

THE INTERACTION OF GENERATION Z WITH INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE THROUGH DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND THEIR PARTICIPATION INTENTIONS

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Abstract

Generation Z, born into the digital age, differs from previous generations in their perspectives on future generations, communication styles, and online consumption habits. They view technology as an essential part of daily life. Digital environments that transfer, preserve, and make cultural heritage values accessible encourage young people to engage with these values, enabling them to pass them on to future generations and reach a broader audience. Tourism is another factor that supports the sustainability of cultural heritage. Generation Z, whose consumer habits are shaped by digital technologies, has become a key segment in the tourism market. It is believed that transforming intangible cultural heritage elements into digital media could increase Generation Z's curiosity about and interest in cultural heritage tourism. As a result, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) values can be handed down to future generations, and conservation plans can be developed. This research conceptually explores the potential impact of Generation Z's interaction with digital intangible components on their intention to participate in cultural heritage tourism. The study's focus on Generation Z's digital engagement with intangible cultural heritage within the context of cultural heritage tourism makes it unique. Accordingly, it is recommended that the Theory of Planned Behavior model be used to examine how interactions with digital intangible cultural heritage influence Generation Z's intentions to engage in cultural heritage tourism. This study could serve as a foundation for further empirical research.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage, generation Z, cultural heritage tourism, digitalization

JEL Classification: Z32, M31, Z1.

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1. Introduction

The development of technology has not only transformed the environment of information processing but also contributed to the preservation of cultural knowledge. Transferring societies' cultural and heritage values to the internet through audio and video resources has enhanced the accessibility and preservation of cultural heritage (Çakmak & Özel, 2016). Technologies such as augmented reality, virtual reality, and social media are innovative methods for providing access to and interaction with cultural heritage (Shan & Bin Wardi, 2025). Individuals can access a country's cultural heritage values at any time and from any location through digital archives and databases, without limitations of time or space (Bosone et al., 2021). As a result, the process becomes more engaging when information about cultural heritage elements is obtained through easily accessible technologies. Furthermore, this enables the dissemination of heritage information to a wider audience (Gümüş, 2022). Digital media tools integrate the processes of collecting, storing, preserving, and distributing intangible cultural heritage data (Ziku, 2020). They also serve as communication tools for promoting ICH elements (Büyükkuru, 2023). Storing cultural heritage elements in digital environments is essential for their preservation and transmission to future generations. In the current century, the attitudes of Generation Z toward cultural heritage should also be considered (Sarı et al., 2021).

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Generation Z values its cultural roots (Kocakaya & Dönmez, 2022; Diaconescu & Şchiopu, 2023). The attitudes of Generation Z, who are expected to be more involved in all aspects of life than previous generations, toward introducing and preserving cultural heritage for future generations are significant (Sarı et al., 2021). Their interaction with digital media is seen as an opportunity for the transfer, experience, and positioning of cultural heritage values in the digital environment. Therefore, heritage experiences should be innovatively designed to suit this generation (Yun, 2023). It is important to develop cultural heritage elements using technology, with attention to visual appeal and openness to feedback, to align with the interests of Generation Z (Pentescu, 2023). Increasing digital cultural heritage awareness is essential to ensure that Generation Z remains connected to its cultural values (Yücekök, 2019).

Cultural heritage is important for its societal value and its potential to contribute to tourism (Carlsen et al., 2008). Tourism protects and promotes cultural heritage elements, transmits them to future generations, and raises awareness (Alagöz et al., 2018). The desire to leave a legacy for future generations is a key motivation for tourists to visit a destination (Poria et al., 2006). Meanwhile, Generation Z's travel preferences represent a growing share of the tourism market (Jiang & Hong, 2023). Therefore, it is believed that fostering Generation Z's intention to visit cultural heritage sites and strengthening their connection can be achieved through digital technologies and social media.

This study aims to explore the potential impact of Generation Z's interaction with intangible cultural heritage elements encountered in the digital environment on their intention to engage in cultural heritage tourism, within the context of existing literature. It also discusses the applicability of the Theory of Planned Behavior model in this context. The study is notable for its originality in examining Generation Z's digital interactions within the scope of cultural heritage tourism. It is considered important because it offers valuable suggestions for tourism stakeholders to better manage their target audiences and develop marketing strategies appropriate for Generation Z.

