

# An Inductive Study with Travellers About the Perceived Barriers and Drivers to Sustainable Tourism Development in a Nature-Based Destination

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The growing popularity of nature-based tourism triggers concerns about its environmental and cultural impacts, thereby initiating discussions on diversifying and reinforcing economic strategies. This situation is particularly relevant in destinations like Phuket, which strives to position itself as a premier global tourist hotspot while relying significantly on international tourist receipts to sustain its island economy. The study identifies the perceived barriers and drivers that prevent and enable tourists from participating in practices that support sustainability in nature-based destinations such as Phuket, shedding light on fundamental factors influencing tourist behaviours. The empirical data was gathered through 38 semi-structured interviews with Generation Z travellers and analysed thematically. The results highlight key barriers—costs, cultural differences, and convenience over sustainability—and drivers—social responsibility, policy support, and heightened awareness—impacting sustainable tourism development in Phuket. The study advances the discussion about the complicated interplay between individual motivations, external factors, and environmental realities in shaping tourists' sustainable behaviours. Theoretical implications for tourism researchers and practical implications for policymakers and businesses are discussed in the paper.

*Keywords:* green consumer behaviour, sustainability: environmental awareness, tourism development, tourism, sustainable tourism



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## Introduction

### *Study Background*

Phuket aims to establish itself as a world-class tourist destination (Suwangerd et al., 2021), while significantly depending on international tourist receipts for the well-being of its island economy (Zhu & Yasami, 2022). This reliance raises questions about the island's vulnerability to global economic fluctuations and its capacity to balance sustainable development with the

demands of a thriving tourism industry (Fuchs, 2022). Moreover, the rapid growth in tourism in nature-based destinations might pose environmental and cultural challenges that require careful management (Grilli et al., 2021; Hernández et al., 2021; Juvan et al., 2021). The present economic model has sparked discussions about the need for diversification (Fuchs, 2021) and resilience-building measures (McCartney et al., 2021). This is particularly true in the wake of global events

like the COVID-19 pandemic that disrupted international travel (Karunarathne et al., 2021). To address these issues, policymakers in Phuket are increasingly focusing on sustainable tourism practices and initiatives (Kaur, 2021), seeking a balance between economic growth and the protection of their unique island ecosystem, which attracts more than 10 million visitors annually (Tuntipisitkul et al., 2021). However, finding a sustainable and resilient path forward remains a complex task that requires collaboration among tourism stakeholders (Roxas et al., 2020).

#### *Nature-Based Tourism*

Nature-based tourism, often referred to as nature tourism, encompasses travel activities that centre around natural environments, biodiversity, and conservation (Kuenzi & McNeely, 2008). This segment of tourism involves exploring and experiencing natural landscapes, wildlife, and indigenous cultures while promoting conservation and sustainability (Wolf et al., 2019). Within the literature, nature-based tourism has been defined by various scholars and organizations, emphasizing its reliance on natural resources, education, and the enhancement of visitor experiences (Frost et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2021). Studies within this field have extensively focused on the environmental and cultural impacts associated with nature-based tourism (Jones et al., 2021). Researchers have highlighted the potential positive impacts, such as raising awareness about environmental conservation and supporting local communities economically (Winter et al., 2019; Da Mota & Pickering, 2020). However, there is substantial concern regarding the negative impacts, including habitat degradation, disruption of ecosystems, cultural commodification, and loss of authenticity in indigenous cultures (Da Mota & Pickering, 2020). Scholars have emphasized the necessity of sustainable practices and policies to mitigate these adverse effects (Da Mota & Pickering, 2020; Jones et al., 2021).

Policies and management strategies play a crucial role in regulating and promoting sustainable nature-based tourism (Winter et al., 2019). The literature review reveals the existence of various policies at international, national, and local levels aimed at conserving natural resources, preserving cultural he-

ritage, and promoting responsible tourism practices (Kularatne et al., 2021). Case studies, such as Kularatne et al. (2021), have been conducted to analyse the effectiveness of these policies in different destinations, highlighting successful instances of managing visitor flows, implementing carrying capacities, and fostering community involvement. Tourist behaviour and experiences form another significant area of exploration within nature-based tourism literature (Winter et al., 2019). The literature emphasizes the importance of education, interpretation, and immersive experiences in shaping travellers' attitudes toward environmental conservation and sustainable behaviours (Zhao et al., 2014; Winter et al., 2019). Moreover, the economic aspects of nature-based tourism have also garnered attention in the literature (Thapa et al., 2022). For example, previous research has quantified the economic contributions of nature-based tourism to local economies, employment generation, and revenue generation (Thapa et al., 2022).

