries, churches, etc.)	0.731	0.297	6.063	1	0.014	2.077	1.161	3.717	
	Constant	-0.600	1.270	0.223	1	0.637	0.549			

Source: own determination based on the results of the survey.

Exp(B) values are the odds ratio for each individual variable. Values less than 1 correspond to a decrease in the ratio, and those greater than 1 correspond to an increase in the ratio. Values close to 1 indicate that the independent variable does not affect the dependent variable.

Confidence interval for odds ratio: if the confidence interval is at the value 1, then that variable does not make any significant difference in the distribution of cases in category VI.

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The following are found to be:

• The people for whom the price of accommodation matters when choosing a rural tourist destination are 1.591 times more likely to belong to Gen Z (while maintaining the other variables at constant values);

- The chances are 4.301 times higher in the case of people who, when choosing a rural tourist destination, consider the culinary diversity important to be part of Gen Z (in the conditions of maintaining the other variables at constant values);
- People who, when choosing a rural tourist destination, take into account the uniqueness elements offered by the area have 2.192 times more chances to be part of Gen Z (in the conditions of maintaining the other variables at constant values);
- The chances are 2.077 times higher that a person who, when choosing a rural tourist destination, appreciates as important the existence of resources included in the UN-ESCO material heritage (monasteries, churches, etc.) belongs to Gen Z (given the maintenance of the other variables at constant values).

The variables "elements of uniqueness", "culinary diversity—unimportant", "price of accommodation" and "familiarity with products of the type PDO (protected designation of origin) or PGI (protected geographical indication)" do not make any significant difference in the distribution of cases in categories VI, the confidence interval for odds ratio containing the value 1.

The coefficients of the regression equation, on the basis of which we can make predictions, and the equation of the binary logistics regression function resulting from its application contain the variables and parameters from Table 7.

The equation of the regression model is:

$$y = a + b1 \times q51 + b2 \times q61 + b3 \times q21 + b4 \times q41 + b5 \times q72 + b6 \times q73 + b7 \times q79 + b8 \times respondent's gender + b9 \times q86 + b10 \times q93$$
 (1)

Replacing the values of the regression coefficients, presented in Table 7, we obtain:

$$y = 6.000 - 0.212 \times q51 - 0.994 \times q61 - 0.899 \times q21 + 0.715 \times q41 + 0.465 \times q72 + 1.459 \times q73 + 0.785 \times q79 - 0.981 \times respondent's gender - 1.918 \times q86 + 0.731 \times q93 + 0.731 \times q93$$

$$P = \frac{e^y}{1 + e^y} \tag{3}$$

where $P = \text{probability of event 1 occurring; e symbolizes the exponent, and y takes different values depending on the type of logistics equation [76] (p. 288).$

$$\frac{p}{1-p} \tag{4}$$

$$logit(p) = ln \frac{p}{1 - p} \tag{5}$$

The ratio $\frac{p}{1-p}$ is called chance, and the logit(p) = $\ln \frac{p}{1-p}$ transformation is called the chance logarithm.

Thus, we have y = -1.16 for a male person who:

- Has a high degree of familiarity with products such as PDO (protected designation of origin) or PGI (protected geographical indication);
- Frequently practices wine tourism;
- It is appreciated as being very important when choosing a rural tourist destination: the existence of resources included in the UNESCO material heritage (monasteries, churches, etc.), the price of accommodation, culinary diversity, but also the elements of uniqueness;
- Purchased products with PDO or PGI on previous trips to the countryside. The result is exp (y) = 0.313486181, and p = 0.238667.

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Since we opted for a critical classification value of 0.5 and obtained 0.24, we can say that, in this case, there is a lower probability of stating that the person belongs to Gen Z (p = 0.24) than of claiming the opposite (probability of belonging to the other category, that is, q = 1 - p = 0.761332715).

If we consider L1 = logit(p1), the chance logarithm for the first group, and L2 = logit(p2), the chance logarithm for the second group, then:

$$L1 - L2 = logit(p1) - logit(p2) = ln \frac{p_1 * (1 - p_2)}{p_2 * (1 - p_1)}$$
 (6)

Equation (6) represents the logarithm of the opportunity ratio, or the relative risk, for the two groups.

L1 - L2 = 0.692, which means that the event is less common among Gen Z representants than among the other group.

According to Table 8, which shows the match between the theoretical prediction model and the actual, observed situation, we find that our model predicts the dependent variable (the individual belongs to Gen Z) in a proportion of 97.5% and that most errors (24) are encountered in the situation in which we predict that an individual belongs to Gen Z when in reality he does not belong. We can say that the degree of correctness of the predictions for a critical classification value of 0.5 is 90.4% correct answers, and the model manages to provide a better prediction of the cases of subjects belonging to Gen Z. For a critical classification value of 0.3, the degree of sensitivity decreases to 93.6% but increases the degree of specificity—from 44.2% to 74.4%.

