How Does Immersion Affect the Travel Intention of Gen Z Tourists? The Mediating Role of Happiness

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Gen Z emerges as a dominant consumer group with unique travel preferences and therefore, understanding their behavior is crucial for developing targeted marketing strategies and enhancing tourism experiences. Yet, there is a significant research gap in the Sri Lankan context, particularly concerning the travel behavior of Gen Z tourists. Hence, this study examined the travel behavior of Gen Z tourists focusing on Immersion, Happiness, and Behavioral Intention in wildlife tourism. It also aimed to investigate the mediating effect of happiness between immersion and behavioral intention of wildlife tourists.

Design/methodology/approach: The study undertook a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional design. Self-administrated questionnaires (online) were distributed employing purposive sampling technique to domestic Gen Z tourists who had travel experiences in Wildlife National Parks in Sri Lanka. A total of 282 responses were analyzed by PLS-SEM approach using SmartPLS 4.0 software.

Findings: The findings revealed that immersion and happiness significantly affected the behavioral intention of Gen Z tourists whereas immersion significantly affected happiness. Additionally, this study proved that happiness partially mediated the relationship between immersion and behavioral intention of Gen Z tourists.

Originality: This research contributes to extending knowledge of tourism consumer behavior of Gen Zers in the context of wildlife tourism. Moreover, this study examined how a Gen Z tourist is immersed towards wildlife tourism consumption and their behavioral intention for such consumptions. Thus, it empirically contributes to broadening the understanding of comprehensive consumer behavior of Gen Zers that has been paid little attention in the national and global contexts.

Implications: These insights provide a deeper understanding of Gen Z tourists' travel behavior. The findings offer important practical implications for policymakers, and other decision-makers for planning and diversifying tourism offerings and capturing new and emerging market opportunities through value-added experiences.

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Introduction

Gen Z (1997-2013) (Schroth, 2019) is a growing influential consumer segment and predicted to represent the largest consumer base by 2030 (Euromonitor, 2018). Similarly, Gen Zers have greater economic well-being, are more highly educated, and are more ethnically and racially diverse than any other generation (Fry and Parker, 2018). Thus, Gen Z is a future marketing challenge.

Gen Zers are a significant type of visitors due to their higher demand for travel and tourism and showing increasing travel reservations compared to travelers of other generations (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2021). Further, scholars have argued that travel behavior is different between the generations (Liu et al., 2022). Hence, recent researchers have posited the necessity to study Gen Zers to effectively meet their specific expectations (Robinson & Schänzel, 2019).

However, in the Sri Lankan context, the lack of comprehensive visitor research has been identified as a major challenge in attracting new market segments. As a result, new product development decisions and marketing strategies aimed at attracting Gen Z visitors have received less attention (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority [SLTDA], 2022). Therefore, it is evident that Sri Lanka as a travel destination, has not recognized Gen Z as a promising market for the future. Similarly, research on travel behaviors of Gen Z is still in its relative infancy (Liu et al., 2022).

When considering the existing literature of the travel behavior of Gen Zers, a growing desire is identified for wildlife tourism (Ilhan et al., 2022, Fortune Business Insights, 2023). Hence, the focus on travel behavior of Gen Zers in wildlife tourism is both timely and relevant. Further, Sri Lanka tourist surveys indicate the significance of wildlife tourism as wildlife safaris, trekking, birdwatching are amongst the most popular activities on land reported by visitors (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority [SLTDA], 2022).

In addition, many recent studies have found that tourists are looking for immersive experiences when visiting some types of tourist attractions, such as theme parks, zoos and museums (Blumenthal & Jensen, 2019; Lunardo & Ponsignon, 2020). Yet, research related to tourists' immersive travel experiences in wildlife tourism is still limited (Lunardo & Ponsignon, 2020). Therefore, this study aims to examine the travel behavior of Gen Z tourists focusing on Immersion (IM), Happiness (HA), and Behavioral Intention (BI) in wildlife tourism.

Research Questions

RQ1: Is there an impact of immersion on behavioral intention of wildlife park tourists?

RQ2: Does happiness mediate the relationship between immersion and behavioral intention of wildlife park tourists?

