

## Complying with digital transformation in online booking through experiential values of generation Z

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### Abstract

This paper offers insights into experiential values and online accommodation booking in the digital transformation era of the tourism sector in relation to the Greek Generation Z cohort. More specifically, the role of experiential values, attitudes, and involvement as well as their impact on patronage intentions of the Generation Z cohort are investigated. Quantitative research conducted with an online questionnaire yielded a sample of 970 Generation Zers' responses. Using the Structural Equation Model via the AMOS statistical package, six hypotheses were tested. Results have revealed that the construct of experiential values positively impacts directly on patronage intentions, attitudes towards the e-booking platform, and customer involvement. Additionally, Generation Z members' attitudes towards the e-booking platform and involvement with the platform impacts patronage intentions. Furthermore, involvement with the e-booking platform has a negative effect on consumers' attitudes towards the platform. Detailed discussion of results and further implications is also provided.

**Key words:** Digital transformation; Tourism; Experiential Values; Generation Z Cohort; Marketing; Digital Communication

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## Introduction

Previous research advocates that the use of technology has affected every aspect of industry, business, and company operations, since retailers are continuously converting their services to digital channels (Hallikainen *et al.*, 2018). The tourism industry belongs to the sectors most profoundly affected by technological advances, mainly because it is highly service oriented (Osei *et al.*, 2020; Pabel, 2020). Thus, it is characterized by harsh competition, and struggles to decrease service costs (Vasko & Abraham, 2015). As a result, the tourism industry depends heavily on online marketing communication, and subsequently on communication technologies. This is clearly indicated by researchers who point out that in the late '90s, the diffusion of the internet initiated the transformation of the tourism-related distribution channels (Buhalis and Amaranggana, 2013; Chatzigeorgiou & Christou, 2020; Papathanassis, 2017; Li *et al.*, 2017). On the other hand, consumers today are also more knowledgeable and experienced in terms of technology, being a critical stakeholder of the digital market (Ruiz-Gomez & Navio-Marco, 2018; Vaško & Abrhám, 2015), as they become increasingly aware of, and adopt, the digital channels for product and service purchase (Chatzigeorgiou & Christou, 2020; Vendrell-Herrero *et al.*, 2017). In particular, the rapid growth of the Airbnb online business model has had important consequences for the hospitality industry, tourism destinations and consumers (Chiappa *et al.*, 2020; Dogru *et al.*, 2020; Priporas *et al.*, 2017a,b; Zervas *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, the use of technology has affected considerably the demand and the supply of tourism products (Buhalis, 1998). More specifically, in the tourism industry, web-based materials constitute the most prominent source of information to travel planners (Abou-Shouk & Khalifa, 2017), with the use of e-booking or online booking platforms (OBP). The OBP are the most used ones by prospective tourists (Sánchez-Lozano *et al.*, 2020), representing an easy and efficient way for travel organization (Bigne *et al.*, 2020; Ristova & Maglovski, 2018). This digital transformation in the sector of tourism contributed to significant changes, increased competition, and has given rise to new opportunities. Lee *et al.* (2014) postulate that digital technology has truly revolutionized modern societies. According to Henriette *et al.* (2016), digital transformation exhibits two main dimensions, namely the digital technologies and the user/consumer experience. The latter is a multidimensional concept with experiential components, and it generates value for the consumer that originates from his/her interactions with an "object" (Gentile *et al.* 2007; Holbrook, 2006). Holbrook (1994, p. 27) characterizes customer value as "an interactive relativistic preference experience," where "such interactive relativistic preferences form the essence of the consumption experiences" (Holbrook, 2006, p. 715).

