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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Cultural Heritage***Between global aspirations and local identity: How cultural drivers and social referents shape Gen Z's travel intentions in Saudi Arabia**Hebatallah Ahmed Mokhtar Taha Ahmed<sup>1\*</sup>, Sameh Fayyad<sup>2</sup> & Abdelrahman Ahmed Abdelhai Abdelghani<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup>Applied College, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Al-Kharj, Saudi Arabia<sup>2</sup>Hotel Management Department, Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, Suez Canal University, Ismailia 41522, Egypt\*Correspondence: [he.ahmed@psau.edu.sa](mailto:he.ahmed@psau.edu.sa)**ABSTRACT**

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 seeks to diversify the economy through sustainable tourism that balances global aspirations with local identity. This study examines how cultural drivers and social referents shape Generation Z's travel intentions in Saudi Arabia, aligning with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). A quantitative survey of 447 Saudi Gen Z respondents (aged 18–28) employed validated five-item scales for cultural drivers, social referents, domestic destination attractiveness, international destination appeal, and travel intention. Data were analyzed using PLS-SEM to test direct and moderating effects. Results: Both cultural drivers ( $\beta = 0.211$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and social referents ( $\beta = 0.358$ ,  $p < .001$ ) significantly influenced travel intentions. Domestic destination attractiveness positively moderated these relationships ( $\beta_{CD \times DDA} = 0.142$ ,  $p = .011$ ;  $\beta_{SR \times DDA} = 0.134$ ,  $p = .017$ ), whereas international destination appeal did not. Findings highlight that enhancing local cultural assets and peer-driven marketing can foster sustainable tourism development (SDG 12) while supporting Saudi priorities in environmental sustainability, human capital, and future economies. By integrating social identity and cultural consumption theories, the study provides actionable insights for policymakers and industry stakeholders to advance heritage tourism, renewable energy investments in tourism infrastructure, and community well-being initiatives.

**KEYWORDS:** cultural drivers, domestic destination attractiveness, Generation Z, international destination appeal, Saudi Arabia, social referents, sustainable tourism, travel intentions, SDGs

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## 1. Introduction

Generation Z (Gen Z), broadly defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, is rapidly emerging as a key demographic in global tourism, significantly shaping travel dynamics worldwide. Saudi Arabia, with its ambitious Vision 2030 plan to diversify its economy and boost tourism, stands at a critical juncture where understanding this generation's travel motivation is pivotal. Against this backdrop, this study investigates how cultural drivers and social referents influence Generation Z's travel intentions (GTI) in Saudi Arabia, a country balancing its deep-rooted cultural heritage with fast-paced modernization and globalization. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z travelers exhibit complex travel patterns shaped by a hybrid of global aspirations and local identity (Choo, Lee, & Xie, 2023; Bakr et al., 2025). This cohort values authenticity and meaningful engagement with cultural heritage while simultaneously embracing global digital cultures and technology-mediated social interactions. Cultural drivers (CD) — which include embedded traditions, values, and narratives reflecting national identity and collective memory — provide a powerful lens through which Gen Z conceptualizes and selects travel experiences. Research by Ribeiro et al. (2025) and Salinero et al. (2025) highlights that these cultural dimensions are not only markers of identity but also motivators for sustainable and pro-environmental travel choices that resonate with Gen Z's ecological consciousness.

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 has further amplified interest in cultural tourism, positioning local heritage sites such as AlUla and fostering initiatives that appeal to young travelers' desires to reconnect with their roots while exploring their country (Alharethi, 2025; Maqbool et al., 2024). Domestic destination attractiveness (DDA) has become instrumental in encouraging young Saudis to revalue homegrown travel experiences as part of lifestyle and identity affirmation (Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, 2025). At the same time, social referents (SR) — including family, peer networks, and digital influencers — shape travel intentions by framing norms and expectations around travel behavior (D'Arco, Marino, & Resciniti, 2025; Alshehri, 2025). The digitally savvy Gen Z is especially susceptible to online social influence, where platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube serve as pivotal channels for discovering destinations and shaping travel aspirations (Alosaimi, 2024; Zaib Abbasi et al., 2023). Paradoxically, while international destinations continue to allure Saudi Gen Z travelers, evidence suggests a nuanced moderation effect whereby the appeal of international destinations (IDA) may dampen or complicate the relationship between cultural drivers, social referents, and travel intention. The allure of global travel destinations offers new cultural exposures but can also compete with domestic offers aligned with cultural familiarity and national pride (Almadani, 2021; Shakeela & Jose, 2025). This tension between global aspirations and local identity thus frames the conceptual underpinning of this research, which hypothesizes specific moderating effects of IDA and DDA on the relationship between cultural and social influences and GTI.

Digital media's role in this ecosystem cannot be overstated in Saudi Arabia, where social media has become a primary source of travel inspiration and planning for over 39% of young digital natives (Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, 2025). Scholars such as Alshehri (2024) and Sharma et al. (2025) stress social media influencers' trust as a critical moderating factor impacting Gen Z's pro-sustainable tourism behaviour and destination selection. This underscores the importance of understanding how digital narratives, local cultural identity, and social norms intersect to shape this demographic's unique travel intentions. Given the Kingdom's youth-dominant population, with Gen Z representing a significant majority, exploring their travel intention through the dual lenses of cultural drivers and social referents offers practical insights for policymakers, marketers, and tourism stakeholders aiming to capitalize on this emerging domestic and outbound travel market (Bodrick et al., 2025; Aldhobaib, 2025). The research holds promise not only for Saudi Arabia's evolving tourism landscape but also offers transferable knowledge for other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries where similar socio-cultural and economic transitions are underway (Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, 2025; Shakeela & Jose, 2025).

Recent research demonstrates the significant role of digital and entrepreneurial factors in shaping Generation Z's travel intentions towards Saudi Arabia. (Abdelghani et al., 2023) show that visually engaging social media campaigns shape destination perceptions, while (Abdelghani, 2018a) finds that digital management enhances operational efficiency, together suggesting that culturally tailored digital narratives can align Gen Z's global aspirations with local Saudi identity. This is paralleled in leadership dynamics; (Ahmed et al., 2025a) found that transformational entrepreneurship fosters resilience, suggesting it can similarly empower Gen Z travelers, and (Ahmed et al., 2025b) demonstrate that leaders' STARA competencies enhance self-efficacy,

indicating how social referents can balance innovative aspirations with culturally relevant frameworks.

## 2. The Relationship with Sustainability and SDGs

The relationship between Generation Z's travel intentions and sustainability is increasingly vital in the context of global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Gen Z travelers exhibit a heightened awareness of environmental and social sustainability, which informs their travel behaviors and choices. This generation's emphasis on pro-environmental practices, such as reduced carbon footprints, support for local communities, and preservation of cultural heritage, directly reflects key SDGs, particularly SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 15 (Life on Land) (Ribeiro et al., 2025; Salinero et al., 2025). Their preferences align with a broader shift towards sustainable tourism, which balances economic growth with the protection of natural and cultural resources. Cultural drivers among Gen Z intertwine with sustainability by fostering a strong sense of responsibility towards maintaining their cultural and environmental heritage. This connection motivates behaviors supportive of sustainable destinations and eco-friendly travel alternatives (Bakr et al., 2025). Furthermore, social referents, including influencers and peer networks, act as catalysts for promoting sustainability values within young travelers, amplifying the adoption of green travel practices (Zaib Abbasi et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2025). Such social dynamics contribute to awareness and behavioral change, supporting SDG 4 (Quality Education) by disseminating knowledge on sustainability through digital and social platforms.

