

Unravelling the Moral Disengagement of Generation Z in Tourism Destination Choice

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Abstract | The tourism industry promotes the movement of people, thoughts, and money across the globe (Salazar, 2010). A heated debate on tourism destinations engages scholars worldwide, with numerous studies analyzing the touristic choices of Generation Z (Robinson and Schänzel, 2019). This paper undertakes a compelling exploration of destination management within the context of Gen Z, with a specific emphasis on their moral disengagement (MD) in destination choice (Bandura, 2016). MD refers to the strategies individuals use, whether consciously or unconsciously, to engage in immoral actions while preserving their self-perception as moral individuals (Bandura et al., 2001). The study aims to explore whether Gen Z tends to morally disengage in unethical choices when selecting a tourist destination, considering the tourist experience as an opportunity for "context switch".

The research involved a Pilot-Test using an online survey with 129 participants to validate 33 choice variables (attributes) influencing the touristic experience (Pike, 2007). Respondents were asked to indicate the importance of each variable in their destination choice. The analysis justified and validated the final destination choice attributes. Gender Discriminant Analysis revealed significant differences about the "*morally exposed*" attributes, towards which male respondents showed a more positive inclination.

Keywords | Tourism, Destination Management, Moral Issues, Moral Disengagement, Generation Z

1. Introduction

Creating memorable experiences is a critical factor for enhancing the competitiveness of a tourism destination (Jensen et al., 2015). The tourism industry is a crucial participant in designing, showcasing, and providing such experiences by shaping the surroundings and presenting the local culture (O'Dell, 2007; Cutler and Carmichael, 2010).

Tourism industry promotes global circulation of people, ideas, and capital (Salazar, 2010). Though some travellers look for relaxation and luxury at the beaches and resorts, they are also in search of a sense of unfamiliarity while visiting various places (Collins, 2015).

Tourism can serve as a means of escape, enabling individuals to gauge the contrast between their own reality and a novel one. Nevertheless, the chosen destination may correspond with an individual's beliefs, but not align with societal values, emphasising how one's values are significantly influenced by their setting. These principles are firmly rooted in each person's psyche, delineating the distinction between right and wrong, good and bad.

Uriely (2005) notes that a shift in tourism has occurred, with the personal interpretation of meaning by the tourist becoming more critical than the traditional focus on objects displayed by the destination. The industry's dynamics are continually shaped by the preferences and motivations of travelers, particularly the younger generation, in the ever-evolving landscape of global tourism.

The management of destinations has a fundamental part to play in resolving the multiple and often contradictory problems that arise within modern tourism. Destinations pose intricate challenges for their management and development, as they must cater to the requirements of tourists and tourism businesses, as well as the local community, businesses, and industries (Howie, 2003).

Within the framework of Moral Disengagement (MD) and Agency Regulation (AR) defined by Bandura (2016), the tourist experience in this context can be viewed as a "*space for moral reconstruction*".

Mayo and Jarvis (1981) argue that meeting visitors' desired benefits is crucial for a destination's appeal. It is essential to comprehend the unique characteristics of tourist spots. Although there is no consensus on how to define and operationalize destination image, structured questionnaire surveys remain the widely used method, where respondents rate destinations based on various attributes. Repertory Grid Analysis (RGA), which originates from Kelly's (1955) Personal Construct Theory (PCT), is a structured qualitative methodology. Individuals are viewed as "scientists" who predict and regulate their surroundings. RGA analyses personal constructs, including "dimensions of consciousness" and "lenses through which the world is viewed," in order to explore subjective experiences. Critics have noted that destination image surveys often employ random attribute selection, but Dann (1996) suggests integrating the viewpoint of the tourist. Pike (2002) discovered, after reviewing 143 studies, that structured questionnaires were the most frequently used method (114), while less than half of the studies employed qualitative methods.

Generation Z, born from the mid-1990s to the early 2010s, is lauded for their digital savvy, social consciousness, and yearning for meaningful experiences. As a cohort, they possess unique qualities, inclinations, and behaviors. Gen Z is characterized by being the first generation to grow up with widespread access to digital technology, the internet and social media from an early age. Their defining characteristics include being tech-savvy, diverse, socially conscious and global in outlook (Dimock, 2019).

