
GREEN MARKETING AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM RURAL DEVELOPMENT ON THE EXAMPLE OF MOUNT GOLIJAJ PERCEPTIONS AND ATITUDES OF GENERATION Z

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of green marketing in promoting sustainable rural tourism on Mount Golija, with a particular focus on the perceptions and attitudes of Generation Z. The research was conducted through an online survey on a sample of 256 respondents aged 18 to 32, aiming to examine their level of environmental awareness, values, and behavioral intentions within the context of sustainable rural tourism in protected natural areas. The analysis revealed that environmental awareness and the perception of destination responsibility have a significant positive impact on the intention to visit Golija. At the same time, a noticeable gap was identified between the respondents' declared ecological values and their actual behavior, highlighting the need for a more consistent and transparent approach to communicating sustainable practices in rural tourism destinations. The results suggest that the long-term success of sustainable rural tourism development depends on authentic communication and the active involvement of Generation Z in initiatives that connect local communities, environmental protection, and tourism development.

Introduction

Contemporary tourism trends increasingly emphasize the importance of sustainability and social responsibility in destination development, particularly in rural tourism contexts. In this regard, green marketing has become a key instrument through which

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tourism organizations communicate environmental values, promote sustainable practices, and encourage conscious tourist behavior. Mount Golija, as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, represents a unique example of a rural natural area that combines rich biodiversity with the potential for sustainable rural tourism development. However, the success of such a development model depends on the integration of ecological principles with modern marketing and project management approaches.

A special role in this process belongs to Generation Z, a demographic group shaping new patterns of tourist behavior. Their expectations from destinations include authenticity, digital connectivity, and environmental responsibility. Therefore, the research conducted in this study aims to examine the perceptions, attitudes, and willingness of Generation Z members to support and participate in sustainable rural tourism on Mount Golija, as well as to identify the key factors influencing their intention to visit and support environmentally responsible practices.

Literature Review

Sustainable tourism is often viewed as a strategic framework aimed at harmonizing three key pillars, economy, ecology, and society, through careful planning, community participation, and continuous monitoring. The development of rural tourism in Serbia has proven to be a sustainable alternative that encourages local economic growth, supports the revitalization of natural and cultural areas, and reflects the growing interest of tourists in authentic, nature based experiences (Andrei et al., 2015; Radanov & Lešević, 2020; Paraušić et al., 2025; Zdravković & Peković, 2020). While the theoretical foundation of sustainable tourism is well established, its practical implementation continues to face numerous challenges, particularly in rural and ecologically sensitive areas. Recent academic contributions have highlighted ongoing issues related to the selection of sustainability indicators, appropriate measurement tools, and the institutionalization of sustainable practices within tourism systems. The literature indicates that the development of sustainability indicators in tourism remains a priority, although their broader application frequently encounters institutional, methodological, and political barriers (Sima & Gheorghe, 2015; Miller & Torres-Delgado, 2023). According to Crabolu et al. (2024), indicators serve not only as quantitative measures but also as conceptual, instrumental, and structural tools, particularly when they are institutionalized and integrated into destination management processes such as stakeholder dialogue, policy adaptation, and governance restructuring.

The challenge of applying sustainability theory in practice lies in the tendency of destinations to adopt indicators as a pro forma exercise, without their genuine integration into management mechanisms, which often leads to symbolic implementation. In the case of rural destinations such as Golija, the application of sustainability indicators must be carefully adapted to the local context, maintaining a balance between analytical precision and operational feasibility. Punzo et al. (2022) argue that the construction of synthetic indicators integrating social, economic, and environmental dimensions enables a more accurate identification of destination strengths and weaknesses, as well

as the formulation of priority development interventions. A study conducted in the Aragon region developed a set of synthetic indicators for sustainable tourism based on a three dimensional model of environmental, social, and economic components, where individual indicators were identified, defined, and evaluated according to their frequency and relevance in previous studies (Yuedi et al., 2023).