#### *Generation Z and Sustainability*

Generation Z, born roughly between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, constitutes a demographic cohort known for its tech-savvy nature, social consciousness, and unique attitudes toward travel and sustainability (Wee, 2019; Seyfi et al., 2023). With rising incomes and access to technology, Generation Z travellers have become increasingly mobile, seeking authentic experiences and meaningful connections with the places they visit (Seyfi et al., 2023). This generation is often characterized as highly conscious of sustainability issues, showing a strong inclination toward responsible and eco-friendly travel practices (Dimitriou & AbouElgheit, 2019). Generation Z will be the largest group of travellers ever in the future (Pinho & Gomes, 2023). Literature focusing on Generation Z and sustainability in travel highlights the values, preferences, and behaviours of this cohort (Dimitriou & AbouElgheit, 2019). Nguyen et al. (2021), for example, indicate that 'environmental concerns significantly influence their travel decisions' (p. 1051). Furthermore, Generation Z travellers prioritize destinations and accommodations that prioritize sustainability, promote environmental conservation, and demon-

strate social responsibility (Nguyen et al., 2021). They actively seek experiences that align with their values, such as engaging in activities that support local communities, reducing carbon footprints, and respecting indigenous cultures (Seyfi et al., 2023).

In terms of impacts, previous research explored how the preferences and choices of Generation Z travellers influence the tourism industry (Jiang & Hong, 2023). For example, Jiang and Hong (2023) note that Generation Z's demand for 'sustainable and ethical travel experiences has prompted businesses and destinations to adapt and integrate eco-friendly practices' (p. 228). This has led to a rise in eco-conscious accommodations, tours focused on environmental education, and the adoption of sustainable tourism certifications and standards by various establishments (Ribeiro et al., 2023). HOMA Phuket Town is an example of lodging that encompasses sustainability practices in its structural building efficiency, waste management, energy, and water consumption, as well as raising awareness amongst their guests in their creative co-living space (HOMA, n.d.). On the other hand, policies aimed at catering to the sustainability preferences of Generation Z travellers have also been a subject of discussion within the literature (Ribeiro et al., 2023). Ribeiro et al. (2023) advocate for stricter environmental regulations and certifications to ensure that businesses and destinations meet certain sustainability criteria to cater to increasingly eco-conscious travellers.

#### *Research Objective*

Previous research has undeniably contributed to establishing numerous cause-and-effect relationships and discovered predictive indicators for behaviour supporting sustainable travel (Darvishmotevali & Altinay, 2022; Toubes & Araújo-Vila, 2022). Nevertheless, it often falls short of capturing the complicated nuances of individual experiences, beliefs, and challenges faced by underrepresented populations (Han, 2020). The research gap lies in the need to explore how Generation Z travellers, in Phuket, perceive barriers and drivers that prevent and enable them to engage in practices that support sustainable development in a nature-based tourism destination. Simultaneously, studies focusing on Generation Z

and sustainability emphasize this cohort's propensity for eco-friendly travel preferences and its potential influence on shaping tourism industries toward more sustainable practices (Nowacki et al., 2023). Hence, this study seeks to bridge the gap in understanding by exploring the specific perceptions, preferences, and challenges of Generation Z travellers in Phuket regarding sustainable tourism practices in a nature-based tourism context. Ultimately, this investigation aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how to effectively cater to the sustainability preferences of Generation Z travellers in nature-based tourism destinations, thereby improving the sustainability footprint of Phuket and contributing to sustainable tourism development.

