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Why (don't) we travel sustainably? Generation Z and the theory of planned behaviour

Marija Vukadin Milojević[a, *, **], Tatjana Pivac[b], Snežana Besermenji[c], Svetlana Tepavac[d, **]

[a] University of Novi Sad (Novi Sad, Serbia), Faculty of Sciences; Department of Geography, Tourism and Hotel Management; https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6176-831X; e-mail: marija-bl@hotmail.com
[b] University of Novi Sad (Novi Sad, Serbia), Faculty of Sciences; Department of Geography, Tourism and Hotel Management; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1660-1295; e-mail: tatjana.pivac@dgt.uns.ac.rs
[c] University of Novi Sad (Novi Sad, Serbia), Faculty of Sciences; Department of Geography, Tourism and Hotel Management; https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1163-3889; e-mail: snezana.besermenji@dgt.uns.ac.rs
[d] University of Novi Sad (Novi Sad, Serbia), Faculty of Sciences; Department of Geography, Tourism and Hotel Management; https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0818-1674; e-mail: tepavacsvetlana17@gmail.com
[*] Corresponding author.
[**] Authors are recipients of scholarships from the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia.

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ABSTRACT

Generation Z, the cohort born approximately between 1995 and 2010, represents a generation shaped by digital technology, social connectivity and global awareness, who exhibit distinct attitudes, behaviours and values that differentiate them from previous generations. These differences are also reflected in travel behaviour. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the determinants of sustainable travel behaviour among university students, using the theory of planned behaviour (TPB), augmented by knowledge, as a predictor, and based on survey data and regression analysis. Using a structured questionnaire and a sample of 217 students, this research measures five key constructs: attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, behavioural intention and actual behaviour. Data were analysed using Spearman's correlation and regression analysis. Results indicate that all core TPB components, individually, significantly predict sustainable travel behaviour, with behavioural intention emerging as the strongest predictor. The findings confirm the presence of an intention–behaviour gap, highlighting the importance of strengthening social support and perceived behavioural control. Knowledge, however, did not emerge as a significant predictor of behaviour. This study contributes to the sustainable tourism literature by integrating cognitive and social aspects of decision-making, while also addressing the often-overlooked economic and social dimensions of sustainability. Additionally, it offers rare empirical insight into the sustainable travel behaviour of young Serbian tourists.

KEYWORDS

Gen Z, sustainable travel behaviour, sustainable tourism, knowledge, university students

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1. Introduction

Members of Generation Z (or Gen Z) represent a highly digitalised generation, financially responsible and open to change, while often leading such change themselves. Among these shifts is a greater orientation towards sustainable behaviour, contributing to a more sustainable future. Generation Z actively seeks unique and authentic experiences, often through travel, which simultaneously represents a context for the expression of their sustainable values and behaviour. Tourism, as a powerful form of cultural exchange and self-expression, has become one of the main ways through which Generation Z interacts with the world, which positions them as a particularly relevant demographic for studying sustainable travel behaviour.

In order to explain and predict individual behaviour, especially in the context of socially responsible action, the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1985) offers a well-established framework that explains human behaviour based on several preceding dimensions: attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, behavioural intention and the behaviour itself.

The aim of this study is to examine whether the TPB, extended by the inclusion of a knowledge dimension, can be applied to sustainable travel behaviour among university students at the University of Novi Sad, Serbia. Given the multidimensional structure of the theory, it is expected that its application will enable a deeper understanding of the factors that influence sustainable behaviour among young people.

Although TPB has been frequently applied in tourism research, there remains a lack of studies that combine this theory with sustainability-related knowledge in the context of Generation Z, particularly within Serbian university settings.

Accordingly, this study investigates the determinants of sustainable travel behaviour among university students, using the elements of the TPB augmented by knowledge as a predictor, through survey-based data and regression analysis. This research contributes to the theoretical refinement of TPB by testing its extended form in a new demographic and cultural context. Additionally, it offers practical insights into the travel-related decision-making processes of young people who are likely to shape the future of sustainable tourism.