Generation Z, as the first generation to grow up in the digital and information era, demonstrates travel behavior patterns that differ markedly from those of previous cohorts. Their identities are shaped by global social networks, digital connectivity, and heightened environmental awareness, all of which directly influence their tourism preferences. Research indicates that Generation Z places strong emphasis on authenticity, local engagement, and sustainability when choosing travel experiences, particularly in nature based and rural tourism contexts. They tend to favor destinations that promote ecological responsibility through eco friendly accommodation, organic products, and opportunities for community involvement. Empirical evidence from a study involving 615 young tourists confirms that this generation demonstrates significantly higher eco centric values and a stronger commitment to sustainable practices compared to older generations (Seyfi et al., 2025). However, a clear gap persists between declared environmental concern and actual behavior, as cost and comfort continue to play a decisive role in travel decision making (Kubíková & Rudý, 2024). This paradox highlights that strong environmental awareness does not automatically translate into behavioral change, creating space for targeted green marketing strategies that reconcile ecological values with practical considerations.

Further studies emphasize that Generation Z's digital connectivity serves as a key driver of sustainable consumption and tourism behavior. Their destination choices are largely influenced by online content, influencer recommendations, and perceptions of a destination's green image (Nowacki et al., 2023). Ma, Li, and Han (2024) found that subjective norms, perceived ecological value, and environmental awareness have a significant positive impact on Generation Z's attitudes toward low carbon transport and accommodation choices, which in turn shape their behavioral intentions in tourism. Contemporary research confirms that factors such as ecological awareness, social responsibility, and self perception strongly influence their willingness to choose sustainable destinations (Ha & Hang, 2024). Conversely, studies conducted in Mediterranean and coastal destinations indicate that although young tourists are well informed about sustainability, they often behave inconsistently with their stated values, choosing eco friendly options primarily when they are accessible and affordable (Pulido-Fernández, 2024). These findings suggest that although Generation Z has significant potential to transform tourism demand, realizing this potential requires integrated policies combining sustainable marketing, education, and institutional support. González-Pozo (2025) shows that environmental criteria are becoming increasingly important in accommodation choices made by Generation Z through online travel agencies, confirming that sustainability plays an integral role in purchasing decisions. The implementation of sustainable practices and green technologies has also been

shown to increase satisfaction among younger tourists, particularly those who value innovation, environmental awareness, and digitalized services (Khmaaj et al., 2025).

With increasing global pressure to reduce environmental footprints, Generation Z increasingly perceives tourism as a means of expressing personal values, particularly through the selection of sustainable destinations and brands with clearly articulated ecological identities. Research indicates that members of this generation often associate their consumer identity with moral beliefs related to environmental protection and social responsibility (de Araújo et al., 2025). Findings by Chang et al. (2024) confirm that emotional identification with nature and a sense of collective responsibility are among the strongest predictors of sustainable behavior in tourism. Similarly, Demiris et al. (2025) demonstrate that climate change awareness directly influences Generation Z's willingness to choose low carbon transport and eco certified accommodation. Comparable results reported by Ribeiro et al. (2025) show that ecological concern and perceived benefits of sustainable practices play a decisive role in the selection of tourism offers. Marques et al. (2025) emphasize that Generation Z's travel motivations are shaped by social media influence, identity formation, and environmental values, making them particularly sensitive to transparency and ethical communication. Xia et al. (2025) further underline that young tourists seek not only nature based experiences but also cultural meaning and authenticity aligned with values of heritage preservation and responsible travel.