Research Objectives

RO1: To identify the impact of immersion on behavioral intention of wildlife park tourists.

RO2: To examine whether there is a mediating impact of happiness on the relationship between immersion and behavioral intention of wildlife park tourists.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Immersion and Behavioral Intention

With the rise of experience economy, tourism research has paid much attention to travel experience (De Souza et al., 2020). Recent scholars have discussed immersion as a vital factor to increase the memorable travel experience among tourists (Kim & Chen, 2019). Immersive travel experience is the physical and mental connectedness to a tourism destination or an activity (Pine et al.,1999, p.31) and it has been discussed widely focusing on immersion in tourism experiences.

Exploring the immersive travel experience within the tourism field has involved investigating different forms of behavioral intentions; individual's expressed likelihood of engaging in a particular behavior (Oliver, 1997), such as visit intention (Lee et al., 2020), return intention (Wei et al., 2022), attachment (Atzeni et al., 2022), and word-of-mouth (Amatulli et al., 2021) as it is an important tourism research direction (De Souza et al., 2020). The impact of immersion on customers' purchase intentions can be observed through two primary mechanisms. Firstly, the immersive experience plays a crucial role in shaping consumers' attitudes, consequently enhancing their inclination to visit (Hsu et al., 2012). Studies have indicated that immersive experiences have the potential to amplify the perceived social value that users derive from their interactions with others (Fang et al., 2018). According to Goethe (2019), immersion encompasses a range of elements such as narratives, storytelling, challenges, social factors, and player narratives. These components collectively contribute to the creation of an immersive experience that can evoke emotional responses. According to the above proclamation, the below hypothesis was derived,

H1: Immersion has a significant impact on Behavioral Intention

Happiness and Behavioral Intention

Happiness is considered as a positive emotional feeling (Haji et al., 2021) and defined as the positive effect of the state of contentment and well-being, that characterized by the sense of joy (Forgeard et al., 2011). Studies have shown that happiness significantly affects behavioral intention (Wu et al., 2017) and people tend to continue participating in activities that make them happy when they desire continuous happiness (Peng et al., 2023).

To ensure happiness, internal psychological individual processes need to be altered to facilitate the change of behavior (Binnawas et al., 2019) and tourists who seek psychological well-being are more willing to continue participating in activities that promote mental well-being (Lin, 2014).

Yet, the relationship between happiness and behavioral intention remains an area in need of further research within the hospitality and tourism literature (Lee et al., 2018; Loureiro et al., 2019). With the empirical underpinnings, the below hypothesis was proposed,

H2: Happiness has a significant impact on Behavioral Intention

Immersion and Happiness

Immersion plays a crucial role in determining tourists' overall happiness with their travel experiences. When tourists are fully immersed, they tend to find the experiences more enjoyable and fulfilling (Li et al., 2023). This deep engagement can lead to heightened emotional responses, such as joy and excitement (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015).

Immersive experiences lead to positive emotional responses, increasing tourists' happiness and happiness mediates the effect of immersion on behavioral intention. Thus, immersive experiences enhance tourists' happiness by providing engaging and enjoyable activities, which in turn influence their behavioral intentions (Li, et al., 2023).

Further, immersion is an important factor influencing the affective and cognitive process of tourism experiences (Makransky and Petersen, 2021) and happiness could act as a mediator between the stimuli factor and affective response. Happiness is related to affective processes, however, the relationship between immersion and affective variables was seldom tested in the tourism context (Liu et al., 2022). With the empirical underpinnings, the below hypotheses were proposed,

H3: Immersion has a significant impact on Happiness

H4: Happiness mediates the relationship between Immersion and Behavioral Intention

A review of the existing literature showed that immersive travel experiences have primarily been studied in tourism settings or destinations utilizing virtual reality technologies (Bec et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2020). However, since most current tourism destinations do not incorporate virtual reality technologies, there is a clear gap in understanding tourists' immersive experiences in general tourism settings or destinations (Li et al., 2023). Therefore, addressing the gaps in the literature, current study investigates travel behavioral intention of Gen Z by focusing on immersion and happiness in wildlife tourism.