2. Literature review

This section presents the key characteristics of Generation Z and their approach to sustainable travel, followed by a theoretical overview of the TPB as the conceptual framework guiding this study.

2.1. Generation Z and sustainable travel

Immediate conditions and socio-technological changes in the environment create a setting in which individuals within a community tend to behave, think and make decisions in a similar manner (Dolot, 2018). Members of a particular generation are usually linked by shared life values and circumstances (Entina et al., 2021), while events experienced during childhood also significantly shape generational identity (Vojvodić, 2019). Establishing clear age boundaries between generations proves to be difficult (Dolot, 2018; Ruspini & Corbisiero, 2018), with Generation Z being especially challenging to define precisely in terms of age (Dolot, 2018). Although exact boundaries remain unclear, for the purposes of this research, Generation Z is defined as individuals born after 1995, following the parameters adopted by Diaconu and Dutu (2020) and Jayatissa (2023).

The concept of sustainable tourism decisions refers to the choices made by authorities, companies, communities and individual tourists when engaging in tourism-related activities, regardless of their specific roles (Puiu et al., 2022). Many destinations currently face sustainability challenges that conflict with the principles of sustainable tourism development. While various initiatives and campaigns are being implemented to address these issues, tourists themselves play a crucial role in advancing sustainability through their behaviour and engagement.

At the same time, Generation Z is recognised as a crucial segment of the future tourism market (Entina et al., 2021), with its share steadily increasing (Tănase et al., 2023). Today, young travellers represent nearly one quarter of global tourism demand (World Youth Student and Educational Travel Confederation, n.d.). Travel has become less of a luxury and more of a necessity, especially among young people for whom frequent travel is becoming a regular part of life.

Among the most significant factors influencing travel planning among young people are socialisation, finances and experience. Social interaction plays a key role in their travel decisions, as younger travellers seek meaningful experiences and connections with locals and fellow tourists (Robinson & Schänzel, 2019).

Financial responsibility is an important part of Generation Z and also influences how they plan and budget for travel (Kubíková & Rudý, 2024) and in many cases, financial limitations, particularly among students, encourage sustainable practices such as participation in the sharing economy (Kalabova & Petru, 2021). Bernardi (2018) notes that young people are not only participants in the sharing economy but also key promoters and developers of these services.

In addition to being referred to as a digital or internet generation, Generation Z has also been described using

terms that reflect their values. Csobanka (2016) coined the term "Generation R" (responsible generation), a term also used by other scholars (Dolot, 2018; Entina et al., 2021). This label is particularly relevant in the context of the present study, as it emphasises the generation's sense of responsibility, awareness, commitment, communication skills and loyalty (Diaconu & Dutu, 2020).

The concept of sustainability is deeply embedded in the lifestyle of Generation Z (Savić et al., 2024). These individuals are often described as catalysts for change, especially when it comes to changes that promote a more sustainable future in tourism (Sormin & Sihombing, 2023). Compared to older generations, younger people are more aware of environmental degradation (Pinho & Gomes, 2023) and are highly environmentally conscious (Hernandez-Arriaza et al., 2023; Monaco, 2018). Unlike previous generations, Generation Z demonstrates strong support for environmentally and culturally sustainable tourism practices (Sormin & Sihombing, 2023), however, it should be noted that not all scholars agree on the importance of age as a determinant of pro-environmental behaviour (Sargisson et al., 2020). Furthermore, many studies focus on stated values or intentions, rather than actual behaviour, which leaves room for social desirability bias and calls for models, such as the TPB, that can better explain the intention–behaviour gap. Based on this, it is assumed that young tourists already tend to behave sustainably when travelling, leading to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

H_1: Young tourists behave sustainably when travelling.

In the study of tourism demand, it is crucial to include the everyday practices of tourists visiting various destinations. Sustainable behaviour should not be limited to specific products or services, but should also encompass general patterns of responsible consumption (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2017). As future tourists, but also tourists who already represent a significant segment of current demand, Generation Z should be better understood in terms of how they engage with sustainable tourism. For this purpose, Ajzen's *Theory of Planned Behaviour* (1991) offers a valuable framework for exploring how attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control influence intentions and actual behaviour.