Green marketing in tourism is no longer merely a promotional trend but has evolved into a strategic instrument for destination positioning in an increasingly competitive global environment. Its core purpose lies in integrating ecological principles throughout the tourism product lifecycle, including planning, resource management, communication, and visitor experience design. Green marketing represents a particularly important tool in the development of sustainable rural tourism, as it enhances environmental awareness among tourists and strengthens the competitiveness of protected natural destinations such as national parks (Ostojić et al., 2025). The improvement of business and organizational process quality is recognized as a key prerequisite for innovation and long term competitiveness of small and medium sized enterprises, which is especially relevant in rural tourism contexts characterized by limited resources and high dependence on environmental quality (Cvjetković et al., 2022). Contemporary approaches highlight that successful destinations combine transparency, digital communication tools, and locally grounded narratives to build credibility and authenticity (Sanjaya et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2023). Digital platforms enable destinations to communicate measurable sustainability outcomes through interactive applications, emission reduction metrics, and ecological certification systems (Vicente et al., 2024). Such transparency strengthens trust, which represents a fundamental component of an authentic green destination image (Fandos-Herrera et al., 2025). At the same time, research warns that inconsistencies between promotional claims and actual practices can lead to greenwashing, thereby damaging destination reputation and reducing tourist loyalty (Chang et al., 2025; Schwarz, 2024). As a result, green marketing in tourism is

increasingly conceptualized as a system of trust and transparency management rather than mere promotion (Wu et al., 2024).

Within this framework, Generation Z represents a crucial target group for sustainable tourism strategies, particularly in rural and protected destinations. As the first generation raised entirely in a digital environment, they expect destinations to provide clear, verifiable, and digitally accessible information about ecological practices (Pulido-Fernández, 2024; Minazzi et al., 2025). Their travel decisions are strongly influenced by environmental messaging across social media, authentic testimonials from local communities, and influencer partnerships with sustainability oriented brands (Kubíková & Rudý, 2024). Studies show that Generation Z responds more positively to marketing campaigns that combine emotional and educational elements, perceiving them as credible and engaging (Nowacki et al., 2023; Sanjaya et al., 2024). Their willingness to pay a premium for eco friendly tourism products increases when destinations provide tangible evidence such as certifications, local partnerships, and publicly available sustainability reports (Vicente et al., 2024; Chang et al., 2025). These findings indicate that Generation Z evaluates destinations not only based on experience quality but also on integrated value systems in which sustainability represents a central component.

Mount Golija, located in southwestern Serbia, represents one of the country's most ecologically valuable rural areas. As part of the UNESCO Golija Studenica Biosphere Reserve, the destination holds protected status due to its exceptional biodiversity, endemic species, and well preserved ecosystems (Milićević et al., 2021). The high ecological value of Golija requires responsible tourism development models in which environmental conservation and prevention of degradation remain primary objectives while supporting rural economic development. Previous studies emphasize that sustainable management of mountain and rural destinations depends on achieving a balance between ecological protection and local development goals (Bošković et al., 2020). In this context, Golija is increasingly recognized as a destination with strong potential to integrate ecotourism principles, organic production, and participatory planning. However, insufficient institutional coordination among park authorities, tourism organizations, and local communities remains a significant challenge and is identified as a key precondition for effective strategy implementation in spatial and tourism planning research in Serbia (Tomić & Stojsavljević, 2013).

Effective sustainable rural tourism management on Golija requires the introduction of indicator based monitoring systems and ecological innovations that enable the measurement, monitoring, and continuous improvement of destination performance. European frameworks such as the European Tourism Indicators System and their local adaptations are increasingly applied to track tourism impacts and support strategic decision making (Gasparini & Mariotti, 2023). Studies conducted in Serbia's mountain regions highlight the importance of monitoring parameters related to waste generation, energy efficiency, and seasonality in shaping future development guidelines (Bošković et al., 2020; Milićević et al., 2021). The adoption of ecological and digital innovations, including solar energy systems, energy consumption sensors, and smart

resource management applications, can significantly improve sustainability outcomes in rural destinations such as Golija. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of such innovations ultimately depends on institutional capacity, stakeholder coordination, and continuous policy adaptation, confirming that sustainable rural tourism development represents both a technical and an organizational challenge (Rocio et al., 2023; Zhang & Deng, 2024; Aransyah et al., 2025).