2. Methodological approach

In this study, the possible impact of Generation Z's interaction with intangible cultural heritage content in digital environments on their intention to participate in cultural heritage tourism is discussed within a conceptual framework. The present study does not constitute an empirical investigation; rather, it adopts a narrative literature review and a conceptual synthesis approach. The aim is to develop a theoretical and conceptual discussion by examining relevant literature trends through a holistic perspective. The literature review was conducted using international databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar, as well as national academic repositories including TR Dizin and other related archives. In the search process, the keywords "Generation Z," "intangible cultural heritage," "digital transmission," "digital engagement," "cultural heritage tourism," and "Theory of Planned Behavior" were utilized. These keywords were also combined in various ways to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of the literature. Although the review primarily focuses on academic studies published between 2010 and 2025, earlier works that contribute significantly to the topic were also included.

3. Theoretical background

3.1 Generation Z and digital interactions

Individuals born between 1995 and 2010 are members of Generation Z. Rapid technological advancements requiring constant adaptation are causing differences in the social lives and core values of younger generations (Umutoni, 2021). The idea that Generation Z has a stronger sense of social responsibility is considered a distinct trait that sets this generation apart. Generation Z youth are conscious of values, ethics, and moral behavior, and have a higher awareness of sustainability (Entina et al., 2021). Studies in the literature report similar findings. For example, Akduman and Hatipoğlu (2021) found that members of Generation Z exhibit high levels of subjective well-being, self-esteem, emotional and social intelligence, moral maturity, and empathy. İnce (2018) also highlights that Generation Z possesses strong communication skills in the digital realm.

Generation Z actively uses digital media for communication (Umutoni, 2021). Jaleniauskiene and Juceviciene (2015) reported that Generation Z believes they cannot interact without the internet. They prefer communicating online using expressions, symbols, and images (Elmore, 2014). These young people also use digital tools to listen to music, watch visual content on various platforms, play games, and browse. One study reported that their time spent on video content ranges from 1.5 to 4 hours (Erten, 2019). Another found that these individuals watch an average of 70 videos per day. Brito (2023) states that the platform where young people spend the most time is TikTok, which features video content and productions. According to a study by Erwin et al. (2023) on Generation Z, TikTok and Instagram are the leading platforms. Furthermore, members of Generation Z frequently use these platforms for shopping activities (Gümüş, 2020).

3.1.2 Generation Z's consumer behavior in the digital environment

Social media platforms serve as reliable sources of information for these individuals during the purchasing decision process (Sönmez, 2016). For example, social media applications influence the behavior of Generation Z consumers, leading to positive interactions among them (Şahin & İlçil, 2019). These individuals exhibit consumer traits that emphasize interaction, rapid consumption, and a preference for brands that make them feel unique. Sedera et al. (2017) found that user-generated content can motivate people to experience the content firsthand.

The literature indicates that advertisements reflecting values such as honesty, sacrifice, respect, and similar qualities attract the attention of Generation Z, who value ethical and moral principles (De Leon et al., 2022). Another study suggests that visual content should be prioritized to capture the attention of Generation Z, given their short attention spans (Artemova, 2018). Similarly, Wang and Park (2022) found that visual content influences the behavioral intentions of Generation Z. In this context, it is believed that interaction with digital intangible cultural heritage content will promote Gen Z's awareness and encourage consumption.

Given Generation Z's concern for future generations, their digital media consumption, interaction styles, and developed consumer behaviors, their interactions with cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage elements are considered essential and warrant further research.

3.2 Cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage (ICH)

The Turkish Language Association (2025) defines culture as "all the material and spiritual values created in the process of historical and social development and the tools used to create these and transmit them to the next generations, which show the extent of human sovereignty over the natural and social environment." In contrast, heritage carries historical values and forms part of society's cultural tradition (Nuryanti, 1996). Cultural heritage encompasses the symbolic, artistic, and material expressions shared by humanity and all cultures (Öztemiz, 2017). It is shaped through experiences and involves the transfer of verbal and non-verbal traditions, social practices, festivals, and ritual knowledge from previous generations to the next (Karaca Yılmaz et al., 2017). While it helps communities connect with their past, it also fosters individuals' sense of belonging to their community. Consequently, it strengthens cultural pride and continuity (Karjalainen, 2020). ICOMOS (2013) defines the values that comprise cultural heritage as either tangible or intangible.