2.2. The theory of planned behaviour (TPB)

The application of socio-psychological theories is justified by their effectiveness in explaining human behaviour across various contexts (Han & Yoon, 2015). The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1985) was developed as an extension of the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and is one of the most widely applied theories in social and behavioural sciences (Bosnjak et al., 2020). According to TPB, attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control influence an individual's behavioural intentions, which in turn predict actual behaviour (Ajzen, 1985; Bosnjak et al., 2020; Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014).

A fundamental component of TPB is the construct of attitudes, capturing value-based judgements about behaviour (Ivanov et al., 2024). Attitudes reflect the degree to which a person evaluates a particular behaviour, positively or negatively (Ajzen, 1991) and are considered central components of the theory. Consequently, it can be expected that individuals with more favourable attitudes toward sustainability will be more likely to engage in sustainable travel behaviour, therefore, H_2 is presented.

H_2: Attitudes influence young people's travel behaviour.

Subjective norms refer to perceived social pressure from friends, family and peers (Fenitra et al., 2021), more precisely, they will target behaviour accepted by important people in individuals' lives (Chen & Slade, 2025). Socialisation is seen as one of the important aspects of youth travel, therefore, the next hypothesis is developed:

H_3: Subjective norms affect the behaviour of young people when travelling.

Perceived behavioural control denotes the individual's perceived capacity to perform a behaviour, accounting for factors such as time, skills and external support (Ajzen, 2011). Accordingly, H_4 is proposed:

H_4: Perceived behavioural control affects the behaviour of young people when travelling.

Behavioural intention, shaped by the three components, represents the most robust predictor of actual behaviour (Ajzen, 1991, 2011), leading to the hypothesis that:

H_5: Behavioural intention affects young people's travel behaviour.

The behavioural outcome itself is a consequence of this intention, consistent with findings from prior studies (de Araújo et al., 2022).

Ajzen (1991) himself suggested that the model can be expanded by incorporating additional variables (Amoako et al., 2020). In this research, knowledge is included as an extended construct and is understood as a cognitive element that encompasses perception, memory, learning and prediction in the process of information processing (Salas-Zapata et al., 2018). Individuals' attitudes towards sustainability and environmental issues are influenced by their level of knowledge (Aziz et al., 2012). Moreover, knowledge has been shown to affect behaviour patterns, such as the purchase of green products among younger populations (Amoako et al., 2020), justifying its integration into the TPB model.

As young people who possess greater knowledge about sustainability are more likely to act accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_6: Knowledge about sustainable tourism positively affects self-reported sustainable travel behaviour during trips.

The inclusion of knowledge within the TPB framework has also been observed in previous studies (e.g., Mullan & Wong, 2010; Nimri et al., 2020). By incorporating additional dimensions, TPB enables the analysis of behaviours that are not entirely under volitional control (Hsu & Huang, 2012). The core assumption of TPB posits that individuals with more positive attitudes are more likely to form stronger intentions to act accordingly (Fenitra et al., 2021).

Chen and Slade (2025) state that TPB is effective in the field of tourism and hospitality, particularly in understanding individuals' willingness to visit specific destinations. Within the realm of sustainable tourism, TPB has been employed to explore the factors that drive environmentally responsible tourist behaviour, emphasising the role of personal beliefs and social influences in decisions such as choosing eco-friendly accommodation or reducing waste while travelling (Menegaki, 2025). TPB has been applied in tourism and hospitality research on both the supply (e.g., Erul et al., 2020) and demand side (e.g., Chen & Peng, 2012; Genç & Zengin, 2025; Kuo & Dai, 2012; Vukadin et al., 2025). Since 2019, a notable increase in studies has emerged that link TPB with tourism, hospitality, management and environmental sustainability (Ulker-Demirel & Ciftci, 2020).

