

Generational Differences in Customer Engagement: Millennials vs. Gen Z in Travel Booking

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Abstract

The emergence of the digital world and social media has altered the relationship of the consumers with the travel brands and rather to the young generations. The study is guided by describing the generational gap between the Millennials and the Gen z in the aspect of the online reservation of the travel. The paper analyzes the difference between the motivations, preferences and brand interactivity of such cohorts, based on the consumer behavior and digital interaction theories. A mixed-method research design was used, survey participants (n=400, survey) and qualitative interviews with regular flyers were analyzed and respondents (n=400) were intended to identify the behavior trends across digital touchpoints in terms of engagement. The findings indicate that Millennials will find pleasant experiences more convenient, boost loyalty to rewards and tailored messages to contact travel platforms. They would be particularly concerned with their contact, which is far less than the trust and reliability of the brand and which can be referred to as pragmatic in terms of online shopping. The younger Gen Z travelers are more authentic, peer-connected and better versed with online communication on the content of the influencers and user reviews. The interaction determinants dictating the Gen Z interaction are the values of social media interactivity, sustainability and instant gratification. The second factor, which is also of interest to the study, is that the two cohorts are respectively about to go digital, yet Gen Z have a worse attention span and are highly sensitive to the aesthetics and transparency of the internet. Travel marketers and online booking organizations are victims with strategic implications of this type of generational difference. Companies are to use varying strategies when addressing the Millennials and the Gen Z generations as they must be more personal and loyal when dealing with the former generation and utilize creativity, authenticity and ethical branding when dealing with the latter generation. The insights into such a dynamic digital behavior will enable the travel brands to establish closer customer relationships and will result in better engagement results in the online marketplace that is becoming more competitive.

Keywords: Generational differences, customer engagement, Millennials, Gen Z, travel booking, digital marketing, consumer behavior.

Introduction

The digital technology has experienced a rapid pace and thus has changed the planning, booking and the experience of the travel by the consumers. The millennials and the generation z are some of the most powerful consumer groups that are driving this change. Technology-sensitive, socially oriented and experience based are the other believes that are unique to the two generations, yet they have distinct behaviors in terms of interaction with the travel platforms and brands. These generational differences have become a matter of concern that tourism marketers and service providers should be aware of because they embark on formulating

effective engagement strategies amid the ever competitive and technology driven market.

Online booking systems and social media became a revolution in the planning of travelling, and the Millennials are the first generation of individuals to start using it. Convenience, value and personalization are some of the factors that motivate their interaction. On the other hand, the generation Z (animated to be 1997-2012) have been completely digital and would prefer untroubled mobile experiences, immediate communication, and authenticity in brand interactions. The generation in the present day is highly concerned with the issue of sustainability, inclusivity and social responsibility that has a significant influence in their destination decisions and the brand they choose to believe in.

Despite the fact that the two generations are highly affined to the digital technology, the reason behind their use of the mediums of travel; the trust relationship and preference of communication are different. These differences will be analyzed to be valuable to the analysis of the emerging consumer behavior and the future of travel marketing. This paper will discuss the online travel agencies, social media influencers, and online loyalty programs used by the Millennials and Gen Z. Attitude comparison will enable the study to identify significant drivers of engagement, behavior, and expectation analysis, which may be applied to generate certain marketing strategies, customer experience, and brand associations in the travel business.

Background of the study

With the introduction of digital technologies, the process of organizing the travel experience and booking has radically changed the way consumers organize their journey and book the tour. The development of online travel agencies, mobile apps and the social media has transformed a one-way communication to a two way communication and a personalized customer interaction as compared to a transactional one. In this digital ecosystem, the generations cohorts and in particular the Millennials and the Generation z have taken over as the driving force that influences the travel and tourism industry. The two generations are highly technological, social and value-oriented with a difference in their behaviors, motivations, and expectations to travel brands and platforms.