Tangible cultural heritage is the physical manifestation of a society's heritage. These are concrete structures of cultural, historical, and artistic importance. They include buildings such as castles, temples, and churches; objects like pottery, clothing, and jewelry; works of art; and archaeological sites, including ceremonial areas and settlements (Gallou, 2022). Hua (2010) defines tangible cultural heritage as the material remains of humanity's productive activities, works, achievements, and developments.

Intangible cultural heritage encompasses the knowledge and skills of practice, representation, and expression that communities, groups, or individuals adopt as part of their cultural identity. The tools and spaces associated with cultural heritage are also included in the definition of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003). These elements include oral traditions and expressions, handicrafts, rituals, festivals, and social and natural practices. These products can be seen as shared heritage and cultural memory of human history, reflecting the past in the present. According to Lenzerini (2011), intangible

cultural heritage is a form of communication that fulfills human activities and spiritual needs that develop through concrete culture. However, there are concerns that these values are at risk of being forgotten due to individuals' current lack of awareness about cultural heritage (Halaç & Bademci, 2021). According to Soylu and Şahin (2023), intangible cultural heritage elements are especially vulnerable and face a higher risk of extinction. Therefore, conservation plans should be designed to protect these elements, and it is important to encourage the participation of young people (Altunsabak, 2015, as cited in Soylu & Şahin, 2023).

3.2.1 Digitalization of ICH elements

Digital media have become a space where much information is shared, stored, and preserved (Acar & Günaydın, 2023). Cultural heritage elements can also be maintained intact for many years in these environments (Kunt, 2023). Additionally, by utilizing metaverse-based technologies, it is possible to document cultural heritage elements in detail, preserve them, and ensure access by transferring them from one generation to the next (Buragohain et al., 2024). For example, digitalization transfers works of art, documents, photographs, and other cultural elements at risk of deterioration or extinction to databases, ensuring that these elements are preserved in their original form (Abduraheem & Sheri, 2022).

Rzayeva (2018), in her study on the effects of communication technologies on cultural changes and intangible cultural heritage, discusses the impact of technologies with both positive and negative aspects. The study states that digitalization has positive effects, such as facilitating the transfer of heritage to future generations, ensuring its sustainability, and enabling users to actively participate by interacting with cultural content. Çetinkaya (2018) found that media technologies positively influence the increase of cultural heritage awareness. One participant in the study suggested that the development of new media tools and the sharing of cultural information have created a free environment for promoting cultures, predicting that this will increase cultural awareness. In his study, Ökten (2022) notes that social media provides opportunities for mutual communication and is an effective tool for promoting cultural activities.

When examined in terms of intangible cultural heritage values, the situation is similar. With the help of digital technology and tools, the processes of collecting, storing, preserving, displaying, and providing access to ICH elements are integrated (Ziku, 2020). Hammou et al. (2020) found that social media communication has significant and meaningful results in promoting handicraft products, which are intangible cultural heritage products, to the younger generation. This study also highlights the vital role of the social media platform Facebook in promoting ICH elements. Ramazanova and Freitas (2022) examined platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook in terms of presenting ICH elements and concluded that Instagram is a useful tool for encouraging the younger generation to acquire information, and that young people interact with ICH elements more easily through TikTok.

It can be said that content produced on the internet within the framework of literature will be transferred to Generation Z by developing it within the context of intangible cultural heritage elements, providing easier access to these values. Furthermore, producing this content can foster engagement and awareness among Generation Z. Thus, digital media are believed to help young people embrace cultural heritage values and encourage participation in cultural heritage tourism to experience these values.

3.3 Cultural heritage tourism

One of the most important building blocks of tourism is historical and cultural elements (Göğebakan, 2016). Cultural tourism is defined as a form of tourism in which visitors travel to see, experience, and discover the tangible or intangible cultural attractions of a destination (United Nations World Tourism Organization, n.d.). According to Smith (2015), cultural tourism includes elements such as protected areas, artistic and religious sites, visual arts, festivals, language, regional cuisine, and traditions.