Conceptual Framework

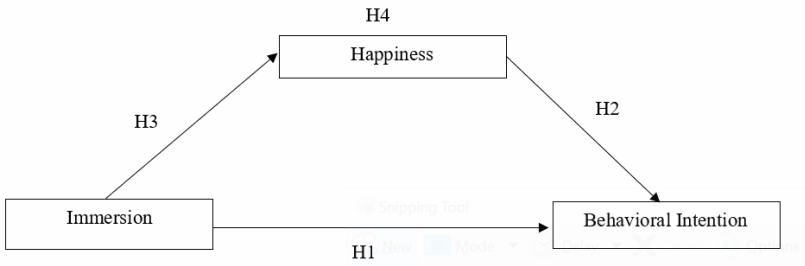

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
Source: Author Developed

Methodology

Sampling and Data Collection

The study employed a deductive approach, and the study population was domestic Gen Z tourists who had travel experiences in Wildlife National Parks in Sri Lanka. Based on the 10-times rule outlined by Hair et al., (2017), the minimum required sample size was determined. This rule specifies that the sample size should be at least ten times the largest number of structural paths directed at any single latent construct within the structural model. Accordingly, minimum sample size was set at 40, as the largest number of structural paths were driving towards BI which was four (IM → BI, HA→ BI, IM → HA, and IM → HA → BI). A filter question (Have you visited a wildlife national park in Sri Lanka?) was asked to identify the qualified participants for this research and purposive sampling strategy (Chan & Baum, 2007) was used to collect data from Gen Z tourists who had wildlife tourism experiences. Considering financial limitations and the difficulty of reaching participants in remote areas and, to obtain data from a relatively large sample, this study utilized a self-administered online survey approach as an appropriate data collection method (Lu, Gursoy & Chiappa, 2014).

Measurement

Scales which had been validated in the literature were used to ensure the validity and reliability of the study measurements. Measures of Behavioral Intention (4 items), Immersion (5 items), and Happiness (5 items) were adapted from a previous study (Li et al., 2023) (See Table I). All variables were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). The variables were then further tested through a pilot study using 50 responses, to ensure that the wording of the questionnaire was clear, and to evaluate the quality of the content and the reliability of the measures. 282 valid questionnaires were retained for data analysis.

Table 1
Measurement Items

Constructs	Measurement items	Reference source
Immersion (IM)	I was absorbed in my travel experience I could ignore most other distractions It was hard to get my attention diverted I didn't notice time passing and felt that time flies I was completely lost in my thought	(Li et al., 2023)
Happiness (HA)	The travel experience was very meaningful The experience contributed very much to happiness in my life I am generally very satisfied with my life I can think about what a happy life I have Can consider myself very happy	(Li et al., 2023)
Behavioral Intention (BI)	I will share this travel experience with others I will recommend this place to others I will encourage my relatives and friends to travel to this place In my next vacation, I hope to visit this place again	(Li et al., 2023)

Source: Survey Data, 2024

Analysis and Results

The data were analyzed using SPSS 28 and SmartPLS 4 softwares. First, the demographic characteristics (See Table II) and the common method bias of the data were tested using SPSS 28. Next, the two-step approach; (1) measurement model assessment for validation and, (2) structural model assessment for hypothesis testing using partial least structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM was conducted as it is characterized as a causal-predictive approach to SEM, emphasizing prediction in the estimation of statistical models (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 2
Demographic Profile of the Sample

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	158	56
Male	124	44
Age		
20-26	147	52
Above 26	36	13
Below 20	99	35
Education		
Graduates	134	48
Other	28	10

Postgraduate	10	4
Secondary	110	39
Employment		
Employed	96	34
Other	46	16
Self employed	122	43
Student	18	6
Unemployed	96	34

Source: Survey Data, 2024

Common Method Bias (CMB) and Normality

The length of the questionnaire items, implicit social desirability in questionnaire responses can result in CMB. To verify whether the model is free of CMB, Variation Inflation Factor (VIF) values in the inner model were considered. All VIF values were below 3.3 (IMS -> HP = 1; IMS -> BI = 1.383; HP -> BI = 1.383), indicating that the model is free of CMB (Kock, 2015). Further, Kurtosis and Skewness values were examined for normality. A normal distribution was confirmed as the values were within the range of –2 to +2 (Hair et al., 2022) (See Table 3).