Table 8. Comparison of the two predictive models, depending on the critical classification value.

Critical		Esti	mated Results (Pred	ictions)		
Classification	Observed Results— — Generatia Z —	Gen Z Membership				
Value(Cut Value)	Generatia_L =	Of	Right away	% Correct		
	Of	273	7	97.5		
0,50	Right away	24	19	44.2		
	% Total			90.4		
	Of	262	18	93.6		
0,30	Right away	11	32	74.4		
	% Total			91.0		

Source: own determination based on the results of the survey.

5. Discussion

Our results partially confirm previous studies, which show that, from the perspective of tourist behavior, Gen Z is not as homogeneous as it is in relation to technology. This suggests that while technology plays a significant role in the lives of Gen Z, it is not the only factor influencing their travel behavior. Other factors, such as cultural heritage, traditional gastronomy, and environmental sustainability, may also play an important role in their travel decisions, particularly in the context of rural tourism.

Romanian tourists who consider the elements of uniqueness that the area offers are 2.192 times more likely to belong to Gen Z. For rural tourism, elements of uniqueness can be considered by UNESCO MCH, ICH, and LHT as part of ICH (due to the fact that the program is still active in Romania), which are closely and specifically linked with the area. Going further, our results have shown two contrasting aspects. While for MCH, the results show that a respondent who is aware of the MCH initiative is 2.077 times more likely to belong to Gen Z, the same cannot be said for ICH and LHT. The results partially validate previous studies that highlight the fact that Gen Z is interested in attractions and architecture [59,61]. Of the three initiatives mentioned earlier, MCH is the oldest and most

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well-known UNESCO initiative, benefiting from both the attention of local authorities through funding for conservation and valorization as well as the attention of the media in promoting it on various channels. This may explain why MCH appears to be a more significant factor in influencing the travel behavior of Gen Z in rural areas compared to ICH and LHT. As Gen Z is at the beginning of their tourism experience, MCH often falls into the category of lesser-known attractions [39,41,48], satisfying the need for education and development through culture [12,17,18,20,49].

This may explain why MCH appears to be a more significant factor in influencing the travel behavior of Gen Z in rural areas compared to ICH and LHT. However, it is important to note that the level of awareness and understanding of these initiatives may vary among individuals and may be influenced by various factors such as education level, cultural background, and personal interests.

Furthermore, the result that tourists who value culinary diversity when choosing a rural tourist destination are 4.3 times more likely to belong to Gen Z can be explained by the fact that among the important aspects that Gen Z includes in their travel plans is gastronomy [16]. However, it can also be explained by the fact that Gen Z is interested in gastronomic tourism [15,49,65]. For Gen Z, gastronomy is associated with wine tourism [21] through the prism of local products in Greece or through food and wine pairing in the USA [68]. Food preference in the sphere of gastronomic tourism can be influenced by social media [15,66], experience [15], and is also associated with supporting local communities [14,15,44]. For Romania, traditional gastronomy, specific to the rural area, is an element of uniqueness, as identified by a series of specialized studies [77–80].

Other factors, such as cultural heritage, traditional gastronomy, and environmental sustainability, may also play an important role in their travel decisions, particularly in the context of rural tourism. Therefore, it is important to take a holistic approach to understanding the travel patterns and preferences of Gen Z in rural areas, considering not only their use of technology but also their cultural and environmental values.

Wine tourism is little practiced by young people and is less associated with wine consumption [21] and more associated with the landscape, educational opportunities, group of friends, and socialization [22]. Similarly, since wine tourism in Romania is in its early stages and poorly promoted, young people have had few contacts with it. That is a possible explanation for the low level of knowledge. Lack of exposure and promotion could result in limited awareness and interest among the younger generation. The variables "familiarity with PDO or PGI" do not make any significant difference in the distribution of cases between the selected categories. These results are similar to those obtained in other studies [70,71], which show a low level of knowledge of PDO and PGI products with the potential to increase interest as they mature [69].

Our study highlights that the rate of accommodation service is an important factor in choosing a rural tourist destination. Furthermore, Gen Z Romanian students are somewhat similar to Romanian tourists of other generations in terms of the importance of the accommodation service tariff in choosing the rural tourist destination [20]; however, there are 1.591 times more chances that tourists for whom the accommodation tariff matters belong to Gen Z. Fares or travel costs have also always been a consideration for travelers, regardless of generation [16]; nevertheless, Gen Z shows a propensity to save money [30], is more budget-conscious [14], and favors less expensive activities [68].