3. Methodology

A significant number of previous studies on the sustainable behaviour of young people have taken place in university environments (e.g., Avelar & Farina, 2022; Aziz et al., 2012; Fang et al., 2018; Kiatkawsin & Han, 2017; Sahin et al., 2012), where the main source of information was students. Universities represent the primary gathering places for young people and the setting of this research is the University of Novi Sad, with the target group consisting of students from all faculties of this University. The University of Novi Sad comprises 14 faculties (nine of which are located in the city of Novi Sad) with approximately 50,000 students (University of Novi Sad, n.d.). Universities play a significant role in promoting sustainable development among young people, which is another reason for choosing this institution as the research setting.

The primary method of data collection chosen was a survey-based approach. The survey questionnaire was inspired by different researchers (e.g., Dutta et al., 2022; Puiu et al., 2022). The structure of the questionnaire included four sections: (a) socio-demographic characteristics (4 items); (b) previous travel experience (5 items); (c) knowledge about sustainable tourism (4 dichotomous items; 0 – *false*, 1 – *true*); and (d) constructs of the TPB with the following elements: attitudes (3 items), subjective norms (3 items), perceived behavioural control (3 items), behavioural intention (3 items) and behaviour (8 items). It is important to emphasise that the questionnaire was developed to reflect all three pillars of sustainability: economic, ecological and social. The full questionnaire is available from the authors upon request.

Composite variables were calculated for analysis of knowledge and TPB constructs (Table 1). Knowledge (KNSUM) was computed as the mean of the four dichotomous items, resulting in values ranging from 0 (*false*) to 1 (*true*), representing the proportion of correct answers. TPB constructs (attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, intention and behaviour) were computed as the mean of their respective Likert-scale items, each measured on a five-point scale (1 – *strongly disagree*, 5 – *strongly agree*).

While individual Likert items are ordinal, composite scores derived from multiple items are widely treated

Table 1. Variables

Construct	Description	Items	Composite variables
Knowledge (KN)	Proportion of correct answers on sustainable tourism knowledge	KN1–KN4	KNSUM
Attitudes (ATT)	Attitudes toward sustainable travel	ATT1–ATT3	ATTSUM
Subjective norms (SN)	Perceived social pressure to behave sustainably	SN1–SN3	SNSUM
Perceived behavioural control (PBC)	Perception of control over sustainable travel	PBC1–PBC3	PBCSUM
Behavioural intention (BI)	Intention to engage in sustainable travel	BI1–BI3	BISUM
Sustainable travel behaviour (B)	Self-reported sustainable travel behaviour	B1–B8	BSUM

Source: authors.

as approximately interval-level data in social science research, allowing the use of parametric statistical methods, including calculation of means and linear regression (Norman, 2010; Tanujaya et al., 2022).

The survey was conducted between March and June 2024. Part of the survey data was collected electronically and the second part was collected through fieldwork. The electronic surveys (administered via Google Forms) were collected by sending the questionnaire via email to various student organisations within the University of Novi Sad, as well as by sharing the survey link in student groups on the social media platform Facebook. Survey questionnaires were collected in the field at high-volume student gathering areas, including student hostels, the university campus and selected faculties. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 was used for data analysis. A total of 238 questionnaires were collected, of which 217 were deemed valid and included in the final analysis. Questionnaires excluded from the analysis did not contain answers to all questions and were therefore not suitable for further analysis. Additionally, three questionnaires were removed from the sample as the respondents fell outside the Generation Z cohort defined previously in this study.

In order to provide a comprehensive overview of the relationship between the construct elements of the TPB, two complementary statistical techniques were applied: Spearman's rank correlation coefficient and regression analysis. Spearman's correlation enabled the identification of statistically significant relationships between the variables of the TPB. On the other hand, regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive power of individual components of the model in explaining the target behaviour. Each regression included a single predictor to assess its individual effect, consistent with the study's exploratory objectives. By combining correlation and regression analyses, a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between constructs and their role in shaping young people's travel behaviour is achieved.

4. Results

The majority of respondents were female students from the University of Novi Sad, accounting for 73.7% (160 participants), while male students made up 26.3% (57 participants). The average age was 21.8 years and female respondents were slightly older on average (22.0) than their male counterparts (21.1). Based on age, all participants fell within the Generation Z cohort. Most respondents were undergraduate students (83.9%), followed by master's (12.0%) and PhD students (4.1%). Regarding financial status, 52.1% reported having personal income (e.g., scholarships, employment, loans), while 47.9% had no regular income (Table 2).