There is an abundance of previous studies that refer to the tourism and travel sector in association with consumer behaviour (Cohen *et al.* 2014; Manyiwa *et al.*, 2018; Moutinho, 1987; Stiakakis & Vlachopoulou, 2017), and a plethora of studies referring to the inclusion of digitalization in the sector of tourism (Kayumovich, 2020; Pierdicca *et al.*, 2019; Xiang *et al.*, 2015; Buhalis & Law, 2008). Many scholars concentrate on smart tourism (Buhalis and Amaranggana, 2013; Gretzel *et al.*, 2015; Hassannia *et al.*, 2019; Wan, 2018), or tourism and digital transformation (Härting *et al.*, 2017; Lam and Law, 2019; Zsarnoczky, 2018). Moreover, a significant number of published papers focus on online booking [OB] (Guillet *et al.* 2020; Huang *et al.*, 2020; Sánchez-Lozano *et al.*, 2020; Li *et al.*, 2017; Zhao *et al.*, 2015), on customer experience from online and mobile retailing (Fan *et al.*, 2020; Li *et al.*, 2020; Pantano & Priporas, 2016; Rose *et al.*, 2012; Verhoef *et al.*, 2009), or on experiential values (EV) and the use of internet (Alias *et al.* 2016; Fiore *et al.*, 2005; Lee, 2005; Saidon and Musa, 2017; Shobeiri *et al.*, 2015; Stavrianea *et al.*, 2019; Tilokskulchai & Soontayatron, 2017). However, these are merely few indicative topics of the general topics regarding technology and the tourism sector that have been explored in the academic research.

Although numerous studies examine the association that holds among the tourism industry and consumers' behaviour, studies combining consumer EV and OB in the digital transformation era of tourism are rather scarce. Research findings have demonstrated that the interrelation amongst EV and OB had been understudied, with only a handful of articles compiled on the subject (eg., Abdullah *et al.*, 2016; Choi, 2015; Stavrianea *et al.*, 2019).

Having in mind the aforementioned, the present paper seeks to explore customer EV during information search and purchase via accommodation OBP. In addition, the role of EV, attitudes, and involvement, and their effects on patronage intentions of the Generation Z cohort (Gen Z) is extensively under- investigated. Since this paper examines EV within digital transformation in the tourism sector, the targeted group consists of people aged 18-23 years old, i.e., individuals that belong to the Gen Z cohort. Members of this generation, the also-called digital natives have been raised in a technological environment, being keen on technology, and never experienced lack of internet and computers in their life (Kamenidou *et al.*, 2020a; Reinikainen, 2020). Thus, this research aims to address the subsequent literature gaps:

1. The targeted group for participation in the current survey includes Greek consumers that are members of the Gen Z cohort, thus, individuals that were born in the time period between 1995 and 2009 (Williams & Page, 2011). The research on this generational cohort regarding tourism is novel, comparatively extremely limited, thus, leaving space for further exploration.
2. It focuses on EV from online accommodation booking (OAB), which is an understudied topic, since only three relevant papers have been pointed out (i.e., Abdullah *et al.*, 2016; Choi, 2015; Stavrianea *et al.*, 2019).
3. While three studies have been encountered on EV from OAB, as far as we know, only one previous combination with the Gen Z cohort exists (i.e., the work of Stavrianea *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, this framework offers foundations for more research on the topic since this group is regarded as essential for studying purposes, constituting the youngest adult-consumer group with limited research in the marketing field (Kamenidou *et al.*, 2018; Priporas *et al.*, 2017c).

## Literature Review

EV form an area that increasingly attracts the interest of academic researchers (Mathwick *et al.*, 2001; Pine & Gillmore 1999; Shobeiri *et al.* 2018; Stavrianea *et al.*, 2019). EV relate to the pleasurable consumption experiences that can be offered to customers through the addition of experiential benefits to product and services (Ahn *et al.* 2019; Shobeiri *et al.*, 2013). In that way, brands can respond to the modern consumer needs for superior value, and experience rather than commodity products (Brakus *et al.*, 2009; Kavoura & Stavrianea, 2016; Keng *et al.*, 2007; Shobeiri *et al.* 2018).

EV can have both extrinsic and intrinsic elements, with the intrinsic emphasizing the recognition of the experience itself (Hollbrook, 1994; Mano & Oliver, 1993). According to Holbrook (1994) values that are obtained by experience can be distinguished into two dimensions: i.e., the intrinsic versus extrinsic values on the first axis, and the active versus reactive sources of value on the second axis. Mathwick *et al.* (2001) proposed four aspects of EV; these dimensions consist of aesthetics (Aes), playfulness (PI), service excellence (SE), as well as consumer return on investment (CROI). Aes refers to the aspect of consumption experience that relates to the ocular attraction, like the layout and patterns, or, for instance, graphics and pictures for the online experience (Holbrook, 1994; Mathwick *et al.*, 2001). The PI nuance of EV relates to the inherent pleasure that a consumer derives from the experiences that offer an escape from everyday life and responsibilities (Mathwick *et al.*, 2001; Unger & Kernan 1983). SE, on the other hand, is associated with the evaluation that the consumer makes about the degree in which

the provider managed to deliver a standard of quality and expertise (Zeithmal, 1988). Lastly, CROI interrelates with the utility, in other words, the consumer's gain from the experience, compared to his/her investment (Mathwick *et al.*, 2001).