#### **Methodology**

##### *Research Design*

This study uses qualitative data because it enables an in-depth exploration of experiences and perceptions, allowing for an assessment of the contextual dimensions of participants' perspectives regarding the perceived drivers and barriers of sustainable tourism development. An inductive research approach, following good practice by Mason et al. (2010), was utilized to explore the problem by comprehensively examining its complex interconnections. Conducting qualitative research is a popular and well-known methodological paradigm for tourism scholars (Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2019). Qualitative research is centred around examining how people behave and interact in the world (McGinley et al., 2021). This type of research has made a substantial contribution to the field of tourism research and has gained widespread recognition and acceptance (Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015). The aim was to fill a gap in the body of knowledge about barriers and drivers that prevent and enable tourists to engage in practices that support sustainable tourism in a nature-based tourism destination. The research was conducted from the perspective of travellers born between the years 1997 and 2012 (i.e. commonly referred to as Generation Z) while vacationing in Phuket, Thailand.

Phuket was selected as the study site for collecting empirical data, mainly due to its recognition as a nature-based tourist destination and its dependency on in-

*Table 1.* Summarized Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Interview Participants

Characteristics		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	19	50%
	Female	19	50%
Age Range	18–19 years old	4	11%
	20–21 years old	5	13%
	22–23 years old	13	34%
	24–25 years old	16	42%
Highest Education	High School Diploma	8	21%
	Vocational Degree	2	5%
	Bachelor's Degree	25	66%
	Master's Degree	3	8%
Origin Region	Western Europe	21	55%
	Eastern Europe	5	13%
	North America	3	8%
	South America	1	3%
	Asia	3	8%
	Oceania	5	13%
Accommodation Type	Hotel (incl. boutique hotel)	21	55%
	Hostel (shared accommodation)	9	23%
	Luxury resort	4	11%
	Others (including apartment)	4	11%

ternational tourism (Suwangerd et al., 2021; Zhu & Yasami, 2022). Thailand's largest island covers a land area of 543 square kilometres, making it marginally smaller than the city-state Singapore. In qualitative research, reliability and validity are achieved through credibility and validity (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Credibility refers to the use of an appropriate data collection method that aligns with the research objective. Validity involves ensuring that the reporting is trustworthy, providing detailed and dense descriptions (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Therefore, the establishment of a robust and reliable methodological framework involved a series of steps, which have been meticulously undertaken and documented as outlined in the following sections.

#### *Data Collection and Sample*

Empirical data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. The potential participants were appro-

ached by the research team and asked for their willingness to participate in the study. For the interviews, participant selection was undertaken via purposive sampling, also referred to as selective sampling, a non-probability sampling technique in which researchers exercise their judgment to choose individuals from the population for inclusion in the study (Palinkas et al., 2015; Sim et al., 2018). A total of 80 potential participants were approached and 38 confirmed their willingness to participate in the study upon providing written consent.

Determining an appropriate sample size is intricate and challenging, with limited guidelines for estimating non-probabilistic sample sizes (Fugard & Potts, 2015; Boddy, 2016). Therefore, the concept of thematic saturation served as the foundation for ascertaining when the sample was considered sufficient becau-

*Table 2* An Illustrative Example From the Inductive Open Coding Approach for the Theme ‘Awareness’, Along with the Relevant Verbatim, Keywords and Codes

No	Codes	Keywords	Verbatim
1	Cultural Preservation	Culture, Heritage, Protection	‘I am quite sensitive towards local cultures, which led me to seek responsible tourism programmes to protect them’ (#13)
2	Prior Experiences	Wildlife, Environment, Safari	‘I have been on a safari and that experience really opened my eyes about protecting the environment and wildlife’ (#8)
3	Decision-making	Climate Change, Travel Decision, Awareness	‘I would say that I am quite aware of my impact on climate change and it somehow influences my travel choices’ (#27)
4	Pollution	Plastic, Tourism Development	‘I have seen what plastic pollution did in Bali and I can see Phuket heading in the same direction’ (#31)
5	Consciousness	Sustainable, Knowledge	‘The more aware I become and learn about it, the more I prioritize experiences that respect sustainable travel’ (# 23)

se acquiring additional novel information becomes unattainable (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The participants were recruited on Phuket Island at three separate locations (Patong Beach, Phuket Laguna, and Old Town). The semi-structured interviews were conducted in late 2023 by the lead investigator and were supported by a research assistant. The length of the interviews ranged from 12 minutes to 37 minutes.