Saudi Arabia's initiatives under Vision 2030 integrate sustainability goals by promoting cultural tourism that emphasizes environmental stewardship and social inclusiveness (Alharethi, 2025; Maqbool et al., 2024). This strategy supports global SDG targets by encouraging domestic tourism that reduces reliance on long-haul travel and fosters local economic development—advancing SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). In conclusion, Generation Z's travel intentions shaped by cultural drivers and social referents inherently support the Sustainable Development Goals through an emphasis on sustainable, responsible tourism. This alignment reinforces the importance of integrating cultural identity and social influence in advancing sustainability agendas in tourism policy and practice globally.

## 3. Review of literature

### 3.1 Theoretical underpinnings

An extensive body of research over the last decade has unpacked the unique travel behaviors of Generation Z, emphasizing their distinct value systems, behavioral intentions, and environmental consciousness (Ribeiro et al., 2025; Salinero et al., 2025). Cultural drivers emerge as a recurrent theme, intricately linked to identity formation processes that influence travel preferences, with Generation Z exhibiting pronounced desires for travel experiences that authentically represent and honor local traditions and heritage (Bakr et al., 2025; Choo, Lee, & Xie, 2023). This cohort's heightened awareness of sustainability and social responsibility further intersects with cultural drivers, fostering pro-environmental tourism behaviors (D'Arco, Marino, & Resciniti, 2025; Butnaru et al., 2022). Social referents, encompassing peer influence, family, and especially digital influencers, have gained scholarly attention as significant determinants of travel intention in the digital age (Zaib Abbasi et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2025). The proliferation of user-generated content on short video platforms such as TikTok and Douyin plays an integral role in shaping young travelers' destination choices via stimulus-organism-response mechanisms (Yamagishi et al., 2024; Duan & Ng, 2025). Social media trust, network interaction, and media credibility have been identified as critical mediators in this dynamic (Alshehri, 2025; Alosaimi, 2024). Within the Saudi context, research highlights a growing domestic tourism surge driven by Gen Z's embracement of local culture, digital exploration, and sustainable travel practices aligned with Vision 2030 objectives (Alharethi, 2025; Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, 2025). Destination branding efforts leveraging social media narratives and cultural authenticity have gained traction as mechanisms to influence this generation's travel decisions, with a marked preference for heritage-rich and eco-conscious hospitality offerings (Almadani, 2021; Bakr et al., 2025; Maqbool et al., 2024). However, the tension between international destination appeal and domestic travel preferences points to a moderating effect needing deeper empirical exploration (Shakeela & Jose, 2025). The interplay of global aspirations with local identity and cultural pride, mediated by social and digital referents, forms an essential conceptual gap that this research addresses, contributing to extant studies on generational

tourism and digital consumption behaviors in a culturally complex and rapidly evolving environment (Bodrick et al., 2025; Alshehri, 2025).

Further studies highlight the profound influence of social, cultural, and environmental identities on contextual travel choices. (Abdelghani et al., 2025a) reveal that gossip-driven emotional contagion can erode self-esteem, indicating influential social referents can sway travel intentions by amplifying collective identity motivations. Similarly, fostering a strong cultural or environmental identity is key; (Abdelghani & Ahmed, 2019; Ahmed et al., 2025c) found that environmental identity mediates sustainable behaviors, while (Abdelghani et al., 2025b; Abdelghani et al., 2025c) illustrate that aligning factors with cultural heritage significantly enhances engagement, indicating local traditions profoundly influence Gen Z's choices. However, challenges remain, as (Abdelghani, 2018b) identifies gaps in digital infrastructure, pointing to difficulties in integrating global exposure with local values, all within a context where socio-cultural dynamics strongly shape travel decisions (Abdelghani et al., 2025d). Based on the provided sources, digital transformation and entrepreneurial leadership are pivotal in aligning global tourism trends with local cultural preservation. The integration of advanced ICT enhances operational efficiency and heritage promotion, supporting Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, while transformational entrepreneurship fosters organizational resilience and competitive advantage (Zaki et al., 2025). Furthermore, experiential learning through internships prepares students with the skills necessary for sustainable tourism challenges (Abdelghani & Ahmed, 2025).

### 3.2 Research hypothesis

#### 3.2.1 Cultural Drivers and Generation Z Travel Intention

Cultural drivers are increasingly recognized as a powerful influence shaping Generation Z's travel behavior and intentions. Culture provides values, beliefs, and practices that guide how individuals perceive destinations, engage in tourism experiences, and develop pro-environmental and socially responsible behaviors. For Generation Z, cultural identity is particularly significant, as this cohort has grown up in an era of globalization, digital interconnectivity, and heightened environmental awareness (Corbisiero, Monaco, & Ruspini, 2022). These cultural elements not only shape their consumption patterns but also influence how they evaluate destinations and make travel-related decisions. Research highlights that cultural drivers interact with broader psychological and social factors to guide sustainable tourism behaviors. For example, Ribeiro et al. (2025) and Salinero et al. (2025) emphasize that Generation Z is more inclined toward sustainable travel when cultural norms align with pro-environmental values, while Butnaru et al. (2022) demonstrate that environmental protection behaviors among this cohort are directly linked to cultural and societal expectations. Similarly, D'Arco, Marino, and Resciniti (2025) argue that personal and injunctive norms—rooted in cultural contexts—play a central role in shaping travel intentions. Beyond sustainability, digital culture has also emerged as a critical driver of travel intention. User-generated content, vlog advertising, and social media engagement reflect how cultural narratives influence destination choice. Studies by Yamagishi et al. (2024), Zaib Abbasi et al. (2023), and Kim and Cake (2025) demonstrate that cultural storytelling through social media enhances Gen Z's intention to travel by validating experiences that resonate with their values. Similarly, Duan and Ng (2025) show how short-video sharing platforms create cultural momentum around travel decisions. Generational research further supports the unique cultural patterns of Gen Z. Sulistyowati et al. (2025) reveal that purchasing and travel intentions differ across generations due to distinct cultural orientations. This is echoed in Ngo et al. (2025) and Rütelioné and Bhutto (2024), who find that cultural identity and green values enhance Gen Z's travel choices, while Choo, Lee, and Xie (2023) illustrate how global and national cultural identities coexist in shaping cross-cultural consumption. Furthermore, Sibi (2023) and Lin et al. (2024) argue that social influences, digital presence, and cultural belonging are critical in reinforcing Gen Z's loyalty and engagement in tourism contexts. Taken together, the literature suggests that cultural drivers, whether through norms, identity, or digital representation, are essential determinants of Generation Z's travel intention. These drivers connect personal values to collective cultural expectations, ultimately motivating Gen Z to travel in ways that align with their generational identity and social influences. Hence, the study posits:

*H<sub>1</sub>. Cultural Drivers (CD) positively influence Generation Z Travel Intention (GTI).*