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of sample (n = 217)

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender (%)	Male	26.3
	Female	73.7
Level of study (%)	Undergraduate	83.9
	Graduate	12.0
	PhD	4.1
Financial status (%)	Regular income	52.1
	Without regular income	47.9
Variable	Category	Mean age
Average age: 21.8	Male	21.1
	Female	22.0

Source: authors.

Regarding previous travel experiences, the majority of respondents indicated that they travelled equally within Serbia and abroad (46.5%). A smaller proportion expressed a preference for either international (28.1%) or domestic travel (25.4%). Most participants spent between €200 and €500 on their most recent trip (43.8%), while only a small number reported spending more than €1,000 (4.2%). On an annual basis, the majority of students undertook between two and five trips (61.3%), while 33.6% reported travelling only once a year. A minority (5.1%) travelled more than six times per year. Travel was most commonly organised with friends (60.8%) or family (22.1%), whereas trips taken alone or organised by the university were rare (under 5%).

Table 3 presents the mean values (M) and standard deviations (SD) for five psychological constructs included in the TPB model. The highest mean score is observed for the construct behavioural intention (BISUM: M = 4.11; SD = 0.805), indicating a relatively strong intention among participants to engage in the target behaviour. Similarly, subjective norms (SNSUM: M = 4.09; SD = 0.863) and perceived behavioural control (PBCSUM: M = 3.95; SD = 0.867) also exhibit elevated average scores, suggesting that respondents perceive both considerable social pressure and a personal capacity to perform the behaviour. Attitudes toward the behaviour show a slightly lower mean value (ATTSUM: M = 3.83; SD = 0.772). The lowest mean is reported for actual behaviour (M = 3.21; SD = 0.573), potentially indicating a gap between intention and enacted behaviour. Standard deviations across constructs range from 0.573 to 0.867, indicating a relatively low to moderate level of variability across the measured constructs.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations (n = 217) of cumulative variables of theory of planned behaviour (TPB)

Cumulative variables	Mean	Standard deviation (*SD*)	Cronbach's alpha
Attitudes (ATTSUM)	3.83	0.772	0.501
Subjective norms (SNSUM)	4.09	0.863	0.750
Perceived behavioural control (PBCSUM)	3.95	0.867	0.575
Behavioural intention (BISUM)	4.11	0.805	0.678
Behaviour (BSUM)	3.21	0.573	0.760

Source: authors.

The reliability of the TPB constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha: the full TPB model (20 items) yielded α = 0.868, while individual constructs ranged from 0.501 (attitudes) to 0.760 (behaviour), which is considered acceptable for exploratory research (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

4.1. Correlation

The Spearman correlation analysis (Table 4) indicated statistically significant correlations between multiple variables within the TPB model. The remaining dimensions of the TPB model also demonstrate statistically significant interrelationships at the 95% and 99% confidence levels.

The correlation matrix indicates statistically significant relationships between individual constructs of the TPB model. Spearman's rank correlation coefficient reveals a statistically significant and strong association between behavioural intention and actual behaviour (rs = 0.516; n = 217; p < 0.001), at the 99% confidence level.

4.2. Regression analysis

To examine the effect of each component of the TPB and knowledge on sustainable travel behaviour (BSUM), separate linear regressions were conducted for each predictor. The dependent variable (behaviour, BSUM) is a composite score of eight items measured by Likert-scale. Independent variables include TPB constructs (Likert-scale composites) and knowledge (KNSUM), calculated as the mean of four dichotomous items (0 – *incorrect*, 1 – *correct*). This approach allowed a direct assessment of each hypothesis individually. Each regression included only one independent variable (predictor) at a time. Beta values represent standardised coefficients for comparison of effect sizes, while R^2 indicates the proportion of variance in sustainable behaviour explained by each predictor (Table 5).