The millennials who are typically defined as individuals born in 1981-1996 have experienced the life of traditional media to digital and are more likely to appreciate experiences, authenticity and brand loyalty generated by trust and personalization. They usually use peer reviews, blogs, and online communities in order to make a sound decision in travelling. Generation Z on the other hand, those born after 1997 and 2012, are digital natives, having grown up in a world of smartphones, social media, and instant access to information. They value convenience, speed and real-time interactions and often prefer visual and interactive content on travel brands in the form of short videos, influencer partnerships, and user-created content.

The development of the digital platforms has rendered the awareness of these generation characteristics to be paramount to the travel and hospitality industry. With the growing competition and development of technologies, companies have to change their marketing and communication efforts and adjust them to the preferences and decision-making habit of each generation. Indicatively, social media trends, sustainability communications, and immersive digital experiences, though Survivor Gen Z travelers are likely to react well to loyalty programs and email marketing, are expected to respond favorably to Millennials.

Although there is increased awareness on these generational differences, empirical studies on the differences in specific contexts of Millennials and Gen Z in terms of customer engagement in the travel booking contexts are limited. A majority of the studies that have been conducted so far either cover a broad overview of digital consumer behavior or study isolated generational groups. This gap has led to the necessity of a comparative study that is capable of enlightening travel companies, tourism marketers, and online platforms regarding the effective engagement strategies that apply to every generation.

Thus, the proposed research intends to explore the customer interaction between the Millennials

and Generation Z in travel booking, focusing on generational aspects. The aim of this research is to present the insights that can assist travel and hospitality companies in the growing competitive digital environment to improve customer experience, retention, and brand-consumer relationship.

Justification

The high pace of digital technologies development and the emergence of social media considerably changed the manner in which consumers interact with brands, especially in the travel and tourism industry. Millennials (born 1981-1996) and Generation Z (born 1997-2012) are some of the most significant consumer groups in the change. The two groups are digital natives, social and experience-oriented but their motivation, preferences, and patterns of engagement are very different. Such differences are essential to travel companies that desire to build personalized marketing campaigns, to build superior customer experiences. The rationale behind this study is that the two groups of generations are becoming more economically significant in regards to the consumption of world travel. Millennials were the first to use online booking, review systems and peer recommendations but it is the mobile-first, social media-focused decision environments of the Gen Z consumers. As a result, the engagement approaches working well with the Millennials may fail to apply to the Gen z travelers who seek authentic, sustainable and immediate communication with the brand. It is likely that these behavioral subtleties can be comprehended to keep the tourism provider, the travel agencies, and hospitality brands afloat in a fast-digitalizing market. In addition, there is a paucity of academic literature discussing the difference in generations in customer interactions with regard to the travel booking behaviour. Despite the studies carried out on the topic of digital marketing and generational consumer behavior, they still miss the dimension of comparing the difference between emotion, cognitive, and behavioral engagement dimension of Millennials and gen Z when they are online and using travel platforms and branding platforms. This gap in the research will be filled because the research will contribute both theoretical and managerial aspects of marketing and tourism research. And last but not the least, the research results will definitely have an influence on the strategic decision making in the marketing of the tourism. The generational engagement tendencies can once again be re-used to create a more detailed communication campaign, user experience (UX) and loyalty programs. The generational psychology and marketing approach reconciliation will help in enhancing the improved and sustainable, customer-oriented business models within the changing travel economy.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the differences in customer engagement behaviors between Millennials and Generation Z in the context of online travel booking platforms.
2. To identify the key factors influencing engagement levels—such as trust, personalization, social media influence, and digital convenience—across both generational cohorts.
3. To analyze how technological familiarity, digital literacy, and content preferences shape the booking decisions of Millennials and Gen Z travelers.
4. To explore the role of social media, influencer marketing, and peer reviews in driving customer engagement and brand loyalty within the two generations.
5. To evaluate generational differences in perceptions of value, price sensitivity, and sustainability when choosing travel experiences.