All participants were between the ages of 18 and 25, travelling for leisure, and generally familiar with the concept of sustainable tourism or sustainable travel. The interviews took place at a nearby venue with the aid of a research assistant, following an interview guide that included questions such as ‘What factors do you consider when choosing a travel destination?’, ‘How important is sustainability in your decision-making process?’, ‘When travelling, what sustainable tourism practices do you actively engage in or seek to support?’, or ‘What would motivate you to be more conscious of sustainable practices during your travels?’. The interview guide was developed in cooperation with other faculty members who are familiar with the study site and are experts in the field of sustainable tourism development.

The sample includes a balanced split between both genders, i.e. 19 female participants and 19 male participants. The average (mean) age of the participants was 23.4 years old and all of the participants were at least high school graduates, with 28 of them holding

a university degree. The majority of participants originated from Western countries, including but not limited to the United Kingdom (4), Australia (4), Germany (3), Sweden (2), Austria (2), France (2), and the United States (2), as well as Italy (1), Denmark (1), and Malta (1). The majority of participants (21) stayed in hotels, followed by hostels (9), resorts (4), and other types of accommodation (4). Table 1 summarizes additional sociodemographic information about the participants.

## Results and Analysis

### *Thematic Analysis Process*

Thematic analysis is the most common method for examining interview data (Nowell et al., 2017; Squires, 2023). The process involved several steps. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and organized based on the questions posed to the participants. Data was then thematically analysed. The thematic analysis process helps researchers uncover common themes among participants, allowing a deeper exploration of their perspectives (Nowell et al., 2017). The transcripts were used only for thematic analysis and did not divulge the identities of the participants although for the research, each participant was given a unique number. Thereafter, keywords were identified and transformed into codes, which formed the basis for grouping and analysing the data (Table 2). This approach, known as inductive open co-

ding, helped identify patterns and clusters within the material (Braun et al., 2022). The researchers chose to carry out these processes manually, foregoing the use of software, as it allowed them to become acquainted with the content. Next, codes were organized and grouped into suitable themes (for example, the theme ‘awareness’ comprises the codes ‘cultural preservation’, ‘prior experiences’, ‘decision-making’, ‘pollution’, and ‘consciousness’) Finally, the process was repeated until the researchers were satisfied with the results and a consensus was reached between the researchers. Six primary themes emerged from the clustered data and implications were drawn. The findings are detailed in the following sections of this study. This systematic process provided insights on barriers and drivers that prevent and enable Generation Z travellers in Phuket to engage in practices that support sustainable tourism by identifying recurring themes within the data.

#### *Perceived Barriers – Themes: (1) Costs, (2) Cultural Differences, and (3) Convenience Over Sustainability*

The discussion with tourists revealed three perceived barriers that prevent sustainable tourism development: costs, cultural differences, and prioritizing convenience over sustainability. These themes represent significant challenges faced by travellers aiming to engage in more eco-friendly practices during their vacations.

#### Costs

The cost factor often influences tourists’ decisions, as sustainable options might come at a higher price compared to conventional alternatives. Many expressed a willingness to engage in sustainable tourism practices, but the higher prices associated with eco-friendly accommodations, tours, or products presented a significant barrier. For instance, environmentally certified hotels or tours endorsing sustainable initiatives often come with a premium price tag, deterring budget-conscious travellers from choosing these options. This can be illustrated with the following quote by a participant which is representative of the sentiment shared amongst the tourists that were interviewed. ‘*I am fine with paying a little more but if it doubles the price then this is something that I seriously have to consider*’ (Participant #28, male, 24 years old).

Another interviewee stated that ‘*many times, I chose one activity instead of two because I prefer the sustainable option, but it also means I can experience less during my holiday*’ (Participant #16, female, 21 years old). The perception that sustainability equates to elevated costs poses a considerable challenge, especially for young travellers who might have limited financial resources.