Among the predictors, behavioural intention (BISUM) had the strongest effect on sustainable travel behaviour (β = 0.645; F = 153.244; p < 0.001), explaining 41.3% of the variance. Subjective norms (SNSUM) and perceived behavioural control (PBCSUM) also had substantial effects (β = 0.414 and 0.442, respectively; p < 0.001). Attitudes (ATTSUM) while significant, demonstrated

Table 4. Spearman's correlation coefficients

Variable	ATTSUM	SNSUM	PBCSUM	BISUM	BSUM
Attitudes (ATTSUM)	1.000	0.451***	0.319***	0.287***	0.187**
Subjective norms (SNSUM)	0.451***	1.000	0.207**	0.360***	0.249***
Perceived behavioural control (PBCSUM)	0.319***	0.207**	1.000	0.359***	0.262***
Behavioural intention (BISUM)	0.287***	0.360***	0.359***	1.000	0.516***
Behaviour (BSUM)	0.187**	0.249***	0.262***	0.516***	1.000

Note: Values represent Spearman's rho; **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001 (2-tailed).
Source: authors.

Table 5. Results of simple linear regression analyses predicting behaviour (BSUM)

Predictor	R^2	F	β	p-value	Dependent variable
Knowledge (KNSUM)	0.015	3.257	0.122	0.073	BSUM
Attitudes (ATTSUM)	0.102	24.459	0.320	<0.001	BSUM
Subjective norms (SNSUM)	0.171	44.477	0.414	<0.001	BSUM
Perceived behavioural control (PBCSUM)	0.192	52.230	0.442	<0.001	BSUM
Behavioural intention (BISUM)	0.413	153.244	0.645	<0.001	BSUM

Source: authors.

only a small effect (β = 0.102; $p < 0.001$). Knowledge (KNSUM) showed a weak and non-significant effect on sustainable travel behaviour (β = 0.122; $F = 3.257$; $p = 0.073$), accounting for only 1.5% of the variance. This indicates that knowledge does not play a substantial role in predicting behaviour within the present model.

Although individual Likert items are ordinal, the use of composite scores allows for linear regression, which is widely accepted in behavioural research (Norman, 2010; Tanujaya et al., 2022). Behavioural intention (BISUM) was the strongest predictor of behaviour, followed by subjective norms, perceived behavioural control and attitudes. These results support hypotheses H_2–H_5. However, the effect of knowledge was not statistically significant and therefore hypothesis H_6 is rejected.

These findings support the central premise of the TPB, which posits that intention is the most immediate antecedent of behaviour, reflecting both motivational readiness and the likelihood of the action being performed. These results not only underscore the predictive strength of behavioural intention but also reinforce the theoretical framework suggesting that individuals are more likely to engage in a particular behaviour when they possess a clearly formed and positively valenced intention to do so.

Based on the preceding model, hypotheses H_2, H_3, H_4 and H_5 are supported, while H_6 is rejected. These findings will be further discussed in the context of previous research and existing theoretical assumptions in the following section.

5. Discussion

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) has found broad application, including in explaining human behaviour that incorporates elements of sustainability and environmental consciousness. The results of the present study suggest that the application of the TPB model to sustainable travel behaviour among young people represents a relevant theoretical framework. Similar findings have emerged in previous research addressing pro-environmental and green behaviours (Amoako et al., 2020; Dutta et al., 2022; Han et al., 2009; Kiatkawsin & Han, 2017; Qiu et al., 2022; Yadav & Pathak, 2016) and more directly in the context of sustainable behaviour among youth (Luong & Nguyen, 2024).

The most significant influence on behaviour was observed for the variable behavioural intention (β = 0.645; $p < 0.001$), which confirms the central assumption of the TPB, that intentions are the most direct predictors of actual behaviour. Behavioural intentions are considered a crucial factor within the TPB framework (Erul et al., 2020; Fenitra et al., 2021 and in the manifestation of specific sustainable behaviours (Han et al., 2009). This finding suggests that students, although they may not always practice sustainable behaviour, show a strong motivation and readiness to do so. However, the observed difference between the high mean value for intention ($M = 4.11$) and the somewhat lower mean for actual behaviour ($M = 3.21$) may indicate the presence of an intention–behaviour gap, which is commonly reported in the context of sustainable tourism (Khan et al., 2024).