Literature Review

Scholars and industry researchers increasingly treat Millennials and Generation Z as distinct travel cohorts with overlapping but importantly different patterns of information search,

booking channel choice, motivational drivers, and post-purchase engagement (e.g., Ketter, 2021; European Travel Commission [ETC], 2020). Understanding these differences is central to modelling contemporary customer engagement in travel booking, because platform design, marketing, and loyalty programs interact with generational tastes to shape booking outcomes (Phocuswright, 2021; Arrivia, 2025).

Information search and decision channels

A consistent finding is generational variation in where travelers begin and how they evaluate options. Millennials continue to use a mix of online travel agencies (OTAs), review sites, and search engines, balancing price and convenience (Ketter, 2021). Gen Z, by contrast, demonstrates a stronger tendency to start with social media and influencer content as discovery channels; social platforms frequently substitute for traditional search and exert strong framing effects on destination choice (Pricope & Vancia, 2023; Phocuswright, 2021). Empirical work shows that user-generated content and peer recommendations hold greater persuasive power for younger travelers—Gen Z especially—who rely on short-form visual content when making quick booking judgments (Armutçu, 2023; ETC, 2020).

Booking platforms, mobile use, and friction

Mobile-first booking is more characteristic of Gen Z than Millennials: studies and industry reports document higher mobile conversion intent among Gen Z and greater willingness to complete full transactions within apps or social platforms (Booking.com, 2025; Phocuswright, 2021). Millennials still value multi-channel options (desktop + mobile + phone) and are more likely to compare prices across OTAs and aggregator sites (Ketter, 2021). This difference matters for engagement metrics (time-on-site, bounce, conversion rates) and suggests distinct UX design priorities—minimal friction and one-click flows for Gen Z; transparent comparison tools and loyalty information for Millennials.

Motivations and experience preferences

Both generations prize experiences, but emphases differ. Millennials historically were associated with “experience economy” spending—prioritizing authenticity, local immersion, and value for money—whereas Gen Z places greater emphasis on novelty, shareability, and social value (Pricope & Vancia, 2023; Seyfi, 2024). Gen Z travelers often factor content creation and social signaling into trip choices, selecting sites and accommodations with high visual appeal and “Instagrammability” (Phocuswright, 2021). Environmental and ethical concerns are increasingly salient for Gen Z; recent studies report stronger pro-environmental travel intentions among younger cohorts, which can mediate booking choices (Ribeiro et al., 2023).

Loyalty, personalization, and rewards

Loyalty program engagement differs: Millennials are more likely to value traditional points-based schemes and predictable benefits, while Gen Z responds to flexible, experiential, and curated rewards (Arrivia, 2025). Personalization is important for both cohorts, but the form differs: Millennials appreciate contextual, utility-driven personalization (relevant deals, trip bundles), whereas Gen Z values personalized discovery (curated itineraries, influencer-led bundles) and expects brands to anticipate preferences through data-driven recommendations (Booking.com, 2025; Ketter, 2021). This shapes engagement strategies—targeted email and search retargeting are effective with Millennials, while algorithmic in-app suggestions and social integrations may better engage Gen Z.

Trust, privacy, and perceived risk

Trust and perceived risk play central roles in conversion. Millennials demonstrate moderate privacy concerns balanced against convenience; they often trade some privacy for tangible

benefits (Ketter, 2021). Gen Z expresses paradoxical behavior: high awareness of data risks but continued high engagement with platforms that provide immediate value, coupled with selective trust in micro-influencers and peer reviews rather than institutions (Pricope & Vancia, 2023; Armutçu, 2023). These patterns imply that transparency about data use and visible social proof are strong engagement levers for younger consumers.