### 3.2.2 Social Referents and Generation Z Travel Intention

Social referents, including peers, influencers, family members, and online communities, play a decisive role in shaping Generation Z's travel intentions. This generation is highly socially connected, digitally native, and significantly influenced by the opinions and experiences of others when considering travel destinations. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z relies heavily on digital interactions and user-generated content to validate travel decisions, creating a social ecosystem where referents are as influential as traditional marketing (CHIAN, 2023; Sharma, Rawat, Joshi, & Misra, 2025). Social media platforms have become a primary arena for these referents. Studies reveal that influencers and digital creators exert a strong pull on Gen Z's travel behavior, particularly regarding sustainable and unique tourism experiences (Sharma et al., 2025; Tuan & Phi, 2025). Rachmandani, Kusumah, and Sukriah (2025) further emphasize that influencer-following behavior moderates the relationship between social media usage and visiting intentions, highlighting the trust placed in referents as credible sources (Ahmed et al., 2025c). Similarly, An and Ngo (2025) show that social media marketing and electronic word of mouth (E-WOM) increase purchase and travel intentions, underscoring the social validation Gen Z seeks before making travel choices. Beyond influencers, peers and social groups also strongly affect Gen Z's travel intentions. Nilsson Vestola and Ek Styvén (2025) note that motivation, opportunity, and ability (MOA) factors are shaped by peer encouragement and cultural norms, which frame sustainable travel as both socially rewarding and morally expected. Paliwal, Buhalis, Jha, and Chatradhi (2025) add that Gen Z's interest in metaverse platforms for travel planning reflects their desire for shared, socially engaging experiences. This aligns with Lee and Lee (2024), who find that AI-driven travel planners are perceived as reliable partly because of peer-sharing mechanisms that create social endorsement of information quality. Social referents also connect with broader societal and environmental contexts. Wu, Lim, and Lim (2025) and Mukhtar, Shad, and Lai (2025) argue that social pressures—combined with innovation and sustainability expectations—drive competitive advantage in travel-related decisions, with social legitimacy reinforcing Gen Z's intentions. Zhou and Choi (2025) and Fan, Liu, Tajeddini, and Khaskheli (2023) highlight that global discourses around sustainability and innovation are amplified through social networks, further shaping Gen Z's travel orientations. Likewise, Su and Muhammad (2023) demonstrate that economic and social conditions influence life satisfaction, which indirectly affects how younger generations pursue meaningful leisure and travel activities. The digital environment also reflects the risks and challenges of social referents. Akamavi, Ibrahim, and Swaray (2023) show that security threats and global instability influence Gen Z's perceptions through social communication, while Letsie (2020) highlights how generational differences affect the integration of digital referents in decision-making. Moreover, Rynthama and Septiani (2025) emphasize how deterrence theory explains social influence on Gen Z's broader digital behaviors, offering insights into how perceived norms extend to tourism contexts. Altogether, these findings underscore that Gen Z's travel intention is profoundly shaped by the influence of social referents—through peers, influencers, and social networks—who validate and legitimize their choices. Therefore, the study propose the following hypotheses:

*H<sub>2</sub>. Social Referents (SR) positively influence Generation Z Travel Intention (GTI).*

### 3.2.3 The Moderating Role of International Destination Appeal

The relationship between cultural drivers and Generation Z's travel intentions is not always straightforward, as external factors can significantly shape this dynamic. One important factor is the appeal of international destinations. Previous studies suggest that the attractiveness of a foreign location can either amplify or weaken the influence of cultural motivations on travel decisions (Yang, 2024). When destinations are perceived as innovative or offer unique cultural experiences, they can overshadow traditional socio-cultural motivations, making travelers prioritize novelty over cultural familiarity (Yamaguchi, 2025). Research on Saudi outbound tourists indicates that socio-cultural drivers strongly affect destination choice, but this relationship can be moderated by how appealing international destinations appear in terms of accessibility, facilities, and global image (Madkhali et al., 2024). For example, events such as the Mevlevi Sema ceremonies demonstrate how cultural appeal is heightened when destinations strategically emphasize heritage experiences, attracting visitors who may not initially have cultural motivations (Erdoğan et al., 2025). Similarly, UNESCO World Heritage sites exert strong international pull, sometimes outweighing the cultural drivers from tourists' countries of

origin (Uderianová & Krnáčová, 2025). City branding and strategic marketing also play critical roles in shaping international appeal. Liu et al. (2025) highlight that destinations like Suzhou leverage integrated marketing strategies to present a distinctive cultural image that resonates globally. In this sense, strong international appeal can reduce the relative impact of personal cultural drivers on travel intentions. Likewise, perceived cultural distance and cultural intelligence affect how tourists evaluate foreign destinations, with high appeal mitigating concerns about unfamiliarity (Malay et al., 2024). Online destination branding further enhances international attractiveness, often positioning destinations as globally relevant cultural hubs (Lusticky et al., 2020). Moreover, mass cultural events can act as catalysts of international appeal, drawing travelers who might otherwise rely on local cultural drivers (Khusanovich, 2025). Based on these insights, the study argues that while cultural drivers positively influence Generation Z's travel intentions, the strength of this relationship diminishes when international destinations exhibit strong appeal. Hence, the study posits:

*H<sub>3</sub>: International Destination Appeal (IDA) negatively moderates the relationship between Cultural Drivers (CD) and Generation Z's Travel Intention (GTI).*

### 3.2.4 The Moderating Role of International Destination Appeal on Social Referents and Travel Intention

Social referents—including peers, family, and online communities—play a crucial role in shaping Generation Z's travel intentions. Word-of-mouth recommendations, social media engagement, and user-generated content create powerful social cues that influence how individuals perceive destinations (Chiu et al., 2020; Brown & Taylor, 2022). Positive endorsements from trusted referents often lead to higher destination loyalty and stronger intentions to visit (Adams & Evans, 2022; Chen & Tsai, 2021). Similarly, satisfaction with prior travel experiences shared through networks enhances revisitation and destination loyalty (Garcia & Perez, 2021). However, the effect of social referents does not occur in isolation. The international appeal of a destination can weaken or override the influence of social endorsements. Research suggests that when a destination has strong global visibility, high-quality branding, and innovative marketing, individuals may prioritize these attributes over social recommendations (Halwani, 2025; Feng et al., 2022). For example, emotionally appealing international marketing campaigns can directly shape perceptions and intentions, reducing reliance on peer influence (Japutra et al., 2024). Social media further complicates this dynamic. While platforms amplify the voice of referents (Kim & Yang, 2023; Doe, 2021), strong international destination branding can reduce dependency on such cues by fostering direct engagement with tourists (Wei et al., 2025; Roy et al., 2024). For instance, when international destinations project sustainability, innovation, and cultural distinctiveness, travelers are more likely to form independent decisions based on global image rather than peer approval (Santos et al., 2022). Similarly, studies on destination satisfaction indicate that global appeal can directly enhance loyalty, bypassing the mediating role of social referents (Garcia & Perez, 2021). Thus, while social referents positively affect Generation Z's travel intentions, this relationship is negatively moderated by international destination appeal. When a destination has strong international visibility and attractiveness, the influence of social referents diminishes. Therefore, the following hypothesis is developed:

*H<sub>4</sub>: International Destination Appeal (IDA) negatively moderates the relationship between Social Referents (SR) and Generation Z's Travel Intention (GTI).*