Along these lines, Ahn *et al.* (2019) explored the importance of EV on co-creation behavior; Abdullah *et al.* (2016) studied the perception of website interactivity and value on loyalty, while Choi (2015) examined the influence of a website's EV on satisfaction and loyalty. Similarly, Shobeiri *et al.* (2014) explored the impact of EV website involvement and perceived e-retailers assistive intention. In the context of OBP, limited scholarly work has exploited the area of EV. Keng *et al.* (2007) suggested that EV impact behavioral intentions in the context of shopping malls in Taiwan, whereas Mathwick *et al.* (2001) studied the role of EV on future patronage intentions for catalog shoppers. Table 1 shows a synopsis of the most relevant research on the topic.

**Table 1.** A synopsis of empirical studies on EV-marketing

Authors/ Year	Purpose	Industry	Findings
Ahn <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Examine the importance of EV on co-creation behaviour.	Integrated resort customers	PL, CROI and SE influence co-creation behaviour.
Brakus <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Create a scale for measuring brand experience.	Different industries	Brand experience directly impacts satisfaction and loyalty and indirectly through brand personality.
Choi (2015)	Empirically explored the associations among EV, satisfaction, and loyalty in the context of travel websites.	Tourism websites	CROI and SE are linked with satisfaction, which in turns, affects in a direct way loyalty.
Keng <i>et al.</i> (2007)	Investigate the relations between EV, service encounters and behavioural intentions of shopping malls customers.	Shopping Malls	Personal interaction encounters influence efficiency and excellence value. Physical environment encounters have an impact on PI and Aes. EV affects behavioural intentions.
Lee and Overby (2004)	Explore the effect of shopping values on satisfaction and loyalty.	Internet shopping	Utilitarian and EV positively influence satisfaction. The latter has an impact on loyalty.
Mathwick <i>et al.</i> (2001)	Evolve and test a scale for measuring EV that can be employed in retail shopping.	Online and Catalog shopping	In the context of online shopping, perceived CROI is significantly linked to the online shopping preference. Catalog shopping is based upon a broad range of EV sources. It entertains, is visually appealing, efficient, and affordable.

<b>Authors/ Year</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Shobeiri <i>et al.</i> (2013)	Investigate the way in which experiential marketing assists the online retailing to improve its brand image.	Online Retailing	EV differ regarding their importance in forming an e-retailer's website personality. Only SE was found to influence all five aspects of a website's personality. The five aspects of the website personality could be ameliorated by the provision of certain EV.
Shobeiri <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Examine the degree to which EV could ameliorate the reactions of the customers towards an e-retailer's website.	Online Shopping	Extrinsic/utilitarian values – including CROI and SE – influence in a greater extent the enhancement of perceived assistive image and involvement with the website. Customers appreciate the experiential dimensions of the website, since they carry significant messages regarding the e-retailer's customer-centric orientation.
Shobeiri <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Examine the differences regarding the influence of EV from online retailing amongst North American and Chinese customers.	Online Retailing	The impact of EV on involvement with the website and loyalty is higher for North Americans than for Chinese visitors. The influence of involvement on attitudes towards the website and the impact of attitudes on loyalty are higher for Chinese customers than for North Americans.
Stavrianea <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Examine gender differences regarding EV amongst Gen Z members.	Online Booking	Statistical differences were reported regarding the PI and SE dimensions of EV.