Thus, as the tourist experience can be presented as an occasion for a "context switch," understood as the rejection of moral norms that affect daily attitudes and actions, the primary objective of this study is to investigate whether Gen Z individuals tend to detach themselves from ethical considerations when deciding on a tourist destination.

This research aims to validate scales for the tourism-related decision attributes and Moral Disengagement tendencies of Generation Z individuals. As part of a broader study, the authors intend to extend the sample and overcome limitations, including social desirability bias, using a Conjoint Analysis that is based on images. The primary objective is to validate scales for both the mechanisms of Moral Disengagement and tourism decision attributes.

Research Question 1. *How do morally exposed attributes influence the destination choices of Generation Z individuals, and what is the correlation with specific mechanisms of Moral Disengagement (MD)?*

Research Question 2. *Are there significant gender differences in the attitudes and choices of Generation Z individuals regarding morally exposed attributes in tourism destination selection?*

2. Theoretical framework

In social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1991), the translation of moral reasoning to actions occurs through self-regulatory mechanisms that exercise *moral agency*. Essentially, individuals seek to justify their involvement in immoral acts by reinterpreting their behaviour in a positive way, thereby maintaining a positive self-image. It is noteworthy that adolescents predisposed to MD are more likely to engage in antisocial, immoral and unethical behaviours such as bullying, aggression and alcohol consumption (Hyde et al., 2010; Gini et al., 2014; Thornberg and Jungert, 2013; Newton et al., 2014).

Moral Disengagement (MD) describes a disconnection between individuals' personal moral standards and their behaviour. This disconnection reduces the internal inhibitions that would ordinarily prevent individuals from engaging in unethical actions (Bandura et al., 1996; Duffy, Aquino, Tepper, Reed, & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005).

Bandura and colleagues (1996; 2001) found a connection between MD in children and decreased prosocial behaviours (such as helpfulness and cooperativeness) as well as increased antisocial behaviours (including aggression and delinquency). In their study, respondents aged 10 to 15 were asked to answer questions finalized at tracking children's prosocial and aggressive tendencies (Bandura et al., 1996). The measures examined children's propensity to employ the eight mechanisms of MD classified by Bandura and colleagues (see Tab. X) for various forms of transgressive behaviour. The transgressive acts included physical harm, destruction, verbal abuse, deception, and theft.

This serves as the foundation of our theoretical statement, which leads to the hypothesis that Moral Disengagement (MD) acts as a *deterrent* to the sense of blame felt by individuals when

engaging in unethical or immoral behaviour, and consequently may have a positive impact on the decision-making process towards such conduct.

Additionally, aside from motivating behavior, *moral identity* may also act as a moderator in the connections between different social cognitive factors and behaviors. This has the potential to directly influence other social cognitions and produce synergistic interaction effects.

According to Bandura and colleagues, MD processes primarily arise from situational pressures, and not from an individual's personality. Nonetheless, there is evidence indicating that personality traits can mitigate these situational pressures (Burger, 2009). It may be worthwhile to investigate whether personality traits, specifically moral identity, can influence these types of pressures (Aquino et al., 2007).

As mentioned before, MD involves conscious or unconscious strategies that enable individuals to engage in immoral actions while maintaining a positive self-image as moral people (Bandura *et al.*, 2001). The table displays the 8 MD mechanisms that were identified by Bandura and colleagues, which were traced using a validated Moral Disengagement scale that comprises of 32 items.

Table 1 | Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement

Mechanisms of MD	Description	Authors	Correspondent Items
Moral Justification (MJ)	Framing harmful behavior as serving moral or social goals renders it acceptable personally and societally	(Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Kramer, 1990; Sanford & Comstock, 1971)	1,9, 17,25
Euphemistic Language (EL)	A convenient tool for disguising unethical acts or even legitimising them	(Bolinger, 1982; Lutz, 1987)	2,10, 18,26
Advantageous Comparison (AC)	Potentially harmful behavior can be made to seem harmless or insignificant	(Bandura, 1991)	3,11, 19,27
Displacement of Responsibility (DisR)	Individuals often attribute their actions to social pressures or external demands, avoiding personal responsibility for their behaviors	(Andrus, 1969)	5, 13,21,29
Diffusion of Responsibility (DifR)	Responsibility can be dispersed through the division of labour in a venture where various	(Kelman, 1973)	4, 12, 20,28