### 3.2.5 The Moderating Role of Domestic Destination Attractiveness on Cultural Drivers and Travel Intention

Cultural drivers, such as heritage, traditions, and authentic local experiences, are among the most powerful motivators influencing Generation Z's travel intentions. When travelers perceive a destination as rich in cultural offerings, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward visiting (Phat et al., 2025; Goeltom & Hurriyati, 2024). The attractiveness of a domestic destination—especially in terms of cultural authenticity and unique heritage—enhances tourists' emotional connection and shapes their overall satisfaction (Evanita & Fahmi, 2025; Abbasi et al., 2021). Domestic destinations that effectively leverage cultural heritage often strengthen their appeal by creating authenticity that resonates with tourists' search for meaningful experiences (Phat et al., 2025). In addition, territorial branding and investment in cultural infrastructure play a pivotal role in improving domestic attractiveness, making such destinations competitive in the tourism market (Tsviliy et al.,

2022). This aligns with findings that destination competitiveness, when supported by cultural elements, fosters stronger intentions to visit and revisit (Qazi, 2024; Purwono et al., 2024). Tourist perceived innovativeness also shapes domestic attractiveness by offering new and creative ways to engage with cultural heritage, thereby enhancing satisfaction and loyalty (Yang, 2024). Furthermore, reducing perceived risks through effective management increases trust in domestic cultural sites, making them more appealing compared to international alternatives (Chaudhary & Ul Islam, 2021). Studies on tourism competitiveness highlight that domestic destinations that integrate sustainability, authenticity, and innovation are better positioned to capture travelers' interest (Bazargani & Kiliç, 2021; de Paula Aguiar-Barbosa & Chim-Miki, 2024). From an economic perspective, domestic destination attractiveness not only strengthens local tourism performance but also contributes to employment, investment, and economic growth (Hossain et al., 2025). In this way, cultural drivers are amplified by domestic attractiveness, producing stronger travel intentions among Generation Z. Therefore, the following hypothesis is suggested:

*H<sub>5</sub>: Domestic Destination Attractiveness (DDA) positively moderates the relationship between Cultural Drivers (CD) and Generation Z's Travel Intention (GTI).*

### 3.2.6 Domestic Destination Attractiveness and Its Moderating Role

Domestic destination attractiveness (DDA) plays a pivotal role in shaping tourist travel intentions, particularly when social referents (SR)—such as family, peers, and cultural networks—are involved in decision-making. Previous research highlights that destination attributes, including image, cultural authenticity, sustainability, and infrastructure, significantly influence tourist perceptions and behavior (GUANGMENG, 2023; Goeltom & Hurriyati, 2024). For domestic destinations, attractiveness becomes even more important when competing with international destinations, as travelers weigh familiarity, cultural values, and perceived safety (Abdelghani et al., 2025e). The literature suggests that social influences exerted by family members, peers, and communities strongly affect destination choice, particularly in collectivist societies (Abdelghani et al., 2025a). However, the extent to which these influences translate into actual travel behavior depends on how appealing the domestic destination is. Attractive destinations offering sustainable practices, memorable experiences, and cultural enrichment strengthen the persuasive power of social referents (Torres-Moraga et al., 2024; Jokom et al., 2025). This moderating effect indicates that when domestic destinations align with values of sustainability and resilience, the influence of social referents on travel intentions becomes more pronounced (Halpern & Mwesiumo, 2025; Karsokiene et al., 2025). Moreover, advances in smart tourism technologies and digital platforms amplify the visibility of domestic attractions, further enhancing the moderating role of DDA (Tulung et al., 2025). A well-promoted, culturally rich, and environmentally responsible destination not only attracts new visitors but also fosters loyalty through positive word-of-mouth, often initiated by social referents (Kusumah, 2024; Fuchs, 2024). Thus, destination attractiveness serves as a catalyst that converts social encouragement into concrete travel intentions. Hence, the study posits:

*H<sub>6</sub>: Domestic Destination Attractiveness (DDA) positively moderates the relationship between Social Referents (SR) and Generation Z's Travel Intention (GTI).*

### 3.3 Study Framework

This research investigates the intricate dynamics between cultural heritage appreciation and digital social influence in shaping Generation Z's travel behavior within Saudi Arabia's transformative tourism landscape. Employing a quantitative approach with 447 Saudi youth participants, the study examines how cultural drivers and social referents interact with domestic destination attractiveness and international destination appeal to influence travel intentions. The conceptual framework integrates social identity theory and cultural consumption perspectives, revealing that while both cultural connections and peer influences significantly motivate travel decisions, their impact is amplified by domestic destination qualities rather than diminished by international alternatives. This framework contributes to understanding generational tourism behavior within culturally rich contexts experiencing rapid modernization, offering insights particularly relevant to Vision 2030's objectives of promoting authentic Saudi heritage experiences while addressing global tourism competitiveness.

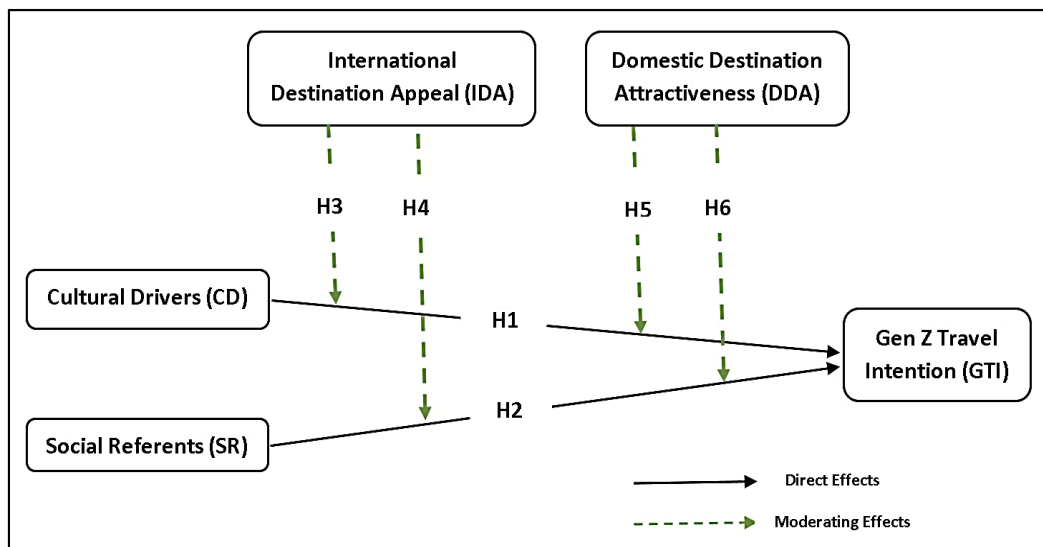


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

## 4. Methods

### 4.1. Measures

To ensure the credibility and validity of the measurement tool—the survey questionnaire—validated scales from previous studies were employed. Social referents (SR) was assessed using a five-item scale developed by Ajzen (1991) and refined by Quintal et al. (2015), which measures the influence of significant others, family members, and peer networks on tourism decision-making behaviors. Cultural Drivers (CD) was measured through a five-item scale proposed by Liu et al. (2024) and Chen & Rosdi (2024), capturing tourists' connection to cultural heritage, local traditions, and authentic cultural experiences that motivate travel behavior. Similarly, Gen Z travel intention (GTI) was evaluated using Nguyen et al. (2025) and Tran & Khoa's (2025) five-item scale, specifically designed to assess young travelers' behavioral intentions toward destination selection and travel planning activities. Domestic Tourism attractiveness (DDA) was measured with five items from Li et al. (2023) and Yang (2024), encompassing facility services, accessibility, cultural heritage, and overall destination appeal factors. Finally, five items were borrowed from Reitsamer & Brunner-Sperdin (2017) and adapted by Chen & Rosdi (2024) to evaluate international destination appeal (IDA), focusing on global destinations' perceived innovativeness, accessibility, amenities, and competitive attractiveness compared to domestic alternatives. All constructs utilized a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, ensuring consistency in measurement and facilitating comparative analysis across variables.