Methodological patterns and limitations

The literature combines large commercial surveys (Phocuswright; Booking.com; Arrivia) with academic survey and observational studies (Ketter, 2021; Armutçu, 2023; McKercher, 2023). A recurring methodological issue is conflating age effects with cohort effects: McKercher (2023) argues that observed differences sometimes reflect life-stage rather than deep cohort dispositions, suggesting longitudinal designs or age-period-cohort analyses are needed. Many industry reports are cross-sectional and proprietary, limiting generalizability.

Gaps and future directions

Key gaps remain. First, longitudinal evidence tracking how Millennial preferences evolve as they age (and as Gen Z matures) is sparse, making it hard to separate cohort from lifecycle effects (McKercher, 2023). Second, much work privileges high-income markets (US, Western Europe); comparative studies in emerging markets are needed since Gen Z's digital behaviors vary by infrastructure and culture (ETC, 2020). Third, there is limited causal evidence on how specific platform features (e.g., social booking widgets, micro-influencer endorsements) change booking behavior across generations; experimental and field-trial methods would strengthen causal claims. Finally, richer mixed-methods studies that combine clickstream analytics with qualitative interviews can unpack the motivations behind observable engagement patterns.

Material and Methodology

Research Design:

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design aimed at examining the differences in customer engagement behavior between Millennial and Generation Z travelers during the online travel booking process. The design allows for statistical comparison between the two cohorts, focusing on factors such as engagement frequency, platform preference, decision-making patterns, and satisfaction levels. The study also incorporates limited qualitative insights from open-ended responses to better interpret attitudinal differences and contextualize quantitative findings.

Data Collection Methods:

Primary data were collected using a structured online questionnaire distributed via social media platforms (Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook travel groups) and travel-related online communities. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions measuring engagement dimensions such as interactivity, trust, brand loyalty, social media influence, and booking frequency.

A pilot survey involving 30 respondents was conducted to test reliability and validity before full deployment. The finalized survey was administered to a larger sample of 400 participants (200 Millennials aged 27–42 and 200 Gen Z individuals aged 18–26). Secondary data from industry reports, academic journals, and travel analytics databases (e.g., Statista, Skift Research) were used to supplement and validate primary findings. Data analysis was performed using SPSS 28.0 and Microsoft Excel, employing descriptive statistics, t-tests, and regression analysis to identify significant generational differences in engagement behavior.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:

Inclusion Criteria:

- Respondents must belong to either the Millennial (born 1983–1998) or Gen Z (born 1999–2010) age groups.
- Participants must have booked at least one travel service (flight, hotel, or tour) **online** in the past 12 months.
- Only respondents with access to digital travel booking platforms and social media accounts were included.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Individuals outside the defined age brackets.
- Respondents who rely exclusively on offline or travel-agent-based booking systems.
- Incomplete or inconsistent survey responses were excluded from the final dataset.

Ethical Considerations:

The research adhered strictly to ethical guidelines for human subjects research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to survey participation, clearly stating the purpose, voluntary nature, and anonymity of the study. No personal identifiers were collected, and data confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. Participants were given the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. The study received ethical clearance from the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), ensuring compliance with standards for privacy, transparency, and responsible data handling.

Results and Discussion

1. Overview of Findings:

The study explored how Millennials (born 1981–1996) and Generation Z (born 1997–2012) differ in their customer engagement behavior during online travel booking. Engagement was examined through five key dimensions: information search behavior, platform preference, social media influence, personalization expectations, and purchase confidence.

2. Descriptive Statistics:

Table 1 presents the mean scores (on a 5-point Likert scale) for each engagement dimension by generation.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Customer Engagement Dimensions

Engagement Dimension	Millennials (n=200)	Gen Z (n=200)	Mean Difference	t-value	p-value
Information Search Intensity	3.84	4.27	0.43	4.12	0.000***
Platform Preference (Mobile)	3.56	4.51	0.95	8.34	0.000***
Social Media Influence	3.22	4.36	1.14	9.01	0.000***
Personalization Expectation	4.12	4.48	0.36	3.17	0.002**
Purchase Confidence	4.05	3.68	-0.37	-2.94	0.004**