Cultural heritage tourism involves people traveling from their permanent residence to another place to learn about different cultures (Özlü & Kaleli, 2019). Participants in these activities aim to experience the stories, artifacts, and events of both the past and present. These travel activities include the performing arts, lifestyles, values, and traditions of the local community (Alagöz et al., 2018). In other words, cultural heritage tourism encompasses tangible heritage elements such as monuments and

artifacts, as well as intangible heritage products (Weng et al., 2019). A review of the literature reveals two opposing perspectives on cultural heritage tourism. For example, Tuan and Navrud (2008) emphasize the contribution of cultural heritage tourism to the local economy and its role in promoting sustainability. In contrast, Sangchumnon and Kozak (2017) argue that the economic benefits of tourism often overshadow other social or ethical dimensions and hinder activities from being conducted within a sustainability framework. Therefore, more realistic solutions should be developed to use tourism as a means to ensure the sustainability of cultural heritage (Oliveira et al., 2022).

In this context, enhancing Generation Z's engagement with cultural heritage through digital awareness campaigns may strengthen the sustainability of cultural heritage and increase their intention to participate in cultural heritage tourism. Understanding Generation Z's participation intentions is crucial in this regard.

3.4 Cultural heritage attitudes and participation intentions of Generation Z

Generation Z is one of the most important segments in the tourism market (Dimitriou & AbouElgheit, 2019). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the factors influencing Generation Z's intentions to engage in tourism. Zhang et al. (2020) found that individuals' cultural identities positively impact their intention to participate in tourism. Um and Chung (2019) stated that the cultural heritage elements of a destination are an essential factor in individuals' decisions to visit. Generation Z also considers cultural heritage a value to include in their travel plans (McIntyre et al., 2018). One study found that cultural heritage values attract the attention of many Generation Z participants, who are particularly interested in cultural heritage values featured in popular culture and presented visually and audibly (Kocakaya & Dönmez, 2022).

A study on the factors affecting the intention of Indian Generation Z individuals to visit heritage sites found that they were willing to visit heritage sites for entertainment and pleasure and had a positive attitude toward participating in cultural heritage tourism (Sujood et al., 2023). The need for productivity among Generation Z has been identified as an important factor in their intention to participate in cultural heritage tourism, as higher productivity needs are associated with a greater likelihood of such participation (Wu et al., 2023). Additionally, Jiang et al. (2024) found that originality, innovation-seeking, social sustainability, and cultural identity positively affect Generation Z tourists' intention to participate in ICH tourism. Social media interactions also influence this young segment's intention to participate in ICH tourism. A study using data collected from Generation Z found that digital storytelling impacts travel intentions (Chang et al., 2025).

4. Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior, developed by Ajzen (1991), expanded the Theory of Reasoned Action by incorporating the perception of control over behavioral intention and the operational behavior of cognitive elements. The Theory of Reasoned Action proposes that people's behavioral intentions can be predicted and that these intentions are influenced by attitudes and subjective norms (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980, as cited in Wu et al., 2023). This theory addresses social factors and the relationship between attitudes and behavior. It claims that behaviors completely under an individual's control can be explained. It states that attitudes are an influential factor in people's intentions and that intentions directly affect behavior. The Theory of Reasoned Action and the Theory of Planned Behavior agree that people's behavior can be predicted based on their intentions (Akkuş, 2013). The most important distinction between them is Perceived Behavioral Control (Yay, 2015).

Ajzen (1991) proposed the Theory of Planned Behavior, which is used to intervene in and predict human behavior, with the idea that human behavior is not entirely controllable but is somewhat limited by behavioral control. With the addition of the variable "Perceived Behavioral Control," human behavior is believed to be more fully explained (Usluel & Akar Mazman, 2010). The theory is based on the explanation that individuals have intentions behind their behavior. According to this theory, an individual's intention is determined by attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Nebioğlu & Kalıpcı, 2020). These variables can transform behavioral intentions into actual behavior (Ostrovskiy et al., 2019).

Attitudes are the positive or negative reactions individuals develop to stimuli (Burucuoğlu & Bulut, 2016). From another perspective, attitudes are psychological feelings that guide the impressions individuals in the consumer role develop toward products or services (Chen & Tung, 2014).