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model of the present study was determined as a reflective model, given that the model exhibits the characteristics of a reflective model: a construct is a trait explaining the indicators rather than a combination of the indicators, and the indicators associated with the constructs are highly correlated with each other (Hair et al., 2017).

First, the internal consistency reliability of the model was tested using indicator loadings, Cronbach alpha values and composite reliability of each variable. The results confirmed the internal consistency reliability of the model as indicator loadings exceeded the threshold level of 0.5 and Cronbach alpha values were above the threshold value of 0.7. Further, Composite reliability (rho_c) of the present study was above 0.7 confirming the composite reliability of the model (Hair et al., 2017) (See Table 3).

Next, convergent validity was examined using Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values. All AVE values were above the required minimum level of 0.50 establishing the convergent validity of the model (See Table III). Further, discriminant validity was tested based on Fornell-Larcker criterion, and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT). In Fornell-Larcker criterion, square roots of all constructs' AVE values were higher than the highest correlations they had with any other constructs (See Table IV) and, all HTMT values were less than the threshold of 0.85 establishing the discriminant validity of the model (Hair et al., 2017) (See Table 4).

Table 3

Results of the Measurement Model

Table 3
Discriminant Validity (HTMT Ratio)

Name	SK	KU	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
IMS_1	-0.765	0.792	0.803	0.863	0.56
IMS_2	-0.533	-0.274			
IMS_3	-0.374	-0.243			
IMS_4	-0.628	-0.165			
IMS_5	-0.274	-0.394			
HP_1	-1.086	1.649	0.911	0.933	0.734
HP_2	-1.024	1.516			
HP_3	-0.631	0.402			
HP_4	-0.845	0.644			
HP_5	-0.793	0.925			
BI_1	-0.979	1.39	0.903	0.933	0.778
BI_2	-1.036	1.275			
BI_3	-0.841	0.811			
BI_4	-0.18	0.009			

Notes: FL = Factor Loadings; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; SK = Skewness; and KU=Kurtosis values
Source: Survey Data, 2024

Table 4
Discriminant Validity (Fornell Larcker Criterian)

Construct	BI	HP	IMS
BI	0.882		
HP	0.746	0.857	
IMS	0.569	0.526	0.748

Source: Survey Data, 2024

Table 5
Discriminant Validity (HTMT Ratio)

Construct	BI	HP	IMS
BI			
HP	0.805		
IMS	0.658	0.583	

Source: Survey Data, 2024

Structural Model

After confirming the validity and reliability of the model, the hypothesized structural model was tested. As exhibited in figure II, results supported the impact of Immersion on Behavioral Intention at a significant level of 0.05 (Hair et al, 2017). Consequently, Behavioral Intention was positively affected by Happiness and Happiness was positively affected by Immersion. Hence, H1, H2 and H3 were supported (See Table 6).