	members undertake separate aspects that appear innocuous		
Distorting Consequences (D)	People engaging in harmful actions for personal or social gain minimize or overlook the negative consequences, emphasizing the perceived benefits	(Brock & Buss, 1962; 1964)	6, 14,22,30
Attribution of Blame (AB)	Victims are blamed for their suffering, seen as provoking harmful behavior, justifying defensive responses	(Ferguson & Rule, 1983)	8, 16, 24, 32
Dehumanization (DeH)	Strips individuals of human qualities, viewing them as subhuman objects devoid of feelings, hopes, and concerns	(Haritos-Fatouros, 1988; Keen, 1986; Kelman, 1973)	7, 15,23,31

Source: Our adaptation from Bandura *et al.* (1996)

3. Methods

The research consisted in a Pilot-Test aimed at attributes' validation. In particular, the authors administered an online survey to a sample of 129 respondents, 51,2% of whom were female, students in the second year of a course of study in economics and business administration recruited from the University of Foggia, located in the Southern of Italy, through a QR code scanned during class hours.

The first part of the questionnaire included a number of 33 variables of choice (attributes) deriving from the Literature (Pike, 2007) and exerting an impact on the touristic experience, on which the respondents were asked to express, by indicating the level of importance of each single variable in their choice of the touristic destination. In particular, the respondents were asked to express their opinion about the level of importance of each of the 33 variables on a 5-points Likert scale.

As a result of an analysis of the Literature on the topic, the authors have identified 6 different general categories of attributes in destination choice (Pike, 2007):

- (i) Cat_1 - Leisure and recreational attributes;
- (ii) Cat_2 - Culture, history and art attributes;
- (iii) Cat_3 - Natural attributes;

- (iv) Cat_4 - Socialization attributes;
- (v) Cat_5 - Enogastronomy attributes;
- (vi) Cat_6 – Location itself.

According to the research purposes, constructing a target destination as a *bundle of attributes* makes it necessary to exclude *Category no.6*, which is “*Location Itself*”, due to its reference to location-specific attributes that not relevant for research purposes. Moreover, the attribute pertaining to *Cannabis Consumers* has been included due to the continuously rising usage of this substance among young people (Boyle *et al.*, 2023).

Following Fishbein's (1963) guidelines for categorising data, the elicited statements have been grouped into themes according to common wording. For instance, statements concerning the various forms of entertainment and recreation have been categorised under a single attribute theme (Funny). As a result, the original 33 statements derived from the literature on the topic have been reduced to just 8 attribute categories.

Starting from the 6 categories proposed by the literature on the topic, the authors have declined 8 attributes' groups characterizing the *bundle* for a touristic destination, classified as follows:

- (i) **Morally neutral attributes:** A1_Funny; A4_Trends about fashion/location;
A5_Wild life; A7_Exotic_food;
- (ii) **Morally exposed attributes:** A2_Leisure_Trasgressivity; A3_Hazard_games;
A6_Sexuality; A8_Cultural & ethical distance in food.

Table 2 reports the list of the selected attributes on which the respondents were asked to express their opinion.

Table 2 | Attributes Selection from the literature

Attributes from the literature (Pike, 2003; 2007)	Description
Friendly locals	Warm and welcoming local residents
Adventure activities	Opportunities for thrilling and exciting experiences
Sport activities	Availability of sports facilities and events
Good climate	Favourable and enjoyable weather conditions
Unique local culture	Distinctive and authentic local traditions
Getting there/getting around	Ease of transportation within and to the destination
Shopping	Retail options and opportunities for shopping
Water sports	Activities related to water, such as swimming
Marine life	Coastal areas and marine life attractions
Places for eating and drinking	Dining and culinary experiences
History/historical sites	Cultural and historical landmarks and sites
Lots to do	Diverse and plentiful activities for tourists
Family destination	Suitable for families with children
Fishing	Opportunities for fishing activities
Wineries	Presence of wineries and vineyards
Walking tracks	Trails and paths for walking and hiking
Cost/Value	Economic considerations and value for money
Safe and relaxing environment	Peaceful and stress-free atmosphere
Suitable accommodation	Availability of appropriate lodging options
Snow sports	Winter sports and related activities
Close to other destinations	Proximity to other interesting places
Nightlife/entertainment	Entertainment options and vibrant nightlife
Within a comfortable drive	Accessibility within a reasonable driving distance