#### Cultural Differences

Additionally, cultural disparities present hurdles, impacting the understanding and adoption of sustainable practices. Cultural disparities surfaced as a complex challenge impacting the sustainable tourism efforts of Generation Z tourists in Phuket. Participants reported a notable difference in perceptions between their expectations compared to local cultural norms, which was evidently reported by the majority of participants. Participants highlighted scenarios where sustainable behaviours might conflict with traditional practices or local customs. For example, ‘*I watched that many tourists in my age group are fairly responsible and throw their garbage in the available bins, but I saw many of the TukTuk drivers [i.e. a common form of motorized vehicle to transport tourists] near the beach who litter into the environment while waiting for their next customer*’ (Participant #19, female, 18 years old). It was reported by about one-third of participants that the ‘*clash between local norms and sustainability expectations can complicate tourists’ efforts to align with environmentally responsible behaviours*’.

#### Convenience Over Sustainability

Moreover, it was reported by one-third of participants that the temptation of convenience often overshadows the intentions to prioritize sustainability among Generation Z travellers in Phuket. A participant expressed that the ‘*convenience aspect tends to succeed over sustainability concerns*’ (Participant #7, male, 22 years old), leading travellers to prioritize ease and comfort over making eco-conscious choices. Participants acknowledged that choosing sustainability sometimes requires additional effort, time, or planning. Another participant shared this sentiment by stating, ‘*The ease of things tends to outweigh thinking about sustainability*’ (Participant #18, female, 24 years old). These vi-



ewpoints underscore a tendency among travellers to favour immediate convenience over the long-term environmental impact of their choices. Nearly half of the interviewed participants highlighted instances where the ease and accessibility of non-sustainable options often overshadowed their intentions to opt for eco-conscious alternatives (for example, having take-out food in a plastic box instead of eating the dish at the restaurant). Furthermore, some participants shared experiences where sustainable choices required additional effort or advanced planning, discouraging them from embracing these options. Although half reported specific situations in which convenience was prioritized over sustainability, only about ten participants noted that there is a prevalence of convenience-centric mindsets, which tends to hinder the adoption of sustainable practices.

*Perceived Drivers – Themes: (1) Social Responsibility, (2) Policy Support, and (3) Heightened Awareness*

With regard to the perceived drivers towards sustainable tourism, three primary themes emerged: social responsibility, policy support, and heightened awareness. These themes encapsulate crucial factors that motivate and enable travellers to actively engage in more sustainable travel practices.

#### Social Responsibility

Social responsibility emerged as a driver for tourists that persuades them to make choices that minimize their ecological impact and contribute positively to local communities. More than two-thirds of the participants highlighted their sense of duty toward the environment and the community as a driving force behind their support of sustainable tourism practices. About a dozen travellers expressed a desire to 'give back' or 'make a difference', showcasing their commitment to ethical travel. Participant 4 made the following comment that is exemplary of this sentiment: 'We should feel pretty privileged that we can travel [to different places]'. However, while the notion of social responsibility was generally regarded as positive, several participants voiced concerns about its involuntary imposition within certain social circles. More than ten participants disclosed experiencing peer pressure

to support sustainable practices. They elaborated on feeling compelled to engage in eco-friendly behaviours due to societal expectations rather than personal conviction. One participant highlighted this aspect by stating, 'There is this unspoken pressure among peers. If you are not on board with sustainable choices, you are seen as against progress' (Participant #16, female, 21 years old). This polarization within social circles might inadvertently force compliance rather than authentic voluntary engagement with sustainable practices.

#### Policy Support

In the realm of sustainable tourism, policy support emerged as another driver for fostering environmentally conscious practices within tourist destinations. In the context of this study, the theme of policy support means supporting the enforcement of governmental regulations and following their guidelines and regulations that were designed to support sustainable practices in Phuket. Participants acknowledged the important role of policies and regulations in shaping and promoting sustainability initiatives. Over fifteen participants acknowledged the importance of government or institutional interventions in incentivizing and regulating sustainable practices. They emphasized the need for clear, enforced guidelines that encourage businesses to adopt eco-friendly measures. For instance, one participant emphasized the necessity of strict regulations by stating, 'They need clear laws that make it mandatory for them to use sustainable practices' (Participant #29, male, 18 years old). Another interviewee noted that 'If there are no rules in place, many businesses might prioritize profits over the environment, but Phuket has a few rules in place that protect the environment' (Participant #9, female, 24 years old). Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned the concept of policy support targeting the regulation of behaviours from the demand side, namely, the tourists themselves. Throughout the interviews, when the theme of policy support emerged, participants inherently directed their focus toward businesses or government entities.