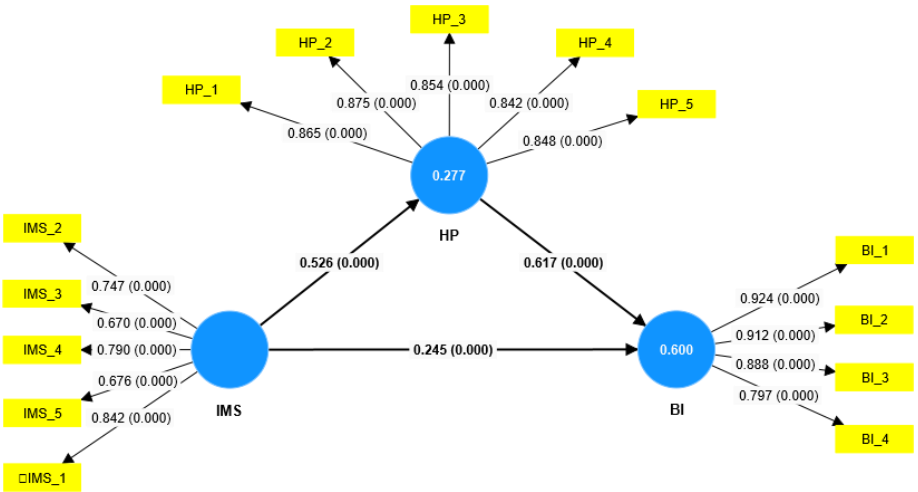

Figure 2: Structural Model
Source: Survey Data

Table 6
Results of the Hypothesized Paths

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficient (β)	T statistics	P values	Result
H1	IMS -> BI	0.245	4.657	0	Supported
H2	HP -> BI	0.617	11.509	0	Supported
H3	IMS -> HP	0.526	8.509	0	Supported

Source: Survey Data, 2024

Mediating Effect

Next, mediation analysis was conducted to reveal whether happiness mediates the relationship between Immersion and Behavioral Intention. As presented in table VII, Immersion exerted a significant influence on Behavioral Intention through Happiness supporting H4. Since both direct and indirect effects were accepted, a partial mediation was identified (Hair et al., 2017). Further, all path coefficient values were positive confirming a complementary partial mediation.

Table 7
Mediation Analysis

Hypothesis	Effect	Path	Path Coefficient (β)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values	Result
H4	**Specific Indirect**	IMS -> HP -> BI	0.325	7.407	0	Supported
H1	Direct Effect	IMS -> BI	0.245	4.657	0	Supported
	Total Indirect Effect	IMS -> BI	0.325	7.407	0	
	Total Effect	IMS -> BI	0.569	9.481	0	

Source: Survey Data, 2024

Given the sample size, R2 of variance explained for Behavioral Intention (60%) and Happiness (27.7%) were worked out as predictive power for testing the accuracy of the structural framework. (Figure 2).

Implications

The findings of this research emphasize the critical role of immersion in enhancing tourist happiness and behavioral intention, providing valuable insights for practitioners in the tourism industry. To maximize the impact of immersion, tourism managers should design and deliver experiences that fully engage tourists, such as interactive activities, personalized services, and culturally authentic encounters. These efforts can create a deeper emotional connection, enhancing happiness and increasing the likelihood of revisits and positive word-of-mouth promotion.

Moreover, the mediating role of happiness highlights the need for managers to prioritize creating joyful and memorable experiences. Training staff to exhibit emotional intelligence, ensuring service quality, and fostering a welcoming environment can significantly contribute to tourists' happiness. Additionally, investing in technologies such as virtual and augmented reality can amplify the sense of immersion, offering tourists a unique and enriched experience that fosters behavioral intention.

Further, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on tourist behavior by explaining the mechanisms through which immersion impacts behavioral intention. Specifically, the identification of happiness as a mediator expands theoretical understanding by showcasing its pivotal role in linking immersion to behavioral outcomes. By focusing on the mediating effect of happiness, this study highlights the importance of examining emotional and psychological factors in understanding tourist behavior, encouraging scholars to explore other potential mediators or moderators in various cultural and demographic contexts.

Conclusion

This research examined how Immersion influences tourist Behavioral Intention via happiness. Results revealed that Immersion positively impacts Happiness and Behavioral

Intention which agrees with prior studies (Li et al., 2023). Moreover, results posited that the Immersion determines tourist happiness, which, in turn, leads to Behavioral Intention agreeing to prior studies (Li et al., 2023).

These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the travel behavior of Gen Z tourists and highlight the pivotal role of emotional satisfaction in shaping their travel decisions and help destinations to diversify the tourism products for new and emerging market opportunities through value additions.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study recruited participants only from Sri Lankan context which may cause limitations in generalizing the findings to other contexts. Hence, comparative analysis could be employed to gain a comprehensive understanding the consumer behavior in different contexts.

Future research should continue to explore the complex interplay between immersion, emotional responses, and behavioral intentions by investigating other potential mediators and moderators, such as demographic factors, personality traits, and artificial intelligence in immersive experiences. Additionally, longitudinal studies would be beneficial to understand the long-term effects of immersion on behavioral intentions. Future research could use this model to examine tourist consumer behavior in other forms of tourism. Furthermore, the model could be applied to understand the tourist consumer behavior of generation Alpha as limited studies have been conducted.

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