### 4.2. Data collection

To collect data from Saudi youth aged 18 to 28, a convenience sampling approach was employed. Survey participation was voluntary, with respondents assured of confidentiality. By completing the questionnaire, participants provided informed consent. Ultimately, 447 valid responses were obtained. The online survey further ensured data completeness through a mandatory response function, which required participants to answer each item before proceeding to the next. Of these 447 respondents, the sample was almost evenly distributed by gender, with 51.7% male and 48.3% female participants. Regarding education, the majority of respondents held a bachelor's degree (64.2%), while 22.1% had completed high school or below, 13.6% held a master's degree.

### 4.3. Data analysis

The PLS-SEM approach, implemented through SmartPLS V3.0, was utilized to test the study hypotheses. PLS-SEM was deemed appropriate for this study, as the primary objective was to predict one or more variables rather than validate an existing theoretical framework. Additionally, PLS-SEM effectively handles complex models, incorporating independent variables (Social referents (SR) and Cultural Drivers (CD)), dependent variables (Gen Z travel intention (GTI)), mediating variables (Family travel decisions (FTD)), and moderating variables (Domestic Tourism attractiveness (DDA), and international destination appeal (IDA)). The analytical process followed two key stages: evaluating the outer model (measurement model) to ensure reliability and validity and assessing the inner model (structural model) to examine hypothesized relationships (Joseph F. Hair et al., 2017).



## 5. Results

### 5.1. Test of common method bias (CMB) and normality

Harman's single-factor test was employed to assess potential common method bias (CMB) in the measurement instrument. According to (Podsakoff et al., 2003), CMB becomes a concern if a single factor accounts for more than 50% of the variance. In this analysis, a single factor accounted for only 27.54% of the variance, suggesting that CMB was not a significant issue. Subsequently, data normality was evaluated using skewness and kurtosis statistics. As presented in Table 1, all items exhibited skewness within  $\pm 2$  and kurtosis within  $\pm 7$  (Curran et al., 1996), indicating that non-normality was not a significant concern.

### 5.2. The measurement model

Following the recommendations of (Hair et al., 2019), the convergent validity (CV) of the measurement model was evaluated using factor loadings ( $\lambda$ ), coefficient alpha ( $\alpha$ ), and construct reliability (CR), with all thresholds set at  $\geq 0.70$ . Furthermore, the average variance extracted (AVE) was required to exceed the minimum criterion of 0.50. As presented in Table 1, the results indicate that these conditions were satisfactorily met, confirming the adequacy of convergent validity and supporting the internal consistency of the measurement model.

**Table 1.** The measurement model evaluation results.

Factors and items	$\lambda$	VIF	Mean	SD	SK	KU	
A. Cultural Drivers (CD) ( $\alpha=0.883$ , CR = 0.914, AVE = 0.680)							
CD1	0.850	2.319	3.660	1.119	-.690	-.106	
CD2	0.855	2.558	3.689	1.108	-.703	.006	
CD3	0.824	2.130	3.736	1.151	-.800	.047	
CD4	0.802	1.877	3.662	1.211	-.684	-.328	
CD5	0.790	2.048	3.582	1.119	-.528	-.255	
B. Social Referents (SR) ( $\alpha=0.858$ , CR = 0.898, AVE = 0.637)							
SR1	0.829	2.852	3.951	1.123	-.808	-.265	
SR2	0.804	2.610	3.893	1.093	-.665	-.480	
SR3	0.792	2.969	3.758	1.130	-.441	-.863	
SR4	0.814	2.322	3.720	1.166	-.575	-.587	
SR5	0.751	2.486	3.624	1.202	-.559	-.624	
C. Generation Z Travel Intention (GTI) ( $\alpha=0.882$ , CR = 0.914, AVE = 0.680)							
GTI1	0.835	2.197	3.868	1.089	-.855	.109	
GTI2	0.838	2.259	3.839	1.176	-.840	-.268	
GTI3	0.828	2.120	3.790	1.194	-.754	-.427	
GTI4	0.860	2.296	3.850	1.212	-.902	-.119	
GTI5	0.759	1.700	3.649	1.233	-.656	-.614	
D. Domestic Destination Attractiveness (DDA) ( $\alpha=0.893$ , CR = 0.910, AVE = 0.670)							
DDA1	0.786	2.580	3.716	1.141	-.545	-.631	
DDA2	0.813	2.144	3.702	1.112	-.503	-.610	
DDA3	0.927	2.407	3.700	1.063	-.426	-.654	
DDA4	0.828	2.231	3.729	1.156	-.498	-.846	
DDA5	0.724	2.017	3.738	1.109	-.490	-.776	
E. International Destination Appeal (IDA) ( $\alpha=0.903$ , CR = 0.928, AVE = 0.720)							
IDA2	0.840	2.012	3.508	1.009	-.226	-.601	
IDA3	0.840	1.984	3.441	1.033	-.202	-.633	
IDA4	0.846	1.804	3.609	1.101	-.414	-.598	
IDA5	0.873	2.129	3.617	1.071	-.357	-.637	
IDA2	0.844	1.856	3.604	1.017	-.252	-.578	

Note: SK = Skewness, KU = Kurtosis.

Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggested that discriminant validity (DV) is achieved when a construct's AVE is greater than the squared correlations with other constructs. Furthermore, the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT), commonly applied in recent tourism and hospitality studies, should remain below 0.90 (Gold et al., 2001). Consistent with these criteria, Table 2 (Fornell–Larcker criterion) and Table 3 (HTMT) show that DV was successfully established.

**Table 2.** Fornell–Larcker criterion.

	CD	DDA	GTI	IDA	(SR)
Cultural Drivers (CD)	0.825				
Domestic Destination Attractiveness (DDA)	0.227	0.818			
Generation Z Travel Intention (GTI).	0.286	0.053	0.825		
International Destination Appeal (IDA)	0.299	0.281	0.460	0.849	
Social Referents (SR)	0.361	0.042	0.486	0.421	0.798

**Table 3.** Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT).

	CD	DDA	GTI	IDA	(SR)
Cultural Drivers (CD)					
Domestic Destination Attractiveness (DDA)	0.253				
Generation Z Travel Intention (GTI).	0.317	0.052			
International Destination Appeal (IDA)	0.327	0.301	0.506		
Social Referents (SR)	0.415	0.058	0.551	0.471	

### 5.3. Structural model estimation and Hypotheses testing.

To assess the structural model, variance inflation factors (VIF), coefficients of determination ( $R^2$ ), Stone-Geisser's  $Q^2$ , and standardized beta coefficients ( $\beta$ ) were analyzed (Hair et al., 2019). Table 1 shows that the VIF values ranged from 1.700 to 2.852, remaining well below the critical value of 5.0, indicating the absence of multicollinearity among the constructs. The model exhibits accepted explanatory power, as the  $R^2$  for Generation Z Travel Intention (GTI) is 0.392, surpassing the minimum cut-off threshold of 0.25. Predictive relevance is confirmed, with all  $Q^2$  values above 0.0, supporting the model's predictive capability (see Table 4) (Hair et al., 2019).