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

3. Interpretation of Results:

3.1. Digital Behaviour and Platform Use

Gen Z exhibited significantly higher engagement with mobile-based travel booking platforms (M = 4.51) than Millennials (M = 3.56). This supports the hypothesis that Gen Z travelers are

more mobile-first and rely heavily on apps such as Airbnb, Expedia, and Hopper. The preference reflects Gen Z’s expectation for fast, visual, and integrated digital experiences. Millennials, although digitally savvy, often reported using desktop or hybrid devices for complex travel planning, suggesting a preference for control and detailed comparison before purchase.

3.2. Influence of Social Media:

Gen Z scored markedly higher on social media influence (M = 4.36) than Millennials (M = 3.22). This result indicates that social media — particularly TikTok and Instagram — functions as both an inspiration and validation source for Gen Z travelers. Millennials tend to rely more on online reviews and travel blogs rather than influencers.

These findings align with previous studies (e.g., Wang & Sparks, 2022), which emphasize Gen Z’s stronger peer validation and visual storytelling orientation in travel decision-making.

3.3. Personalization and Engagement:

Both generations valued personalized offers, but Gen Z demonstrated slightly greater expectations (M = 4.48). This reflects their experience with algorithmic curation on digital platforms. Millennials’ slightly lower score suggests they value practical personalization — loyalty-based recommendations and reward programs — rather than dynamic content customization.

3.4. Purchase Confidence and Decision Style:

Interestingly, Millennials reported higher purchase confidence (M = 4.05) compared to Gen Z (M = 3.68). While Gen Z engages more frequently, they exhibit decision fatigue due to information overload and algorithmic suggestions. Millennials, with greater purchasing experience, tend to evaluate fewer options but make decisions faster.

4. Hypothesis Testing Summary:

Table 2 summarizes hypothesis testing results for the five proposed relationships.

Table 2. Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Statement	Result	Supported
H1	Gen Z demonstrates higher digital platform engagement than Millennials.	t = 8.34, p < .001	✔ Supported
H2	Social media exerts stronger influence on Gen Z’s travel booking decisions.	t = 9.01, p < .001	✔ Supported
H3	Gen Z exhibits greater personalization expectations than Millennials.	t = 3.17, p = .002	✔ Supported
H4	Millennials show higher purchase confidence than Gen Z.	t = -2.94, p = .004	✔ Supported
H5	There is no significant difference in information search intensity. (rejected)	t = 4.12, p < .001	✘ Rejected

5. Discussion and Implications:

The findings demonstrate that Gen Z’s customer engagement in travel booking is characterized by mobility, social influence, and digital immediacy, while Millennials exhibit more deliberate, loyalty-based engagement.

- **For travel companies:** Enhancing mobile UX, integrating social commerce, and

providing AI-driven personalization will appeal to Gen Z.

- **For Millennials:** Loyalty programs, transparent pricing, and in-depth trip customization remain key drivers.
- **For marketers:** Influencer collaborations, user-generated travel content, and ethical marketing will help bridge both groups.

In essence, engagement strategies must balance experiential storytelling with informational reliability, catering to the emotional immediacy of Gen Z and the pragmatic trust of Millennials.

This comparative analysis reveals that generational differences are not only behavioural but also psychological and value-based. While Gen Z is redefining engagement through mobile-first and social media-centric habits, Millennials continue to prioritize confidence, authenticity, and value consistency in their travel booking experiences.

Limitations of the study

While this study provides valuable insights into the differences in travel booking behaviors and customer engagement patterns between Millennials and Gen Z, several limitations should be acknowledged.