Maintaining loyalty is a central business goal especially in a competitive environment such as tourism (Kavoura & Stavrianea, 2016; Nam *et al.*, 2011; Suhartanto *et al.*, 2020). Patronage intentions relates to the customers' intention for positive word-of-mouth and preference of a service or product again in the future (Zeithaml, 1996). Prior research on the online shopping environments has also showed that EV could ameliorate customer satisfaction (Lee and Overby, 2004), as well as consumer attitudes towards the website and loyalty intentions (Brakus *et al.*, 2009; Jeong *et al.*, 2009; Mathwick *et al.*, 2001; Shobeiri, 2018). Attitudes towards the OBP represent the overall evaluation of the OBP and how favourable this is for the consumer (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). A favourable evaluation, for example, can have an effect on patronage intentions. It is along these lines that this study proposes that EV can positively impact attitudes towards the OBP and behavioral intentions overall. Therefore, the research hypotheses have as follows:

*H1: EV from the OBP positively impact patronage intentions towards the OBP.*

*H2: EV from the OBP positively impact attitudes towards the OBP.*

*H3: Attitudes towards the OBP positively impact patronage intentions towards the OBP.*

Furthermore, research has linked EV with website involvement (Shobeiri *et al.*, 2014). Involvement with a website is a behavioral response and it can be perceived as the degree that the content of an OBP can hold the interest of the visitor (Shobeiri *et al.*, 2014; Singh *et al.*, 2005, p.289). Therefore, it is suggested that the offering of additional EV can contribute to consumer's interest in the OBP:

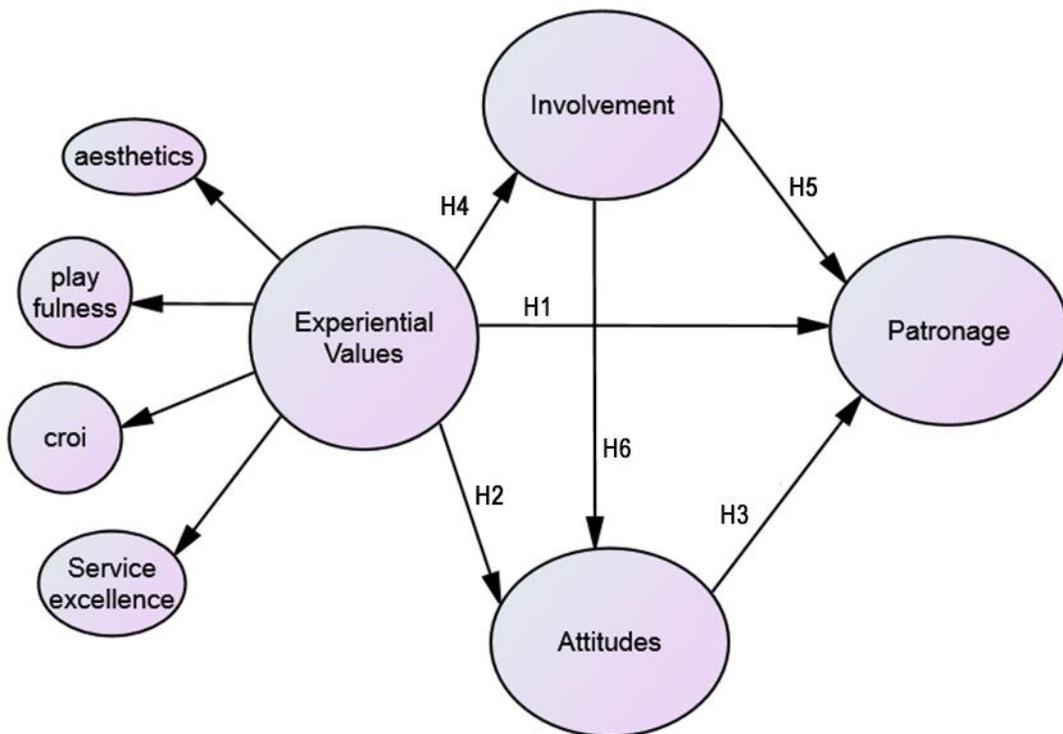
*H4: EV from the OBP positively impact the involvement with the OBP.*

Online involvement has been shown to result in positive consumer responses such as patronage intentions (Shobeiri *et al.*, 2014; Singh *et al.*, 2005) for a website or an OBP by enhancing the interaction with consumers (Shobeiri *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, we suggest that high involvement with the OBP positively impacts patronage intentions with the OBP:

*H5: Involvement with the OBP positively impacts patronage intentions towards the OBP.*

*H6: Involvement with the OBP positively impacts attitudes towards the OBP.*

The Conceptual Model of the study is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The Conceptual Model