Source: Our adaptation from Pike (2007)

It is important to point out that certain attributes identified in the literature were excluded, in order to focus on the constructs that were aligned with the research objectives. For the same reason, the authors have also omitted constructs relating to purely naturalistic, infrastructural and cultural travels.

Table 3 | Attributes Exclusion

Not-included Attributes	Description
Nature	Presence of natural landscapes and outdoor attractions
Holiday homes	Availability and quality of vacation rental properties
Infrastructure	Quality and accessibility of local infrastructure
Not too touristy	Avoidance of excessive tourism and a more authentic feel

Source: Our elaboration

The inclusion of certain attributes from the literature and the addition of new variables in the research is solely based on their relevance to the research objectives. The following table shows

Table 4 | Attributes Inclusion

Selected Attributes	Description
Funny	Humorous and entertaining experiences
Cannabis & Hazard games	Activities involving risk or chance
Wild life	Presence of diverse and natural wildlife
Exoticism	Unusual and culturally different experiences
Cultural and ethical distance in food	Variance in cultural and ethical aspects of local cuisine
Transgression	Opportunities for unconventional and rule-breaking activities
Sexuality	Emphasis on experiences related to human sexuality
Trends about fashion/location	Alignment with current trends in fashion or location

Source: Our elaboration

To categorize the selected attributes, the methodology included conducting an Exploratory Factor Analysis through IBM SPSS Statistics software in the first instance. Subsequently, a Gender Discriminant Analysis was conducted as the next step.

As a second part of the research, an Exploratory Factor Analysis was performed on the 32 MD items (Bandura, 2016). The aim was to assess whether MD plays a role in destination selection, particularly when it involves participation in socially unacceptable or immoral activities like sexual tourism, gambling, trying exotic cuisine that is unfamiliar to one's culture, or using cannabis. Such attributes, known as "*morally exposed*," are a deviation from standard reality. The table below displays the validated scale items for measuring MD of Gen Z's respondents. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a 4-point Likert scale.

Table 5 | Moral Disengagement Scale

Cat	Item
MJ	It is alright to fight to protect your friends.
EL	Slapping and shoving someone is just a way of joking.
AC	Damaging some property is no big deal when you consider that others are beating people up.
DisR	A kid in a gang should not be blamed for the trouble the gang causes.
DifR	If kids are living under bad conditions, they cannot be blamed for behaving aggressively.
D	It is okay to tell small lies because they don't really do any harm.
AB	Some people deserve to be treated like animals.
DeH	If kids fight and misbehave in school it is their teacher's fault.
MJ	It is alright to beat someone who bad mouths your family.
EL	To hit obnoxious classmates is just giving them "a lesson."
AC	Stealing some money is not too serious compared to those who steal a lot of money.
DisR	A kid who only suggests breaking rules should not be blamed if other kids go ahead and do it.
DifR	If kids are not disciplined, they should not be blamed for misbehaving.
D	Children do not mind being teased because it shows interest in them.
AB	It is okay to treat badly somebody who behaved like a "worm."
DeH	If people are careless where they leave their things it is their own fault if they get stolen.
MJ	It is alright to fight when your group's honour is threatened.
EL	Taking someone's bicycle without their permission is just "borrowing it".
AC	It is okay to insult a classmate because beating him/her is worse.
DisR	If a group decides together to do something harmful it is unfair to blame any kid in the group for it.
DifR	Kids cannot be blamed for using bad words when all their friends do it.
D	Teasing someone does not really hurt them.
AB	Someone who is obnoxious does not deserve to be treated like a human being.
DeH	Kids who get mistreated usually do things that deserve it.
MJ	It is alright to lie to keep your friends out of trouble.
EL	It is not a bad thing to "get high" once in a while.
AC	Compared to the illegal things people do, taking some things from a store without paying for them is not very serious.
DisR	It is unfair to blame a child who had only a small part in the harm caused by a group.
DifR	Kids cannot be blamed for misbehaving if their friends pressured them to do it.
D	Insults among children do not hurt anyone.
AB	Some people have to be treated roughly because they lack feelings that can be hurt.
DeH	Children are not at fault for misbehaving if their parents force them too much.