Materials and methods

The research was conducted with the aim of identifying the ecological and social needs of Generation Z in the context of sustainable rural tourism development on Mount Golija, as well as examining the role of project management and green marketing in shaping attitudes, behaviors, and intentions to visit this rural destination. Particular emphasis was placed on understanding the level of environmental awareness among young tourists, their attitudes toward sustainable practices, and their willingness to support tourism offers aligned with the principles of sustainable rural development. The study sought to explore how Generation Z, as an emerging driver of future consumer trends, can contribute to the transformation of the tourism market toward sustainability, particularly in rural and protected areas.

Based on the research objectives and prior findings, five research hypotheses were formulated to examine the influence of the perception of sustainable rural tourism and green marketing on Generation Z's intention to visit Mount Golija.

H1: There is a statistically significant positive relationship between the perception of ecological practices on Golija and Generation Z's intention to visit the rural destination. This hypothesis assumes that respondents who recognize sustainable initiatives and ecological technologies within the rural tourism offer demonstrate greater motivation to visit the destination.

H2: There is a significant positive correlation between the implementation of green marketing, including digital promotion and communication via social media, and the intention to visit Golija as a rural tourism destination. This hypothesis is based on the theoretical model suggesting that digital marketing and the visibility of sustainable content enhance the destination's image among younger populations.

H3: Generation Z's willingness to pay a higher price for environmentally responsible accommodation in rural tourism settings has a positive effect on their perception of sustainable tourism and their intention to visit. This hypothesis tests the economic dimension of ecological awareness and the readiness of young tourists to support sustainable practices through their own behavior.

H4: Awareness and educational content about sustainable rural tourism significantly contribute to the positive perception of Golija as a sustainable destination. This hypothesis assumes that transparent information and accessible educational materials increase respondents' understanding of and support for sustainable initiatives.

H5: The perception of Golija as a rural destination with high ecological potential represents the most important predictor of Generation Z's intention to visit. This hypothesis arises from the idea that the destination's image, based on its natural resources and sustainable practices, has a decisive influence on the decision to visit.

The questionnaire was designed to include two main sections, demographic characteristics and attitudes toward sustainable rural tourism and green marketing. The first section covered basic information such as gender, age, place of origin, and travel frequency, while the second section focused on questions measuring perceptions of sustainability, ecological practices, and digital promotion of the rural destination. The main research variables were defined through three constructs, sustainable tourism, green marketing, and travel intention. The sustainable tourism construct included ecological initiatives, educational content, destination potential, and the use of green technologies in rural tourism. The green marketing construct comprised promotion and digital visibility as well as willingness to financially support sustainable practices. Travel intention referred to the willingness to visit a destination that follows sustainability principles. A five point Likert scale ranging from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree, was used to measure attitudes, allowing for precise quantification of subjective perceptions and comparisons across research dimensions.

The data collected from the survey were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26. The statistical processing included several analytical levels. In the first stage, descriptive statistics were applied to display general tendencies and response distributions, calculating means, standard deviations, and percentage shares. In the second stage, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to examine relationships between key variables, sustainable tourism, green marketing, and travel intention. The third stage involved regression analysis to determine the extent of the impact of independent variables, ecological practices, green marketing activities, and availability of information, on the dependent variable, intention to visit Golija as a rural tourism destination. All analyses were conducted at a significance level of $p < .05$ and $p < .01$, ensuring a high level of result reliability.

Results

The research was conducted between April and June 2025 through an online survey created using the Google Forms platform. The questionnaire was distributed via social media, primarily Instagram and LinkedIn, as well as by email to university students across Serbia. This approach enabled the inclusion of a diverse sample of respondents differing in education, place of residence, and travel experience. The total number of valid responses was 256, which represents an adequate sample size for quantitative analysis and allows for reliable conclusions. Generation Z, aged between 18 and 32 years, a population selected due to its pronounced environmental awareness and digital connectivity, particularly relevant for rural tourism destinations.