Following the confirmation of validity and reliability for both the measurement and structural models, the next step involves testing the study's hypotheses. This stage is crucial for determining the significance and direction of the proposed relationships between the constructs. The detailed results of these hypothesis tests are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Hypotheses testing

Hypothesis	$\beta$	t	p	Remark
Direct effect				
H1: CD $\rightarrow$ GTI	0.211	4.172	0.000	✓
H2: SR $\rightarrow$ GTI	0.358	6.185	0.000	✓
Moderating effect				
H3: CD $\times$ IDA $\rightarrow$ GTI	-0.044	0.728	0.467	✗
H4: SR $\times$ IDA $\rightarrow$ GTI	0.083	1.610	0.108	✗
H5: CD $\times$ DDA $\rightarrow$ GTI	0.142	2.560	0.011	✓
H6: SR $\times$ DDA $\rightarrow$ GTI	0.134	2.389	0.017	✓
Generation Z Travel Intention (GTI)	R2	0.392	Q2	0.242

Note: Cultural Drivers = (CD); Domestic Destination Attractiveness = (DDA); Generation Z Travel Intention = (GTI); International Destination Appeal = (IDA); Social Referents = (SR); Beta coefficients= $\beta$ ; t-value=t; p value=p; ✓= supported; ✗= Not supported.

The results in Table 4 and Figure 2 reveal that both cultural drivers ( $\beta = 0.211$ ,  $t = 4.172$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and social

referents ( $\beta = 0.358, t = 6.185, p < 0.001$ ) exert significant positive effects on Generation Z's travel intention, with social referents emerging as the stronger predictor. Regarding the moderating effects, international destination appeal (IDA) does not significantly moderate the relationships between cultural drivers or social referents and travel intention ( $p > 0.05$ ). In contrast, domestic destination attractiveness (DDA) significantly strengthens both the CD–GTI ( $\beta = 0.142, t = 2.560, p = 0.011$ ) (see Figure 3) and SR–GTI ( $\beta = 0.134, t = 2.389, p = 0.017$ ) relationships (see Figure 4).

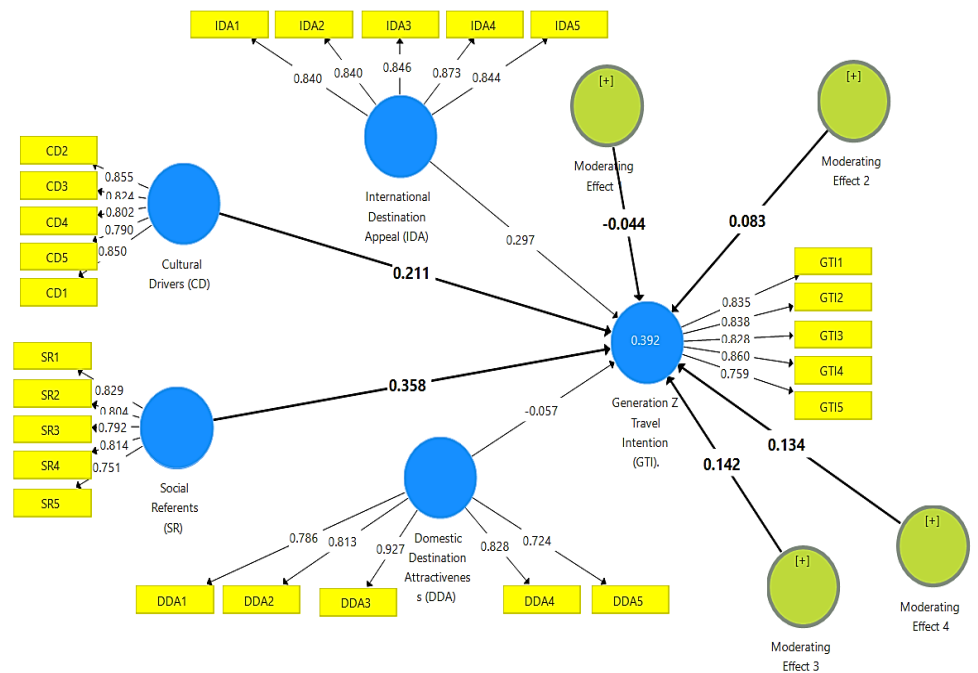


Figure 2. Estimation of structure model

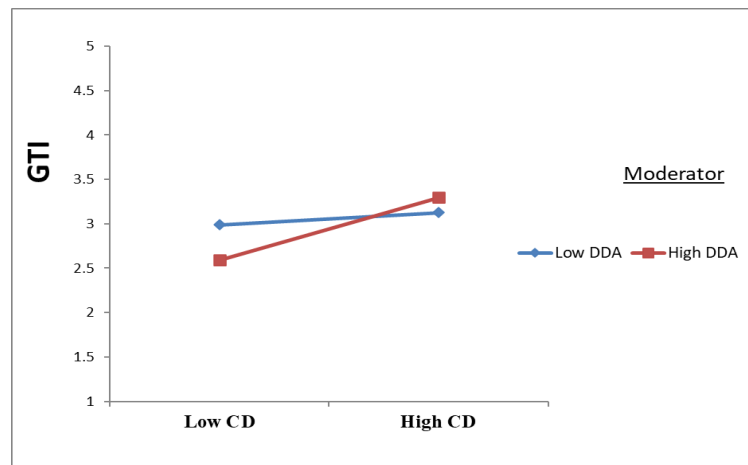


Figure 3. Moderating effect of DDA on the relationship between CD and GTI.

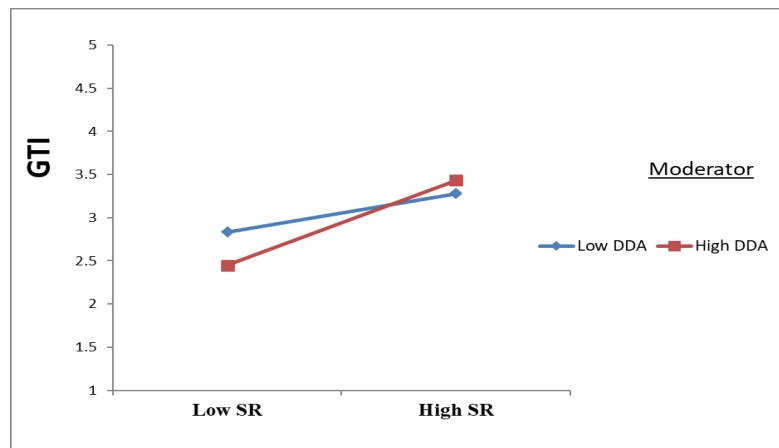


Figure 4. Moderating effect of DDA on the relationship between CD and GTI.

Figure 2's Structural Model confirms the significant pathway from social influences to travel behavior, demonstrating substantial predictive capability ( $R^2=0.392$ ) while acknowledging other potential factors, and this relationship is further illuminated in Figures 3 and 4, which illustrate the moderating effects of domestic destination qualities; these visuals show that investment in local attractions practically enhances and amplifies both cultural and social travel motivators, thereby highlighting a synergistic rather than competitive approach to tourism development.