#### Heightened Awareness

Moreover, a heightened awareness of sustainability issues among travellers emerged as a catalyst for

embracing eco-friendly options during their travels. Nearly all participants cited increased awareness and knowledge about environmental concerns as pivotal in influencing their travel decisions. The participants mentioned that exposure to information through various channels, such as social media, educational institutions, and advocacy campaigns, was important in shaping their perception of sustainability. However, as previously reported, costs and convenience are barriers preventing tourists from engaging to a larger degree in sustainable practices.

The interviewed tourists expressed a sentiment that they are willing to do more only if the surrounding circumstances support their views. For example, if the costs for sustainable products and services were reduced and/or if these products and services meant no inconvenience for the tourists, they would be ready to engage. One participant elaborated, *'As I became more aware of the environmental impact of travel, I started seeking out accommodations, but I also need to watch my budget'* (Participant #35, female, 20 years old). Another participant stated, *'In the future, I would prioritize destinations and services that align with my values'* (Participant #12, female, 22 years old). In essence, the sentiment amongst the participants can be summarized as: heightened awareness among travellers about sustainability issues translates into actionable behaviours only when it harmoniously aligns with the accessibility and affordability of environmentally friendly products and services.

## Discussion and Implications

### Discussion

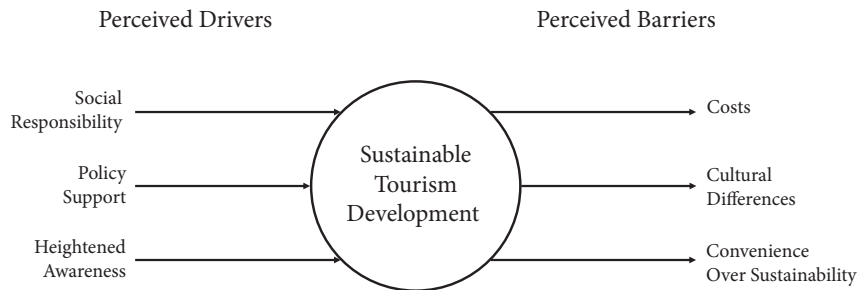
This inductive research aimed to investigate how to effectively cater to the sustainability preferences of Generation Z travellers in nature-based tourism destinations, thereby improving the sustainability footprint of Phuket and contributing to sustainable tourism development. More specifically, this exploratory study sought to holistically study perceptions of Generation Z travellers, therefore advancing the theoretical discourse and providing practical implications for businesses and policymakers. The investigation of Generation Z tourists' perspectives on sustainable tourism in Phuket highlighted insights into their mo-

tivations and challenges regarding eco-friendly travel practices. The study discovered significant barriers (such as costs, cultural differences, and convenience over sustainability as visualized in Figure 1) that prevent the seamless adoption of sustainable behaviours. Among these barriers, the high cost associated with sustainable options emerged as a notable deterrent, especially among budget-conscious travellers. This aligns with existing research, emphasizing the pivotal role of affordability in influencing tourists' choices with regard to sustainability (Djafarova & Fouts, 2022).

Cultural disparities also surfaced as a substantial challenge, showcasing a conflict between tourists' sustainability expectations and local customs. This dissonance complicates tourists' efforts to align their behaviours with environmentally responsible practices (Marzo-Navarro et al., 2020). Convenience prioritized over sustainability stood out as a prevailing factor, leading travellers to opt for ease and comfort over eco-conscious choices. This inclination toward convenience, while not surprising, highlights the need to address the balance between immediate gratification and long-term environmental impact in promoting sustainable behaviours among tourists (Pinho & Gomes, 2023). These barriers underscore the complexity of shaping sustainable tourism practices and emphasize the importance of addressing these challenges to foster meaningful change.

In parallel, the study revealed crucial drivers motivating sustainable tourism practices among Generation Z travellers (Figure 1). Social responsibility emerged as a powerful motivator, prompting tourists to minimize their ecological footprint and contribute positively to local communities. This aligns with prior studies emphasizing tourists' desire to make a positive impact on their destinations (Coles et al., 2013; Paskova & Zelenka, 2019; Lee et al., 2019). However, concerns surfaced regarding the involuntary imposition of sustainability ideals within social circles (i.e. peer pressure to support sustainable development), potentially leading to compliance rather than genuine voluntary engagement. While findings by Lee et al. (2019) report from diverse contexts, their implications resonate with the challenges observed in this study.