The sample structure shows that 59% of respondents were female (N=151), while 41% were male (N=105). The largest age group consisted of respondents aged 23 to 27 years (61.5%), followed by those aged 28 to 32 (19.7%), and finally, respondents aged 18 to 22 (18.9%). Regarding origin, 77% of participants were from Serbia, while 23% were international respondents, mainly from neighboring countries. This sample structure provided insight into the perception of sustainable rural tourism and ecological practices among both domestic and international members of Generation Z, offering a broader understanding of the trends and development potential of the Golija destination. To verify the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated, yielding $\alpha = 0.86$, indicating high internal consistency of the items and confirming the adequacy of the questionnaire for research purposes. This methodological design enabled a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing Generation Z's perception of sustainable tourism, as well as the identification of key elements that can contribute to the successful development and positioning of Golija as an environmentally responsible rural tourist destination.

The study analyzed the main variables related to the perception of sustainable tourism and green marketing on Golija. Each statement was measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 - strongly disagree; 5 - strongly agree). The goal of this analysis was to determine which areas respondents rated most positively and which require further improvement.

Table 1. Descriptive Indicators for Main Variables (N = 256)

Variable	Mark	M	SD	Min	Max
The tourist offer contributes to the preservation of the natural environment	ST1	3.724	0.913	1	5
Information on sustainable practices is available and transparent	ST2	2.832	0.972	1	5
Golija is promoted on social media	GM1	2.611	1.025	1	5
Accommodation facilities use ecological technologies	ST3	3.007	0.876	1	5
I am willing to pay more for eco-accommodation	GM2	3.873	0.934	1	5
There are enough educational contents about ecology	ST4	3.019	0.948	1	5
Golija has potential as a sustainable rural destination	ST5	4.093	0.818	1	5
Intention to visit Golija (dependent variable)	DV	4.038	0.789	1	5

Source: Own research

The analysis shows that respondents rated the statements *Golija has the potential to become an example of a sustainable destination* (M=4.093) and *Intention to visit Golija* (M=4.038) the highest. These results indicate that Generation Z largely recognizes the natural potential of Golija and demonstrates a positive predisposition toward visiting a destination that upholds sustainability principles.

The lowest-rated statements refer to *Promotion of Golija on social media* (M=2.611) and *Availability of information on sustainable practices* (M=2.832). This implies that respondents perceive the communication and visibility of sustainability initiatives as

insufficiently developed, which may negatively affect the destination's perception and image among young people.

Moderate values for the variables *Accommodation uses ecological technologies* (M=3.007) and *Educational content on ecology* (M=3.019) suggest that respondents are neutral, indicating that certain sustainability efforts are present but their visibility and implementation remain unsatisfactory.

The conclusion derived from the descriptive analysis is that while the perception of Golija's ecological potential and the respondents' willingness to support environmental initiatives are evident, it is necessary to strengthen green marketing and information channels to adequately leverage this potential.

A correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between the perception of sustainable tourism, green marketing, and the intention to visit Golija. Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was used for the analysis, where values between 0.10 - 0.29 indicated a weak correlation, 0.30 - 0.49 a moderate correlation, and ≥ 0.50 a strong correlation. Statistical significance was tested at the $p < 0.01$ level.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix Between Variables (N = 256)

Variable	ST1	ST2	GM1	ST3	GM2	ST4	ST5	DV
ST1	1	.476**	.334**	.414**	.372**	.435**	.562**	.582**
ST2		1	.513**	.452**	.402**	.472**	.529**	.492**
GM1			1	.384**	.592**	.357**	.418**	.458**
ST3				1	.391**	.441**	.481**	.524**
GM2					1	.402**	.539**	.572**
ST4						1	.514**	.551**
ST5							1	.618**
DV								1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Own research

The results indicate a high degree of correlation between almost all variables, confirming the theoretical framework that sustainable practices and green marketing jointly contribute to shaping Generation Z's positive attitudes toward the rural destination.