## 6. Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the complex interplay between traditional cultural identity and contemporary digital influence in shaping Generation Z's travel behavior within Saudi Arabia's rapidly evolving tourism landscape. The confirmation that both cultural drivers and social referents significantly influence travel intentions aligns with recent research highlighting Gen Z's dual need for authentic cultural connection and peer validation (Ribeiro et al., 2025; Sharma et al., 2025). However, the notably stronger influence of social referents ( $\beta=0.358$ ) compared to cultural drivers ( $\beta=0.211$ ) suggests a fundamental shift in how young Saudis prioritize travel motivations, reflecting broader generational trends toward digitally mediated decision-making processes. The absence of significant moderation effects from international destination appeal challenges conventional assumptions about global travel aspirations among young travelers. This finding contradicts studies suggesting that international destinations typically overshadow domestic alternatives for Gen Z (Yang, 2024; Yamaguchi, 2025), indicating that Saudi Arabia's unique cultural context and Vision 2030 initiatives may have successfully repositioned domestic tourism as equally compelling to international options. The lack of international destination appeal's negative moderation suggests that young Saudis view domestic and international travel as complementary rather than competing choices, reflecting a sophisticated understanding of travel's multifaceted benefits (Alharethi, 2025; Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, 2025).

Conversely, the significant positive moderation of domestic destination attractiveness on both cultural and social influence pathways reveals crucial insights for tourism development strategies. These findings support recent evidence that well-developed domestic tourism infrastructure can amplify rather than compete with existing travel motivations (Phat et al., 2025; Evanita & Fahmi, 2025). The strengthening effect of domestic attractiveness suggests that investments in local heritage sites, cultural experiences, and tourism infrastructure create a multiplicative rather than additive impact on travel intentions, validating Saudi Arabia's strategic focus on domestic tourism development under Vision 2030. The dominance of social referents in influencing travel intentions reflects broader patterns observed in global Gen Z tourism research, where peer influence and digital social validation increasingly supersede traditional cultural motivations (Zaib Abbasi et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2025). This finding has profound implications for tourism marketing strategies, suggesting that authentic peer-generated content and influencer partnerships may be more effective than traditional cultural heritage promotion alone. The result aligns with studies demonstrating that 90% of Gen Z travelers use social media for travel inspiration, with 61% following travel influencers who significantly affect their destination choices (Global Web Index, 2024).

However, the sustained significance of cultural drivers, despite being secondary to social influence, indicates that cultural identity remains a fundamental component of travel motivation for young Saudis. This finding supports research emphasizing Gen Z's search for authentic cultural experiences and meaningful connections with heritage (Bakr et al., 2025; D'Arco, Marino, & Resciniti, 2025). The persistence of cultural influence suggests that tourism strategies combining authentic cultural storytelling with peer-validated experiences may achieve optimal engagement with this demographic. The study's implications extend beyond Saudi Arabia to other culturally rich destinations undergoing rapid modernization. The findings suggest that destinations can successfully leverage both traditional cultural assets and contemporary social influence mechanisms without cannibalizing either approach. Furthermore, the positive moderation effects of domestic destination attractiveness provide a roadmap for developing countries seeking to enhance their tourism competitiveness through strategic heritage tourism investments (OECD, 2009; Torres-Moraga et al., 2024). Future research should explore the temporal stability of these relationships as Saudi Arabia's tourism infrastructure continues developing and as Gen Z travelers gain experience that is more international. Additionally, investigating how digital cultural storytelling can bridge the gap between cultural drivers and social referents may reveal innovative approaches



to heritage tourism marketing that authentically engage younger generations while preserving cultural integrity.

## 7. Theoretical and Practical Implications

### 7.1 Theoretical Implications

This study makes substantial contributions to the theoretical understanding of generational tourism behavior by demonstrating how cultural identity and social influence mechanisms operate within digitally native cohorts. The findings advance social identity theory by revealing that Generation Z's travel decisions emerge from complex interactions between traditional cultural anchoring and contemporary peer validation systems (Kim et al., 2025; Yang & Wang, 2022). Unlike previous research suggesting linear relationships between cultural drivers and tourism behavior (Alyahya, 2024; Yang, 2024), our results illuminate a more nuanced theoretical framework where cultural identity serves as a foundation that is amplified or diminished by social referents and destination characteristics. The theoretical implications extend beyond conventional tourism motivation models by challenging assumptions about international destination superiority among young travelers. The absence of significant moderation effects from international destination appeal contradicts established theories suggesting that global aspirations consistently overshadow domestic tourism preferences (Suriyankietkaew, 2025; Schönherr et al., 2024). This finding suggests that cultural context may fundamentally alter theoretical predictions, particularly in societies undergoing rapid modernization while maintaining strong cultural heritage foundations. The results contribute to cultural tourism theory by demonstrating that authentic cultural connections can successfully compete with international alternatives when supported by quality domestic infrastructure (Alkhanbshi, 2024; Robinson, 2019).

Furthermore, the study's integration of the stimulus-organism-response framework with social identity theory provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding how digital social influence mediates traditional cultural motivations (Phyo, 2025; Wei et al., 2022). The dominant influence of social referents ( $\beta = 0.358$ ) over cultural drivers ( $\beta = 0.211$ ) supports emerging theories about digital natives' prioritization of peer validation in decision-making processes (Choo et al., 2023; D'Arco et al., 2025). This theoretical contribution is particularly significant as it bridges traditional cultural consumption theories with contemporary digital behavior models, offering a framework applicable to other culturally rich destinations experiencing technological transformation. The positive moderation effects of domestic destination attractiveness provide theoretical insights into how destination development can enhance rather than compete with existing motivational structures. This finding challenges zero-sum theoretical assumptions about tourism development, instead supporting multiplicative effect theories where infrastructure investments amplify existing psychological drivers (Li et al., 2023; Alyahya, 2024). The theoretical implications suggest that destination attractiveness functions not merely as a direct influence but as a catalyst that enhances the effectiveness of both cultural and social motivational pathways. This contributes to destination development theory by proposing that strategic investments can create synergistic effects across multiple motivational dimensions simultaneously, offering a more sophisticated understanding of how destination characteristics interact with tourist psychology to influence behavioral intentions within culturally significant contexts (Yang & Brown, 2022; Packer et al., 2019).