## Methodology

This study has adopted a three-phase approach. Firstly, an extensive literature review informed the finalized questionnaire employed in the survey. The questionnaire was adopted from Shobeiri *et al.* (2018), where it was used for measuring EV, attitudes, involvement, and patronage intention for online shopping. Shobeiri *et al.*'s (2018) questionnaire was modified from the previous research of Mathwick *et al.* (2001), Eighmey (1997), Zeithaml *et al.* (1996), as well as Muehling *et al.* (1990). More precisely Shobeiri *et al.* (2018) also applied the Mathwick *et al.* (2001) experiential scale which contains the values of Aes, PI, CROI, and SE in order to measure EV. Additionally, a 5-item construct was used to measure attitudes which was originally developed by Eighmey (1997), while the involvement construct was developed by Muehling *et al.* (1990). Finally, for patronage intentions, a construct with four items developed by Zeithaml *et al.* (1996) was used. The items examined were assessed with a 7-point Likert scale. Appendix 1 demonstrates the items of the study.

The second phase of the study included a pilot study of the questionnaire in a smaller scale to guarantee that the questionnaire distributed is functional and to ensure face validity (Kent, 1993). This was completed by 135 university students who responded to it after the completion of a teaching session, using their phone and providing researchers with the necessary feedback.

In the last phase, the quantitative research was conducted. The questionnaire was distributed solely online, and a non-probability sampling method (combination of criteria, convenience, and snowball sampling) was used, following Kamenidou *et al.* (2020b) procedure. The criterion for inclusion was that participants had to be members of the Greek Gen Z cohort (18-23 years old at the time of the research). At first, students of the researchers and acquaintances were requested to respond to the questionnaire via a link they could find on a Facebook page that was made for the specific research. Once opened, the link provided the user with the goals of the study, the participation criteria, and requested consent that the data could be used for research purposes (first question in the questionnaire), confirming to them confidentiality of the answers provided (Kamenidou *et al.*, 2019).

Furthermore, respondents were asked to forward the link to relatives, friends and acquaintances who also belonged to Greek Gen Z cohort. The link could accept responses during a five-month period, i.e., August to December 2018. Via this data collection process, 970 responses were collected which were regarded as usable and suitable for analysis.

The subsequent analysis included: descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, discriminant validity, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and SEM with AMOS.

## Results

### *Sample profile*

The sample consisted of 970 Gen Zers, of which 42% were males and 58% females, while 35% was 18-20 years old and the rest 65% was 21-23 years of age. Two main categories stood as education: 76% had up to postsecondary education, and 24% hold at least a bachelor's degree, while the vast majority (63%) being university students and 19% being private employees. Lastly, 73% live in urban areas, while 27% live in rural areas, while as concerns net monthly family income 45% had an income up to 1000.00€, 24% had an income ranging from 1000.01-2000.00€ and 21% had an income more than 2000.00€.

### *Reliability, Convergent, Discriminant Validity and CFA*

A second-order CFA was employed, and the results demonstrated a good fit for the measurement model and acceptable loadings for all items. Specifically, the Chi-Square test value was 32.848 (df = 2) with

$p < 0.001$ , while AGFI, TLI, CFI had values of 0.919, 0.951, and 0.983, respectively. The measurement model was assessed for reliability, convergent and discriminant validity. All measurements had Cronbach's alpha higher than 0.80 (Table 2) which indicates adequate internal consistency reliability (Nunnally, 1978).

**Table 2.** Cronbach's alpha

Parameter	Cronbach's alpha
Aes	0.90
PI	0.92
CROI	0.90
SE	0.82
Involvement	0.95
Attitudes	0.96
Patronage Intentions	0.88

The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of all factors were observed to exceed 0.70, above the threshold of 0.5, and therefore, demonstrating convergent validity according to Fornell and Larcker (1981). To test for discriminant validity the square root of AVE of every factor was compared to all the correlations between factors. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981) discriminant validity was established, since the Square root of AVE was in each case higher than the correlations between factors (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Convergent and discriminant validity tests

Factor	AVE	Aes	PL	CRO	SE	I	Attitude	PI
Aes	0.72	0.85						
PL	0.71	0.61	0.84					
CROI	0.76	0.59	0.54	0.87				
SE	0.85	0.63	0.65	0.69	0.92			
I	0.74	0.63	0.62	0.68	0.73	0.86		
Attitude	0.82	0.01	0.27	0.33	0.10	0.13	0.91	
PI	0.72	0.58	0.33	0.59	0.57	0.66	0.25	0.85