1. **Sample Size and Representativeness:** The research is based on a concrete sample which is not the most accurate one as it does not represent the whole population of Millennials and Gen Z customers in the whole world. This restricts the extrapolation of the results to other regions, cultures or socio-economic groups.
2. **Self-Reported Data:** The primary data were collected using surveys and questionnaires that were based on self-reporting by the participants. It can give biased responses like social desirability or difficult recall of previous traveling patterns.
3. **Cross-Sectional Design:** The study is carried out in the form of cross-sectional research, where the engagement behaviors are observed at a single point in time. It therefore fails to consider any possible shifts in preferences or behavior across a period of time, which may be affected by a shift in the trends of travel or externalities, e.g. economic conditions or technological advances.
4. **Narrow Definitive Areas of Customer Engagement Measures:** The metrics of customer engagement were taken using select behavioral and attitudinal measures, and they might not capture other valuable dimensions of customer engagement, including emotional loyalty, post-purchase advocacy, or indirect word of mouth, which also might vary between generations.
5. **Platform-Specific Bias:** It will concentrate on the mainstream online travel booking websites and might not be a comprehensive representation of the offlines travel booking behavior and niche websites that some consumer groups may prefer.
6. **Cultural and Regional Differences:** The variation in engagement behavior can be conditioned by the cultural norms, the local tourism infrastructure or the products of regional marketing. The findings might not be applicable across all geographic differences since the sample of the study might not be all-inclusive.
7. **Fast-Changing Technology and Trends:** The travel and digital engagement practice changes very fast. The findings of the study are likely to lose relevancy due to the arrival of new technologies of booking, mobile apps, or preferences of different generations.

Future Scope

The analysis of the generational gap in customer engagement in the travel booking sector offers a list of research opportunities in the future. Firstly, as the paper at hand is predominantly devoted to the Millennials and Gen z, in the future, it can be expanded to include other generations such as Gen X and Baby Boomers so that the study could obtain a deeper

understanding of the cross-generationality of behaviours when travelling. Second, the technological revolution is rapid, so new digital operational technologies such as AI travel bots, VR tours, blockchain-based reservation systems, and others can significantly influence the dynamics of customer interaction. More study would be done on how these technological advances affect the engagement and loyalty rates of the generational groups differently. Third, influencer marketing and use of social media keep getting popular particularly among younger tourists. The possible effects that the platform-specific engagement strategies i.e., the Tik Tok campaigns or Instagram storytelling will have on the decision to book and brand perceptions can be beneficial to contemplate in the future. The other area that will be undertaken is the cultural and regional differences. The comparisons made by the countries or regions would be a marker of correlations between the cultural expectations, economic standards, and domestic travel infrastructure and generational preferences to determine what the engagement behaviours are. Lastly, the circumstances of the post-pandemic patterns of travelling, sustainability, and experiential tourism offer a lot of potential avenues to explore in the future. The perception of health, safety, eco-friendly, and experience in real life of Millennials and Gen Z can assist the travel service provider to develop some engagement programs and loyalty schemes in the long-term. As such areas are being researched, future studies will be better placed to reveal more on how new generations act, what approaches in marketing and service innovations will be enlightened, and finally what is the best way as far as customer engagement in travelling market is involved.

Conclusion

The results of the present study provide significant differences between Millennials and Generation Z regarding the process of booking a travel consultancy and contact with the customers. The tendency towards well-developed brands and decision-making process is noted by the loyalty to brands, product based on experience, and better knowledge of the millennials. Gen Z, conversely, is more concerned with convenience and customization and social media-based inspiration as the measure of more liquid and digitally mediated engagement strategies. These intergenerational differences demonstrate that travel service providers require more segmentation in their marketing that necessitates technology, as well as, data analytics to streamline communication, offers and booking experience. To a larger extent, this angle of these variations is critical in generating long-term relationships with customers and keeping in pace with the highly digitalized and experience-based travel market. The companies can maximize the satisfaction, engagement and create the loyalty by making sure that services and expectations are aligned and behavioural patterns of the individual generations are taken into account. Lastly, according to what it is established in the study, the generational wisdom may be implemented not only in the development of marketing strategies, but also in the development of the traveling experiences that will become tuned to the evolving needs of customers.

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