*Figure 1* A Visual Synthesis Derived From the Thematic Analysis Showing the Perceived Drivers and Perceived Barriers in Sustainable Tourism Development Among Generation Z Travellers

### *Implications*

The study provides several theoretical and managerial insights into developing a deeper understanding of the perception of Generation Z travellers (predominantly of Western descent) toward the development of sustainable tourism in nature-based destinations. The empirical findings offer theoretical contributions to the existing body of knowledge on tourist perception of sustainable tourism in the context of Thailand by supporting previous research (Dimitriou & Abou-Elgheit, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2021; Jiang & Hong, 2023; Seyfi et al., 2023) and identifying barriers and drivers preventing and enabling their participation. According to Nguyen et al. (2021), Generation Z travellers prioritize destinations and accommodations that prioritize sustainability, promote environmental conservation, and demonstrate social responsibility. However, prior to this study, there was limited knowledge about barriers and drivers preventing and enabling their participation (Salinero et al., 2022). While Jiang and Hong (2023) argued that Generation Z's demand for sustainable travel experiences has prompted destinations to adapt and integrate eco-friendly practices, the results of this study showed that only limited progress was made.

The study advances the discussion about the complicated interplay between individual motivations, external factors, and environmental realities in shaping tourists' sustainable behaviours. For instance, heightened awareness among Generation Z travellers translated into actionable results only when harmonized with local customs (D'Arco et al., 2023). Similarly,

Pinho and Gomes (2023) empirically identified that many Gen Z travellers 'are concerned about choosing a sustainable destination' but did very little about supporting destinations in achieving sustainable development (p. 1). However, the barriers align with the literature, wherein costs (Djafarova & Fouts, 2022) and convenience (Butnaru et al., 2022) deterred these travellers from engaging more extensively in sustainable practices, despite their heightened awareness (D'Arco et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of targeted interventions aimed at addressing barriers at the destination level (Weidenfeld, 2018). Simultaneously, it advocates for the enhancement of supportive environments and the promotion of accessible and cost-effective eco-friendly alternatives (Doran & Larsen, 2016). This implication underscores the necessity for strategies that strike a balance between individual values and external factors (Amendah & Park, 2008). Such strategies are essential to facilitate meaningful engagement in sustainable tourism among Generation Z travellers, particularly in nature-based destinations such as Phuket (Pinho & Gomes, 2023).

### **Conclusion and Future Work**

The study contributes to the theoretical discourse on sustainable tourism by highlighting the complicated interplay between individual motivations, external factors, and environmental realities in shaping tourists' sustainable behaviours. For example, heightened awareness only translated into actionable results if aligned

with the local customs and practices at the respective destination. Moreover, costs and convenience are other barriers that prevent Generation Z travellers from engaging to a larger degree in sustainable practices despite their heightened awareness. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the need for targeted interventions addressing barriers (at the destination level) while enhancing supportive environments and promoting accessible and affordable eco-friendly options. The implications derived from this study call for strategies that balance individual values with external circumstances to facilitate meaningful sustainable tourism engagement among Generation Z travellers in nature-based destinations like Phuket. As with any study, acknowledging its limitations is fundamental for a comprehensive understanding of the findings and to map future research directions. First, the study's nature is inductive, thereby limiting the generalizability of its results beyond the specific context examined. Future research could enhance these findings by validating hypotheses through a quantitative research approach. Second, further research could examine the interconnectedness of sociocultural, economic, and environmental aspects shaping tourists' sustainability choices.

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#### Ethics and Confidentiality

The interview participants were informed about the aim of the research and voluntarily provided their written consent prior to commencing the interviews. Furthermore, confidentiality was extended to all respondents, and finally, all interviewees received a gift card as a gesture of appreciation for their participation and insights.

#### Institutional Approval

The Research Committee of the Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism, Prince of Songkla University approved the study on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2023 under approval no. FHT66000007.

#### Author Contribution Statement

KF conceptualized the study, conducted the data collection, and prepared a first draft of the article. The author approved the final version of the manuscript.

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