Young people's travel experiences are shaped by a complex interaction of direct influences (family, friends, immediate environment), global factors (geopolitical, technological and social), as well as destination-specific influences (culture, infrastructure, socio-political factors) (Robinson & Schänzel, 2019). Travelling with parents or relatives often means that young people follow itineraries planned by older family members (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018), which may limit their autonomy in decision-making. Additionally, financial independence represents a common barrier for young travellers (Hysa et al., 2021; Kalabova & Petru, 2021; Nagaj & Žuromskaitė, 2023). A group of authors (Nguyen et al., 2018) explain the intention–behaviour gap by arguing that when "green" products are readily available and consumers believe that their use has a positive environmental impact, individuals with intentions are more likely to act upon them. This gap represents a fertile ground for future research.

Furthermore, subjective norms (β = 0.414) and perceived behavioural control (β = 0.442) also demonstrated substantial effects on behaviour. This suggests that students place significant importance on social context and support from their environment, which is consistent with the claim that young people are more willing to act when supported and validated by their social network (Entina et al., 2021; Robinson & Schänzel, 2019). The responsibility for sustainable travel ultimately rests with the individual, as each person's perceptions and actions in the tourism context influence the implementation of sustainable tourism practices (Narkūnienė, 2024). Moreover, the perception of personal control over behaviour, such as the availability of sustainable transport or accommodation options, emerges as a key factor in overcoming behavioural barriers.

Young people exhibit positive attitudes toward specific elements of sustainable travel, such as green hotels (Verma & Chandra, 2018) and generally maintain favourable attitudes toward the three core pillars of sustainable development while travelling (Vukadin et al., 2022), all of which were considered in this study. Interestingly, while these attitudes are generally positive ($M = 3.83$), their influence on behaviour (β = 0.320) is somewhat lower in comparison to subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. This result suggests that a positive perception of sustainability

alone may not be sufficient to drive responsible behaviour unless other conditions are also met. This contrasts with certain studies that report a stronger role of attitudes in prompting sustainable behaviour (Yarimoglu & Gunay, 2019; Verma & Chandra, 2018).

Finally, the results indicate that knowledge about sustainable tourism does not have a statistically significant influence on behaviour ($\beta = 0.122$; $p = 0.073$), suggesting that its impact is limited within the present model. While there are numerous criticisms and concerns regarding the sustainable behaviour of young travellers, there is also a consensus that their perception of sustainability will improve if efforts to inform and educate them are sustained (Balakrishnan et al., 2020; Šaparnienė et al., 2022). The responsibility for promoting sustainable tourism among younger generations also lies with government authorities (Bernardi, 2018). This suggests that although knowledge did not necessarily affect behaviour, it should not be disregarded, but rather complemented with alternative approaches that can more effectively encourage sustainable behaviour. Universities also play a significant role in advancing sustainability among young people. More effective approaches are needed to achieve sustainable development within universities, beyond merely relying on strategies and policies (Filho, 2011). Therefore, as educational institutions, universities have a crucial role not only in disseminating information but also in shaping the conditions necessary for sustainable behaviour among students.

The insights presented above support the acceptance of the main research hypothesis, suggesting that young people demonstrate a sustainable behaviour while travelling. Nevertheless, they require ongoing support in their transition towards more sustainable practices, given that they are among the key actors in understanding and implementing sustainable tourism development (Schönherr & Pikkemaat, 2023).

6. Conclusions, limitations and future research

Sustainable behaviour is the responsibility of every individual and identity. Tourism related bodies and organisations should inspire consumers to adopt more sustainable and responsible practices (Puiu et al., 2022).

The findings confirm that the TPB can be successfully applied to explain the sustainable travel behaviours of young people. The most significant influence was observed in behavioural intention, indicating a strong motivation among students to make sustainable choices. However, the gap between intention and actual behaviour implies the need to strengthen the conditions and infrastructure that support sustainable practices. In this context, particular attention should be given to enhancing social support and perceived behavioural control, alongside active involvement from educational institutions and the wider community. Knowledge, however, did not show a significant effect on behaviour in this study.