Being digital natives, using mobile phones and apps to plan trips and book accommodations [37,39], Gen Z can compare offers and choose the best option for them. They can do this better than Millennials because they show a different openness to new and digital technologies as they grow with the advent and evolution of these technologies. Similar to other results [14,16], the increased interest in the price of accommodation is also due to the limited financial possibilities but also to the need to find the right accommodation option.

Overall, Gen Z's focus on saving money when traveling reflects their overall approach to finances. They are a generation that is conscious of their spending and always looking for ways to stretch their budget. While they may not have the same level of disposable

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income as other generations, their resourcefulness and willingness to seek out bargains allow them to experience the world and create meaningful memories without breaking the bank.

6. Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

These variations in results can be attributed to various local factors, including cultural influences, geographical location, the availability of tourist attractions, and the personal preferences of individuals within Gen Z. It emphasizes the need for destination-specific research to better understand the specific preferences and behaviors of Gen Z tourists in different contexts.

Our study showed that Romanian students, part of Gen Z, are interested in elements of cultural uniqueness when traveling to rural areas, especially MCH. Culinary diversity and price are also important. Less important or without importance are ICH, LHT, and wine tourism. As has been shown [5], the importance of identifying in the early stages the trends manifested by a new generation is obvious. Additionally, Gen Z is at the beginning of its journey into life and tourism. Intellectual maturation, changes in social status, and career evolution will certainly bring about changes in tourism behavior, changes that can be traced transversally in future research.

This paper contributes to the development of scientific literature by analyzing two elements that will change the face of tourism in the coming years. Rural tourism is experiencing growing interest at the international level following the COVID-19 pandemic [81,82], and Gen Z will increase its share of the international tourism market. By selecting a group of Gen Z individuals (Romanian students) and a series of specific items related to national rural tourism, the paper contributes to the development of national scientific literature and provides a better understanding of Gen Z at the international scientific literature level. By using binary logistic regression, we find that our model predicts the dependent variable (the individual belongs to Gen Z) in a proportion of 97.5% and that most errors (24) are encountered in the situation in which we predict that an individual belongs to Gen Z when in reality he does not belong.

The analysis of the specialized literature highlighted the close relationship between technology and tourism. The omnipresence of technology appears in the stages of vacation planning [36,37] (searching for information, price comparison), during the vacation (posting on social media), or after its completion (online comments, posting on social media) [6,39–41,66]. As shown in recent studies [35], technology can mediate Gen Z's relationship with cultural tourism by creating diverse experiences. Understanding the consumption behavior of Gen Z towards rural tourism can help local public authorities and tour operators tailor their offerings to meet the needs and preferences of this target market. By adapting the offer to meet the preferences of this generation, local public authorities and tour operators can attract more visitors and boost the rural tourism industry.

Tourism's future development must start with the digital environment in which this generation operates. Providing complete information in an accessible and intuitive way through the right channels will contribute to increasing the attractiveness of the rural tourism offer. Being a generation in search of new things [12,14], eager for unique experiences, there are chances that rural tourism will offer exactly those elements that it is looking for. In the highly competitive tourism industry, destination management organizations (DMOs) that can effectively promote their destinations and identify and adapt to emerging trends will have an advantage over their competitors. With rapid changes occurring in the tourism industry, it is important for DMOs to stay informed and proactive in identifying and addressing new trends in order to remain competitive and attract visitors.

Our study has certain limitations that might serve as suggestions for future studies. The sample of the research is relatively small for making prediction models using binary logistics regression (according to specialists, a minimum of 50 subjects are needed for each predictor, or 20–30 subjects/predictor in the case of a sample of more than 300 subjects),

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but this paper represents a starting point for other future research. The optimal sizing of the sample at the national level will increase the level of predictability of the results by validating or not the results already obtained. By using a convenience sample of the Gen Z population from Romania, the results restrict the ability to make broad generalizations. Additionally, alternative models of analyzing Gen Z and its relationship with tourism can be used. This paper focuses on Gen Z students, so there are different groups (belonging to Gen Z) that should be considered. Examining the relationship between demographic attributes and variables can provide more insights into the behavior of Gen Z Romanians when it comes to tourism.

As Gen Z is still in its early stages, there is a lot of potential for future research to better understand their travel behavior and preferences, especially in relation to rural tourism. It will be interesting to see how their preferences change over time as they mature and become more established in the workforce. Additionally, comparing their travel behavior to that of previous and future generations will provide valuable insights into the evolution of tourism trends and preferences. Overall, there is a lot of opportunity for future research in this area. Further research could examine additional factors that could impact Gen Z's intention to visit rural destinations. Additionally, researchers could explore how these factors may vary across different regions, socio-economic groups, and cultural backgrounds.

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