The highest correlation was recorded between the variables *Golija has potential as a sustainable destination* (ST5) and *Intention to visit Golija* (DV), $r = .618$, $p < 0.01$. This strong positive relationship shows that the perception of a destination as sustainable directly influences the decision to visit. Another significant correlation was observed between *Willingness to pay more for eco-accommodation* (GM2) and *Intention to visit* (DV), $r = .572$, $p < 0.01$, confirming that younger populations value environmental responsibility and are willing to invest additional resources in sustainable services.

The variable *Promotion on social media* (GM1) shows a moderate but statistically significant correlation with the intention to visit ($r = .458$, $p < 0.01$), highlighting the importance of digital marketing as a communication channel for Generation Z. The

lowest correlation was found between *Information on sustainable practices* (ST2) and *Intention to visit* ($r=.492$), which still represents a moderate relationship and suggests that better access to information can enhance tourist motivation.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the variables are interrelated in accordance with theoretical expectations, where the perception of sustainable potential and economic readiness to support ecological initiatives are the most important factors influencing the decision to visit the destination.

To determine the extent of the influence of independent variables (sustainable tourism and green marketing) on the dependent variable (intention to visit Golija), a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. The model was tested using the Enter method, and significance levels were verified at $p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.01$.

Table 3. Results of Multiple Linear Regression
(DV - Intention to visit the rural tourism destination)

Predictor	β	t	p
The tourist offer contributes to preserving nature (ST1)	0.173	2.913	0.004
Information on sustainable practices (ST2)	0.108	2.082	0.039
Promotion on social media (GM1)	0.191	3.249	0.001
Accommodation uses ecological technologies (ST3)	0.089	1.754	0.081
Willingness to pay more for eco-accommodation (GM2)	0.247	4.182	0.000
Educational content on ecology (ST4)	0.142	2.442	0.015
Golija has potential as a sustainable destination (ST5)	0.284	5.030	0.000
Model summary: R = 0.818 R ² = 0.669 Adjusted R ² = 0.652 F(7, 248) = 70.308, p < 0.001			

Source: Own research

The model explains 66.9% of the variance in the intention to visit Golija, indicating a high level of predictive power and confirming that the combination of ecological practices and green marketing significantly influences the formation of Generation Z's attitudes.

The strongest individual effect was observed for the variable *Golija has potential as a sustainable destination* ($\beta = 0.284$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that the perception of the destination as environmentally responsible plays a decisive role in shaping the intention to visit. The second strongest predictor was *Willingness to pay more for eco-accommodation* ($\beta = 0.247$, $p = 0.000$), confirming that economic support for sustainable practices is an important indicator of Generation Z's real engagement. A significant contribution was also observed for *Promotion on social media* ($\beta = 0.191$, $p = 0.001$), implying that effective digital communication can increase young tourists' interest.

Variables with smaller but still statistically significant effects include *Educational content on ecology* ($\beta = 0.142$, $p = 0.015$) and *Information on sustainable practices* ($\beta = 0.108$, $p = 0.039$), emphasizing the importance of accessible information and education in travel decision-making. The variable *Ecological technologies in accommodation* (ST3) shows a weaker, marginally significant effect ($\beta = 0.089$, $p = 0.081$), suggesting that respondents may lack sufficient knowledge about existing eco-friendly solutions in accommodation offerings.

Overall, the regression model confirms that the perception of sustainable potential, willingness to support eco-friendly offers, and digital visibility are key factors in predicting Generation Z's intention to visit. These findings support the main hypothesis that project management and green marketing, when integrated into destination development, significantly enhance competitiveness and recognition among younger populations.