Subjective norms are influenced by a person's reference groups, such as their spouse, friends, family, and social groups or relationships. A person tends to accept the behaviors of those with whom they share common values. Therefore, subjective norms play a significant role in an individual's decisions (Eyler, 2016, as cited in Kırıkcı & Göktaş Kulualp, 2021).

Perceived behavioral control is defined as people's perception or belief about how easy or difficult it is to perform the behaviors they are interested in (Ajzen, 1991). It is also defined as an individual's perception of their abilities, such as whether they can control a behavior (Kocagöz & Dursun, 2010). When individuals believe they can cope with the risks that may arise while performing a certain behavior thanks to their skills, they can act with a stronger perception of behavioral control (Ülker Demirel & Çiftçi, 2020).

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) has been frequently used in the literature as a predictive tool in individuals' decision-making processes (Qiu et al., 2025). This behavioral model has also been widely utilized in the tourism literature (Nebioğlu & Kalıpçı, 2020). TPB has been the subject of many studies on topics such as tourists' travel intentions, behavioral intentions during destination visits, and consumption choices. For example, Jalilvand and Samiei (2012) tested the impact of electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM) on tourists' destination selection within the framework of TPB. It was determined through EWOM that attitude, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms had a significant impact on people's visits to Isfahan. Kutluk Bozkurt and Avcıkurt (2019) used the TPB model to examine the destination selection intentions of Generation Y tourists. As a result, it was observed that subjective norm had a strong effect on travel intentions to Antalya, but perceived behavioral control had a negligible impact. Therefore, this model can help tourism marketers understand tourist behavior and develop effective strategies (Joo et al., 2020).

This theory is also discussed in studies on cultural heritage tourism. For example, regression analyses of attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms are valid predictors of the intention to visit heritage sites (Duarte Alonso et al., 2015). Some studies expand and apply the TPB model by incorporating additional concepts. In a survey of Generation Z, productivity was integrated into the TPB model in the context of cultural heritage tourism. The findings showed that young people's productivity, attitudes toward cultural heritage tourism, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control each have varying levels of influence on their intention to visit. While the attitude of this generation was found to affect their intention to participate in cultural heritage tourism, its impact was limited by subjective norms (Wu et al., 2023). Another study examined Chinese visitors' intentions to visit cultural heritage sites using the TPB framework, with the addition of experience and cultural tour participation. Perceived control, experience, and cultural tour participation were found to be predictive factors of intention (Shen et al., 2009).

4.1 Explanation of model

This study proposes expanding the TPB model by adding the variable of interaction with digital intangible cultural heritage elements. Based on the literature, it suggests that Generation Z's digital interaction with intangible cultural heritage content may influence individuals' positive attitudes toward these values. Furthermore, the influence of the social environment and this interaction is believed to foster a sense of achievability regarding participation in cultural heritage tourism. Thus, individuals' intention to participate in cultural heritage tourism may lead to actual behavior.

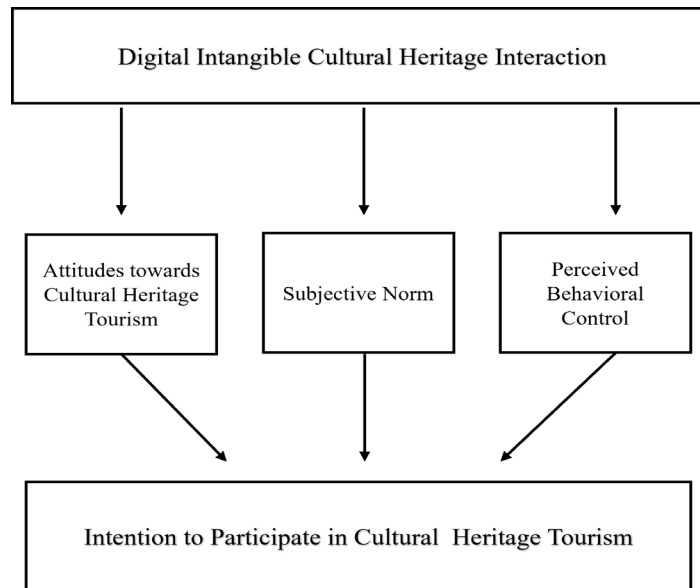


Figure 1. Proposed TPB-based model for Generation Z's intention to participate in cultural heritage tourism

4.2 Propositions

- **P1:** Generation Z's increased interaction with digital intangible cultural heritage content will be positively correlated with their attitudes towards cultural heritage tourism.
- **P2:** Generation Z's interaction with Digital Heritage Tourism content will positively affect their subjective norms towards cultural heritage tourism.
- **P3:** Making ICH content more experiential and accessible on these platforms will strengthen the perceived behavioral control of Generation Z.
- **P4:** Digital ICH interaction, attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control will positively affect the intention of Generation Z individuals to participate in cultural heritage tourism.