Source: Our adaptation from Bandura *et al.* (1996)

4. Results

The EFA on the attributes of the touristic destination resulted in 6 factors, which include all the variables (33 attributes). Notably, *Sexual Transgression* reflects the desire for sexual freedom, exhibiting a strong internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .723. *Sport & Adventure* emerged as the highest-rated factor, boasting a mean value and a robust Cronbach's alpha of .720, indicating reliability. *Enogastronomy* also demonstrated good internal consistency with an alpha of .682. *Fashion Shopping*, *Cannabis & Hazard Games*, and *Exotic Gastronomy* showed slightly lower but still acceptable reliability scores with alphas of .637, .571, and .609, respectively. These findings provide practical insights for tourist destinations, emphasizing key factors influencing traveler choices. Destinations can strategically focus on attributes such as *Sexual Transgression*, *Sport & Adventure*, and *Enogastronomy*, given their higher reliability and appeal. For example, recognizing that *Sexual Transgression* reflects a desire for sexual freedom can guide destinations in tailoring experiences accordingly. Lower reliability scores, such as those for *Cannabis & Hazard Games*, signal a need for careful management, enabling destinations to refine offerings and cater to diverse traveler preferences.

Table 6 | EFA on attributes

Exploratory Factor Analysis	% Var.	F	Sig.	α	N. Items
F1 - Sexual Trasgression	12,886	45,256	0,000	0,723	4
F2 - Sport & Adventure	12,603	25,998	0,000	0,720	5
F3 - Enogastronomy	10,610	44,800	0,000	0,682	3
F4 - Fashion Shopping	9,212	83,434	0,000	0,637	3
F5 - Cannabis & Hazard Games	9,070	2,979	0,870	0,571	2
F6 - Exhotic Gastronomy	8,911	0,714	0,400	0,609	2

Source: Our elaboration

As a result of the EFA on MD items, the analysis allowed to validate the eight mechanisms of MD in the research field.

Table 7 | EFA on MD

Exploratory Factor Analysis: Moral Disengagement	% Var.	F	Sig.	α	KMO	χ^2
F1- Moral justification	48,861	72,389	0	0,649	0,669	69,901
F2- Euphemistic language	36,849	45,313	0,001	0,422	0,53	23,217
F3- Advantageous comparison	42,031	27,383	0	0,508	0,625	37,695
F4- Displacement of responsibility	31,971	96,179	0,236	0,272	0,524	8,026
F5- Diffusion of responsibility	35,825	41,260	0,000	0,396	0,508	27,790
F6- Distorting consequence	43,880	71,888	0,000	0,486	0,586	56,020
F7- Attribution of blame	49,289	58,213	0,000	0,639	0,716	65,267
F8- Dehumanization	32,886	55,657	0,093	0,234	0,533	10,864

^ Significance was extrapolated from factor analysis and not from reliability analysis

Source: Our elaboration

The Correlation Analysis among attributes and MD mechanisms showed a significant correlation (at a 0.01 level of significance) between *Cannabis & Hazard Games* (F5) and, respectively: *Euphemistic Language* (0,328**); *Advantageous comparison* (0,289**); *Distorting consequence* (0,233**); *Attribution of blame* (0,261**) and *Dehumanization* (0,299**). At a 0,05 level of significance, instead, a positive correlation emerges between F1 (*Sexual Transgression*) and *Moral Justification* (0,2*) and a negative correlation between F1 and *Diffusion of Responsibility* (-0,19*). These results suggest that individuals engaging in these activities (*Cannabis & Hazard Games*) employ cognitive processes to morally disengage. They use *Euphemistic Language* to downplay the ethical implications, engage in *Advantageous Comparison* to minimize perceived harm, and resort to *Dehumanization* to distance themselves from potential negative consequences. Overall, these cognitive strategies serve as tools to minimize perceived ethical implications, allowing individuals to reconcile engaging in potentially harmful activities, maintaining a positive self-image.