Discussions

The primary aim of this research was to identify the ecological and social needs of Generation Z in the context of sustainable rural tourism development on Mount Golija and to examine how project management and green marketing can contribute to enhancing the destination's tourism offer. Through the application of descriptive, correlation, and regression analyses, the results provide an empirical basis for testing the proposed hypotheses and understanding the behavior of Generation Z in relation to sustainable tourism practices.

The correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between the variables *The tourist offer contributes to the preservation of the natural environment* and *Intention to visit Golija* ($r = .582$, $p < 0.01$). This finding indicates that the greater the respondents' awareness of ecological practices and environmental protection, the stronger their willingness to visit the rural destination. Regression analysis further confirmed a statistically significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.173$, $p = 0.004$), validating its predictive value. Based on these findings, hypothesis H1 is confirmed, establishing a significant positive relationship between the perception of ecological practices on Golija and Generation Z's intention to visit this destination. This result aligns with Font and McCabe (2017), who emphasize that the perception of ecological initiatives plays a central role in shaping the preferences of environmentally conscious tourists.

The results also show a moderate but statistically significant correlation between *Golija is promoted on social media* and *Intention to visit* ($r = .458$, $p < 0.01$). The regression model confirms the effect of digital promotion ($\beta = 0.191$, $p = 0.001$), suggesting that increasing online visibility can significantly enhance the destination's positioning among Generation Z. Consequently, hypothesis H2 is confirmed, supporting the existence of a positive relationship between green marketing (digital promotion and social media communication) and the intention to visit Golija as a rural tourism destination. This finding supports the perspective of Permanent et al. (2021), who highlight the role of digital communication and technological tools in contemporary marketing, particularly among Generation Z, who obtain most of their travel information through social networks.

The variable *Willingness to pay more for eco-accommodation* demonstrated a strong correlation with *Intention to visit* ($r = .572$, $p < 0.01$). In the regression model, this variable showed high statistical significance ($\beta = 0.247$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that financial willingness is a key factor distinguishing environmentally aware tourists from others. Based on these results, hypothesis H3 is confirmed, indicating that Generation Z's readiness to pay a higher price for environmentally responsible accommodation

positively affects their perception of sustainable tourism and intention to visit. This finding underlines the growing importance of ethical consumption and confirms that Generation Z recognizes the value of sustainability and is willing to support it financially, which is consistent with contemporary research showing that young tourists increasingly choose green products and socially responsible brands.

A moderate but significant correlation was also found between *Educational content on ecology* and *Perception of Golija's potential as a sustainable rural destination* ($r = .514, p < 0.01$). Regression analysis showed that educational content has a positive and statistically significant effect on the intention to visit ($\beta = 0.142, p = 0.015$). This suggests that the availability of educational and informational content increases respondents' awareness and trust in sustainable initiatives. Therefore, hypothesis H4 is confirmed, showing that awareness and educational content on sustainable tourism significantly contribute to the positive perception of Golija as a sustainable destination. These empirical findings are consistent with the approach advocated by UNESCO (2022), which emphasizes education as a key factor in raising environmental awareness and strengthening youth participation in environmental protection.

The strongest relationship in the correlation matrix was observed between *Golija has potential as a sustainable destination* and *Intention to visit* ($r = .618, p < 0.01$). Regression analysis confirmed that this variable had the highest standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.284, p = 0.000$), demonstrating that the perception of ecological potential is the main motivational factor for visiting the destination. Based on this evidence, hypothesis H5 is confirmed, indicating that the perception of Golija as a destination with high ecological potential is the most important predictor of Generation Z's intention to visit. This result supports the central thesis of the study: the successful development of sustainable tourism depends on effective project management of resources and destination branding based on sustainability values, positioning Golija as a representative example of a sustainable mountain destination.