#### *Path Analysis and hypotheses testing*

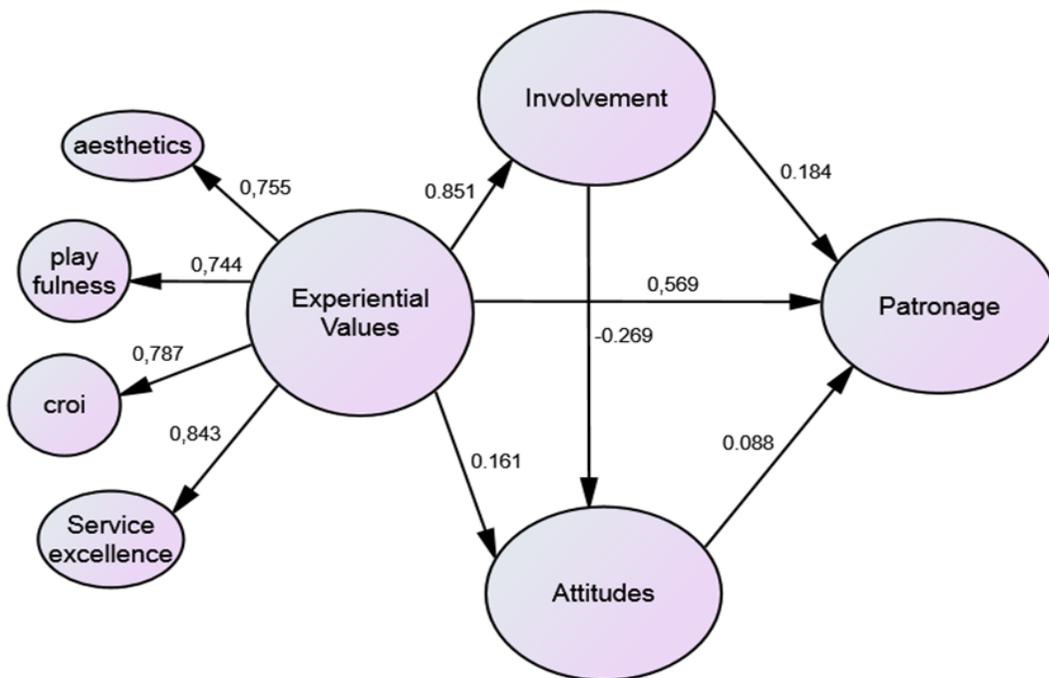
The Structural Equation Model with AMOS 24 software package was employed to test the aforementioned hypotheses. The model showed a good fit, with the Chi-Square, AGFI, TLI, CFI, RMSEA having values of 81.168 ( $df = 9$ )  $p < 0.001$ , 0.926, 0.954, 0.98, 0.091 respectively (Hu & Bentler, 1991). The path coefficients are presented in Table 4, where coefficients in all cases are significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). The construct of EV positively impacts directly patronage intentions (0.57), attitudes towards the OBP (0.16) and customer involvement (0.85), providing strong support for hypotheses H<sub>1</sub>, H<sub>2</sub>, and H<sub>4</sub>. As expected, attitudes towards the OBP (0.09) and involvement with the OBP (0.18) have positive direct effects on

patronage intentions, providing support for the hypotheses H3 and H5. Contrary to the authors' expectations, involvement with the OBP has a strong direct-but a negative-effect on consumers' attitudes towards the OBP, therefore hypothesis H6 is not supported.

**Table 4.** Structural relationships

Hypotheses	Path	Path coefficient	p-value
H1	Experiential Values → Patronage Intentions	0.57	p<0.001
H2	Experiential Values → Attitudes towards the platform	0.16	p<0.050
H3	Attitudes towards the platform → Patronage Intentions	0.09	p<0.001
H4	Experiential Values → Involvement	0.85	p<0.001
H5	Involvement with the platform → Patronage Intentions	0.18	p<0.001
H6	Involvement with the platform → Attitudes towards the platform	-0.27	p<0.001

Figure 2 demonstrates the Structural Equation Model results.