Table 8 | Correlation Analysis among Factors and MD mechanisms

Attributes MD	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8
F1	0,2*				-0,19*			
F5		0,328**	0,289**			0,233**	0,261**	0,299**

* sig < 0,05

** sig < 0,01

Source: Our elaboration

Finally, the Gender Discriminant Analysis showed significant differences in terms of attributes choices. For example, regarding the “*morally exposed*” attributes included in the analysis, male respondents show a positive attitude (.435), against a negative tendency of female respondents towards *Sexual Transgression* (-.414). The same for *Cannabis & Hazard Games* (0.312 for male respondents and -.322 for females) and in an inverse manner for *Exhotic Gastronomy* (-0.130 for male respondents and .105 for females).

Table 9 | Gender Discriminant Analysis on Attributes

	Gender	
	Male	Female
F1 - Sexual Transgression	0,453	-0,414
F2 - Sport & Adventure	-0,130	0,134
F3 - Enogastronomy	0,178	-0,177
F4 - Fashion Shopping	-0,495	0,464
F5 - Cannabis & Hazard Games	0,312	-0,322
F6 - Exotic Gastronomy	-0,130	0,105
<i>Fisher's linear discriminant functions</i>		

Source: Our elaboration

The discriminant analysis by gender revealed significant disparities in attitudes among Generation Z respondents concerning the MD mechanisms explained in Table 10. For example, the analysis conducted on the sample of students at the University of Foggia indicates a tendency for women to be more prone to *Advantageous comparison*, *Displacement of responsibility* and *Diffusion of responsibility*, whereas males are more inclined to adopt the remaining forms of MD.

Table 10 | Gender Discriminant Analysis on MD

	Gender	
	Male	Female
Moral justification	0,120	-0,087
Euphemistic language	0,018	-0,004
Advantageous comparison	-0,058	0,006
Displacement of responsibility	-0,035	0,010
Diffusion of responsibility	-0,059	0,061
Distorting consequence	0,327	-0,266
Attribution of blame	0,023	-0,013
Dehumanization	0,208	-0,187
<i>Fisher's linear discriminant functions</i>		

Source: Our elaboration

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper navigates a crucial exploration of destination management in the context of Generation Z, with a particular focus on their tendency to morally disengage in destination selection. As Generation Z enters the sphere of travel, their moral values, or lack thereof, in the selection of tourist destinations emerges as a pivotal factor that requires thorough investigation. Rooted in Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, the study elucidates the intricate relationship between moral reasoning, action and self-regulatory mechanisms, highlighting the concept of moral disengagement as a strategy used by individuals to engage in potentially immoral actions while maintaining a positive self-image.

The research methodology, which includes a pilot test with 129 respondents, adopts a multifaceted approach involving Exploratory Factor Analysis, Gender Discriminant Analysis, and a validation of the MD items. The identified *morally neutral* and *morally exposed* attributes in destination choice provide a nuanced understanding of the multiple factors at play. *Sexual Transgression*, *Sport & Adventure* and *Enogastronomy* emerge as significant factors, due to the high Cronbach's alpha values, contributing to the validation of the study's constructs.

Crucially, the correlation analysis reveals meaningful links between morally exposed attributes, such as cannabis consuming and dangerous games, and specific MD mechanisms. Gender Discriminant Analysis further highlights gender differences in attitudes towards morally exposed attributes. Male respondents show a positive tendency, while females show a negative attitude, which is particularly evident in choices related to *Sexual Transgression*, *Cannabis & Hazard Games*, and *Exotic Gastronomy*.

In essence, this study explores the complex dynamics of Generation Z's destination choices and provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the interplay between moral considerations and travel preferences. The findings have implications for destination management strategies, calling for a nuanced approach that takes into account the multiple ethical dimensions that shape the tourism choices of the emerging Generation Z cohort.

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