### 7.2 Practical Implications

The findings offer transformative insights for destination marketing organizations and tourism policymakers seeking to engage Generation Z travelers effectively. The dominance of social referents in shaping travel intentions necessitates a fundamental shift from traditional heritage-focused marketing toward peer-validated, socially mediated promotional strategies (Phyo, 2025; Chen, 2023). Tourism marketers should prioritize authentic influencer partnerships and user-generated content campaigns that display cultural experiences through peer perspectives rather than institutional narratives. This approach aligns with evidence that 90% of Gen Z travelers rely on social media for travel inspiration, with peer recommendations significantly outweighing official destination marketing (Zaib Abbasi et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2025). For Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 implementation, the results provide strategic direction for heritage tourism development investments. The positive moderation effects of domestic destination attractiveness indicate that infrastructure improvements will amplify both cultural appreciation and social influence pathways, suggesting that tourism development spending generates multiplicative rather than additive returns (Alyahya, 2024; Alkhanbshi, 2024). Policymakers

should focus on creating Instagram-worthy cultural experiences, immersive heritage storytelling, and digitally enhanced cultural encounters that satisfy both authenticity desires and social shareability requirements. The Heritage Tourism Market projections indicating growth from USD 5.1 billion to USD 8.4 billion by 2033 support strategic investments in technology-enhanced cultural preservation and visitor engagement systems. Destination management organizations should implement integrated marketing approaches combining cultural authenticity with digital engagement strategies. The sustained significance of cultural drivers despite social media dominance suggests that authentic cultural storytelling remains essential, but must be delivered through peer-validated channels (Suriyankietkaew, 2025; Robinson, 2019). Practical strategies include creating cultural ambassador programs where young Saudis share heritage experiences, developing augmented reality applications for historical sites, and designing culturally immersive experiences specifically optimized for social media documentation and sharing. The absence of international destination appeal's negative moderation suggests that domestic tourism development can proceed without concerns about cannibalizing international travel desires. Tourism authorities should position domestic heritage tourism as complementary to rather than competing with international travel, emphasizing unique Saudi cultural experiences unavailable elsewhere (Schönherr et al., 2024; Yang, 2024). This positioning strategy supports Vision 2030's diversification objectives by developing domestic tourism as a sustainable economic pillar while maintaining international tourism aspirations.

This research offers pivotal contributions to Saudi Arabia's socio-economic landscape by informing strategies that advance human health, environmental sustainability, basic needs, energy and industry, and future economies as prioritized in the National Research, Development, and Innovation (RDI) framework (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2021). First, by identifying cultural drivers that reinforce heritage appreciation, the study supports initiatives to preserve traditional sites and promote community well-being (Bakr et al., 2025). Second, the dominant role of social referents underscores the importance of leveraging digital platforms and youth networks to disseminate health-promoting travel experiences in natural and cultural settings, contributing to SDG 3 (Zaib Abbasi et al., 2023). Third, the positive moderation by domestic destination attractiveness informs investments in renewable-energy-powered tourism facilities and eco-friendly infrastructure, advancing SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) and SDG 13 (Climate Action) while driving local industry growth (Li et al., 2023). Fourth, the demonstrated complementarity between domestic and international tourism aligns with Vision 2030's goal of diversifying the economy through a knowledge-based and experience-driven tourism sector, bolstering SDG 8 and fostering future economies. This discussion is best placed in the Implications section immediately following the theoretical contributions, where the practical value for national policymakers and community stakeholders can be fully elaborated. Furthermore, the findings recommend developing culturally grounded social media strategies that leverage peer influence while preserving heritage authenticity. Tourism operators should create experiential packages designed for social sharing, establish partnerships with culturally knowledgeable local influencers, and implement technology solutions that enhance rather than replace traditional cultural encounters (Kim et al., 2025; Chen, 2022). The practical implications extend to training programs for tourism professionals in digital marketing, cultural storytelling, and Generation Z engagement techniques, ensuring that heritage tourism development aligns with contemporary traveler expectations while maintaining cultural integrity and supporting sustainable tourism growth within Saudi Arabia's transformative economic landscape.

## 8. Limitations and Future Research

This study acknowledges several methodological and conceptual limitations that warrant careful consideration in interpreting the findings. The cross-sectional design, while providing valuable insights into the relationships between variables, limits our ability to establish definitive causal inferences or track the temporal evolution of Gen Z's travel intentions over time (Vogl, 2023; Hosany et al., 2022). Given the rapidly changing digital landscape and evolving cultural values within Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 context, longitudinal research designs would provide more robust evidence of how cultural drivers and social referents influence travel behavior across different life stages and societal transitions. The study's focus on Saudi Arabia, while contextually rich, raises questions about cross-cultural generalizability. Recent research emphasizes the importance of examining generational tourism behavior across diverse cultural contexts, as cultural dimensions significantly influence tourist motivations and decision-making processes (Pérez-Tapia et al., 2022; Chen & Gabrenya, 2021). Future investigations should extend this framework to other culturally rich developing nations experiencing rapid

modernization to assess the universal applicability of these findings and identify culturally specific variations in the relationships between traditional heritage appreciation and contemporary social influence. The reliance on self-report measures introduces potential social desirability bias and retrospective recall limitations, particularly when assessing culturally sensitive topics related to heritage identity and peer influence (Li et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024). Incorporating behavioral observation methods, digital trace data from social media platforms, and mixed-methods approaches combining quantitative surveys with in-depth qualitative interviews would enhance measurement validity and provide deeper insights into the psychological mechanisms underlying Gen Z's travel decision-making processes. Future research should also address demographic limitations by including broader age ranges within Generation Z, examining regional variations within Saudi Arabia, and investigating gender differences in cultural identity expression through travel behavior. The rapid evolution of digital tourism marketing and emergence of virtual tourism experiences present opportunities for examining how technological innovations interact with traditional cultural motivations (Bermúdez-González et al., 2023; Armutcu et al., 2023). Additionally, investigating the role of sustainability concerns, economic factors, and post-pandemic travel attitudes would provide a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary youth tourism behavior within the context of global environmental and health challenges.

## 9. Conclusion

This research provides groundbreaking insights into the complex interplay between cultural heritage and digital social influence in shaping Generation Z's travel intentions within Saudi Arabia's transformative tourism landscape. The study's findings reveal that while both cultural drivers and social referents significantly influence young Saudis' travel decisions, social referents emerge as the dominant predictor, reflecting broader generational shifts toward digitally mediated decision-making processes. This dominance of peer influence over traditional cultural motivations represents a fundamental transformation in how heritage tourism must be conceptualized and marketed to digital native generations, suggesting that authentic cultural experiences must be communicated through socially validated channels to achieve maximum impact (Phyo, 2025; Kim et al., 2024). The study's most significant contribution lies in demonstrating that domestic destination attractiveness serves as a positive moderator that amplifies both cultural and social motivational pathways, challenging conventional assumptions about international destination superiority among young travelers. This finding has profound implications for Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 tourism development strategy, indicating that strategic investments in domestic tourism infrastructure will generate multiplicative rather than merely additive returns on both heritage appreciation and peer-validated travel experiences. The absence of negative moderation from international destination appeal suggests that young Saudis view domestic and international travel as complementary rather than competing choices, supporting the Kingdom's ambitious goal of positioning itself as both a leading domestic and international tourism destination. From a theoretical perspective, this research advances our understanding of generational tourism behavior by integrating social identity theory with cultural consumption frameworks, revealing how traditional cultural anchoring interacts with contemporary digital influence mechanisms. The findings contribute to destination marketing theory by demonstrating that heritage tourism development can successfully compete with international alternatives when supported by quality infrastructure and socially engaging experiences. The study's implications extend beyond Saudi Arabia to other culturally rich nations undergoing rapid modernization, offering a framework for understanding how traditional cultural assets can be leveraged to engage digitally native generations while preserving cultural integrity. The practical implications emphasize the need for tourism organizations to adopt integrated marketing approaches that combine authentic cultural storytelling with peer-validated digital engagement strategies. As Generation Z continues to mature into primary tourism decision-makers, destinations that successfully bridge the gap between cultural authenticity and social media engagement will be best positioned to capture this influential demographic. This research provides both theoretical foundations and practical guidance for achieving this balance, contributing to the sustainable development of heritage tourism in an increasingly interconnected and digitally mediated world.

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