**Figure 2.** The Structural Model Results

## Discussion and Conclusion

This research provides important insights regarding the EV of Gen Zers towards OBP and their patronage intentions. Results revealed that offering value to the Gen Z cohort through additional experiences carries ultimately a very strong impact on their intention for positive future behaviour. The findings of the current research are aligned with prior research (e.g., Mohseni *et al.*, 2014; Shobeiri *et al.*, 2018) that explained the effect of EV on future intention, although-for the specific generational cohort and in the context of the OBP- the effect was even stronger. The EV nuance also plays a very significant role in capturing and maintaining this generational cohort's interest and involvement with the OBP. Again, it seems that for this young generational cohort the offering of additional experiences proves to be extremely important in order to get them engaged with the OBP. As anticipated, EV seem also to influence the Gen-Z cohorts' attitudes towards the OBP. Furthermore, involvement seems to constitute a key element that is related to patronage intentions, in accordance with prior research (Singh *et al.*, 2005). The role of attitudes towards the OBP is also significant but less strong than the other factors examined in the formation of patronage intentions. Therefore, it becomes evident that the Gen Z cohort tourists highly appreciate the gaining of EV in order to get involved, have a positive attitude, and continue to patronage an OBP.

Furthermore, the research provides online travel services, tourism businesses and organizations with valuable information and practical suggestions from this research. Elements such as Aes, PI, together with an overall SE are essential in order to achieve better performance for this cohort. Marketers in the tourism industry arena could take advantage of the results of the research since they offer insights on how to engage these young tourist-customers more with their products and services, and, consequently, repeat visits to their OBP. The latter is of greatest interest, particularly for this young, understudied generational cohort, who consist of the body of today's as well as the near future's youngest adult consumers.

### *Limitations and Directions for future research*

This current study is tied with several limitations that could constitute drivers for future research. Firstly, the research used a non-probability online data as a collection method, and as such, generalizability of results to the total Gen Z cohort is not realizable. Secondly, the targeted sample of the research consists merely of the Gen Z cohort and is thus limited to the age of 18-23 years old. Moreover, additional constructs may exist that can measure EV from OBP, but this study follows the research recommendations of Shobeiri *et al.* (2018).

Albeit its limitations identified, the contribution of the present study towards providing insights on tourism behaviour regarding the Gen Z cohort is valuable given that it is an increasingly evolving subject in the marketing field.

Undoubtedly, further research may incorporate a probability sampling method involving all Greek generational cohorts. Likewise, other future research pathways could embrace alternative dimensions to measure tourist EV in the tourism's digital transformation era.

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### Appendix 1: Constructs, items, and factor loadings

Items EV	Loading on factor
<b>Aesthetics (Aes)</b>	
The way the OBP displays the products/services is attractive.	0.861
The OBP is aesthetically appealing.	0.910
I like the way that the OBP looks.	0.880
I think that the OBP is very entertaining.	0.723
The enthusiasm of the OBP is catching.	0.602
<b>Playfulness (PI)</b>	
Booking from the OBP “gets me away from it all”.	0.828
Booking from the OBP makes me feel like I am in another world.	0.896
I get so involved when I book from the OBP that I forget everything.	0.857
I enjoy booking from the OBP for its own sake.	0.797
I book from the OBP for the pure enjoyment of it.	0.824
<b>Consumer return on investment (CROI)</b>	
Booking from the OBP is an efficient way to manage my time.	0.819
Booking from the OBP makes my life easier.	0.911
Booking from the OBP fits my schedule.	0.877
<b>Service excellence (SE)</b>	
When I think of the OBP, I think of excellence.	0.921
I think of the OBP as an expert in the services it offers.	0.920
<b>Involvement (I)</b>	
The OBP is important to me.	0.822
The OBP is meaningful.	0.838
The OBP is worth remembering.	0.840
The OBP is relevant to my needs.	0.854
The OBP is worth paying attention to.	0.903
The OBP is for me.	0.890
The OBP is interesting to me.	0.859
<b>Attitudes</b>	
This OBP is good.	0.882
I like the OBP.	0.920
I react favorably toward the OBP.	0.963
I have positive feelings for the OBP.	0.943
The OBP is attractive.	0.817

<b>Items EV</b>	<b>Loading on factor</b>
<b>Patronage intentions (PI)</b>	
I will recommend the OBP.	0.861
I will use the OBP in the future.	0.918
The OBP is my first choice for booking.	0.754

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