5. Discussion and Implications

This section discusses the opportunities offered by digital ICH, Generation Z's interest in cultural tourism and their intention to participate, drawing on the literature reviewed above.

5.1 Theoretical implications

This study provides a new conceptual perspective to the literature by examining the transfer of intangible cultural heritage elements to digital environments within the context of Generation Z and cultural heritage tourism. Previous research has explored the effects of digital platforms, social media, and visual content on Generation Z consumer behavior and behavioral intentions (Avcı & Bilgili, 2020). However, there has been no comprehensive assessment of how digital intangible cultural heritage content can influence these individuals' attitudes toward cultural heritage tourism and their intention to participate. Therefore, the perspective in this study - that digital intangible cultural heritage interaction will stimulate Generation Z's intention to participate in cultural heritage tourism - addresses an important gap in the literature.

Additionally, the applicability of the Theory of Planned Behavior in this context remains a subject of discussion. A review of studies on heritage tourists and sites within the framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Osiako & Szente, 2024; Lee et al., 2021) indicates that the theory's variables can explain the intention to participate in cultural heritage tourism. In this context, the study introduces a new theoretical relationship by incorporating the variable of digital intangible cultural heritage interaction into the Theory of Planned Behavior model. Thus, it is suggested that applying and expanding the model in future empirical research may yield meaningful results.

5.2 Practical implications

Studies in the literature indicate that destination sharing on digital and social media increases young people's travel intentions when it receives sufficient interaction (Wang & Park, 2022). Visual content on these platforms also influences individuals' behavioral tendencies. In this context, presenting intangible cultural heritage elements interactively on these platforms could attract the attention of Generation Z. Encouraging sharing with narratives, visual presentations, or audio materials - especially in ICH content produced on social media - and increasing the use of other interactive digital tools such as AR and VR in cultural heritage areas can foster interaction among young people. In this way, it is believed that Generation Z's interest in intangible cultural heritage elements can be increased, and their desire to experience and participate in cultural heritage tourism can be stimulated. Therefore, tourism stakeholders can prioritize digital content when presenting ICH elements to their young target audiences. Strategies such as video sharing, collaborations with content creators, and real user experience content can be used to promote cultural and heritage sites.

6. Conclusions and directions for future research

Generation Z, which uses digital technology intensively, tends to explore cultural heritage, demonstrating that digital tools can effectively increase participation intentions. Interactive technologies such as AR and VR enhance accessibility, provide opportunities to develop participation intentions, and highlight the potential of digital media in cultural heritage tourism (Jantanukul, 2024; Lalwani et al., 2021; Skinner et al., 2018; Poria et al., 2006). In these contexts, digital platforms can serve as promotional tools, and heritage values can be transmitted across generations by motivating travel intentions to cultural heritage sites. Additionally, media content and digital platforms motivate Generation Z's travel behavior and play an effective role in individuals' tourist decision-making processes (Vieira et al., 2020; Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, 2018), which is useful for developing strategies for this generation within cultural heritage tourism.

Transferring intangible cultural heritage elements to digital formats and enabling young individuals to interact with this content may stimulate their intention to participate in cultural heritage tourism. This study, based on literature-based inferences, is expected to provide a foundation for future empirical research. Future studies can empirically examine the extent to which Generation Z encounters intangible cultural heritage elements in digital media, the level of awareness they develop regarding these elements on social media, and whether their interactions influence their intention to participate in cultural heritage tourism. Interaction with digital intangible cultural heritage content can be integrated into the Theory of Planned Behavior model, and the expanded model can serve as a basis.

This study is limited by the lack of primary data sources and the consideration of only a subset of the existing literature. Therefore, the implications cannot be generalized.

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