Overall, the results confirm all proposed hypotheses, showing that the perception of sustainability, environmental awareness, and digital communication significantly shape Generation Z's behavior in the rural tourism context. Generation Z demonstrates a high degree of environmental responsibility and willingness to support sustainable initiatives both financially and behaviorally, confirming that ecological factors are becoming a central determinant of travel decisions in contemporary tourism.

The findings clearly indicate that the perception of Golija's ecological potential ($r = .618, \beta = 0.284, p < 0.01$) is the strongest predictor of travel intention, confirming that destinations effectively communicating their natural assets and green initiatives can attract younger, environmentally conscious tourists. Sustainable practices such as the use of renewable energy and recycling in accommodation facilities were positively evaluated and showed a statistically significant impact on respondents' decisions ($r = .582, p < 0.01$). This suggests that tourists increasingly seek tangible evidence of sustainability - not only through visual identity but through visible, on-site

environmental practices.

The research also highlights the crucial role of digital promotion and green marketing in shaping destination image among Generation Z. The moderately strong correlation between online presence and visit intention ($r = .458$, $p < 0.01$) confirms that effective communication via social media directly influences tourist perception. This supports contemporary tourism trends where digital experiences are viewed as an extension of the actual travel experience. The insufficient digital visibility of Golija underscores the need for developing digital infrastructure (web platforms, mobile applications, interactive maps) that connects visitors with local content, producers, and ecological initiatives.

Another significant finding relates to tourists' willingness to pay a higher price for sustainable accommodation ($\beta = 0.247$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that Generation Z perceives payment as a form of ecological participation. This has important implications for destination management, as it demonstrates that the sustainable tourism market carries not only moral but also economic value.

Nevertheless, the study also identified several limitations. The sample primarily consisted of students and urban-oriented members of Generation Z, which may affect the generalizability of results to the broader population. Moreover, the research was conducted online, meaning that participants were likely already digitally aware, introducing a possible bias in favor of digital marketing. Additionally, the data were based on self-reported attitudes, which may involve a degree of social desirability bias. The research focused exclusively on Generation Z, while including other generations (Y and X) would allow for a broader comparative perspective on shifting tourism preferences. Furthermore, the study did not address seasonality or Golija's actual ecological carrying capacity, both of which would provide valuable complementary insights into destination sustainability.

Future research should expand on these findings by examining the long-term impact of sustainable rural tourism on local economies and demographics, analyzing tourist behavior regarding ecological practices, and assessing the effectiveness of digital tools (such as the Eko Golija platform) in influencing engagement and sustainable behavior. Comparative studies with successful eco-destinations in the region (such as Pokljuka, Alpbach, and Bansko) could help identify best practices and knowledge transfer models, while psychological and motivational studies could further explore the values and emotional triggers that shape Generation Z's perception of sustainability and nature.

Conclusions

Based on the conducted analysis, it can be concluded that Generation Z represents a key driver of the transformation of tourism toward sustainability, particularly in rural and nature-based destinations. Their environmental awareness, digital literacy, and willingness to support green initiatives position them as catalysts of change within Serbia's tourism industry. Golija, as a rural mountain destination rich in natural resources

and cultural identity, possesses a genuine potential to become a model of sustainable rural tourism, provided that existing resources are managed through strategic project management and an integrated approach to green marketing.

The sustainability of Golija depends not only on the preservation of natural assets but also on the way tourism development is communicated, planned, and supported through active involvement of local communities. By strengthening digital visibility, environmental education, and partnerships between public, private, and civil sectors, it is possible to establish a self-sustaining rural tourism system capable of generating economic, social, and environmental benefits.

The conducted research not only empirically confirmed the relevance of project management and green marketing for the development of sustainable tourism but also identified concrete mechanisms for their implementation in rural contexts, ranging from ecological infrastructure and educational initiatives to digital tools and evaluation systems.

These findings open space for future research and practical initiatives that could further contribute to positioning Golija as a national example of sustainable and responsible rural tourism development in Serbia.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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