The responsibility for sustainable travel lies with each individual. Younger generations are increasingly incorporating sustainable practices into various aspects of their lives (Dabija et al., 2020; Lazányi & Bilan, 2017; Pinho & Gomes, 2023). Although young people express positive attitudes and intentions, the existence of an intention–behaviour gap highlights a key area for further research.

Younger generations constitute the foundation of future tourism demand and will play a critical role in shaping travel trends (Kalabova & Petru, 2021). Their travel frequency is expected to increase over time. It is important that young people are made aware of the positive impacts of their actions, particularly as they report being motivated by such messages to act responsibly and sustainably (Heidari et al., 2018). Systemic support and coherent youth policies are required, alongside the utilisation of appropriate communication channels to effectively convey these messages.

6.1. Contribution of the study

This study makes several notable contributions to the fields of sustainable tourism and behavioural research. First, it extends the TPB by incorporating knowledge as an additional cognitive variable and by explicitly addressing the intention–behaviour gap. The findings indicate that knowledge does not have a significant direct influence on sustainable travel behaviour. However, rather than diminishing its importance, this result points to the need for complementary approaches that can more effectively translate knowledge into sustainable actions, thereby offering a theoretically grounded and empirically informed extension of the TPB, particularly relevant for pro-environmental behaviour research.

A notable limitation of many studies on sustainable travel is their narrow focus on the environmental dimension, often neglecting the social and economic pillars of sustainability. Similarly, in research concerning sustainable tourist behaviour, sustainability is frequently reduced to "green" practices, such as reducing energy or paper consumption and recycling. This study, while acknowledging environmental sustainability, also examined the economic and social dimensions embedded within the data set.

Further, the study provides empirical insight into Generation Z, a key demographic in global tourism, within the under-researched context of South-East

Europe. While much of the existing presented literature focuses on Western or Asian markets, this research adds contextual diversity by analysing data from Serbian university students, highlighting how cultural, economic and social conditions influence sustainability-related choices. Topics such as sustainable development and practices are rarely explored among samples of young people from Serbia, making this study one of the few contributions in this area. The same applies to research specifically addressing the travel behaviours of Serbian young people, which is also rarely discussed. While such studies exist, there is a clear need for regular updates and broader thematic scope.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a more holistic understanding of the psychological, social and informational drivers of sustainable tourism behaviour.

6.2. Study limitations and recommendations for future research

It is important to recognise that different researchers often arrive at different conclusions. When young people are treated as a distinct age category, it becomes possible to identify internal variations in attitudes and behaviours (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018). Most studies in this domain have been focused on environmental sustainability and ecotourism, and the observed differences often depend on socio-demographic variables such as country of origin (Fang et al., 2018; Kabir & Hassan, 2024) or type of academic programme (Arrobas et al., 2020). The intention–behaviour gap identified in this study is another promising avenue for further exploration.

Kafková (2019) notes that values are shaped by national context, historical period and social change. It can therefore be expected that changes in young people's living environments will influence their attitudes and behaviours. Future research should be conducted continuously and expanded to include other topics beyond sustainable travel alone.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. These include the composition and size of the sample, the geographic scope and the methodology employed. The lifestyle of students may differ significantly from that of non-students, largely due to differences in family obligations and available free time (Mbwile & Rwekaza, 2024). To achieve a more comprehensive picture of youth travel sustainability, future research should include non-student populations.

Although the University of Novi Sad had approximately 50,000 students in the previous academic year (University of Novi Sad, n.d.), the sample of 217 respondents represents only about 0.44% of the total student population, so including students from other universities and enabling comparative analysis could enrich the findings. Additionally, the conditions under which the survey was conducted, with some questionnaires completed in a relatively short time, may have affected the quality of responses. As the questionnaire attempted to address all three dimensions of sustainability, future surveys should consider expanding the instrument to ensure equal representation of each dimension. It is also recommended to apply other statistical methods that would examine the dimensions of TPB and knowledge as a whole, rather than individually, as is the case in this study.

Finally, alternative research methods such as interviews or focus groups may yield deeper insights, allowing respondents to articulate their views and opinions more fully.

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