



Boutique Hotel Branding for Generation Z

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Abstract

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<p>The aim of this thesis is to find out what kind of boutique hotels are interesting to Generation Z. This information is then connected to how it shows in the boutique hotels' branding. Previously published research explained that boutique hotels are still a rather new concept. They have many different themes and concepts they follow such as focus on wellness, sustainability, and local collaborations. The research on the traveller behaviour of Generation Z shows that they are the current trend setters when it comes to travelling and they themselves prefer locations and experiences that offer sustainability, focus on culture and locality, and have exciting activities.</p> <p>The chosen research method for the study is quantitative research and the data was collected from 18-25-year-olds with a survey in March 2024. The number of respondents was 100. The results indicated that Generation Z finds boutique hotels mostly interesting and would be interested to stay at boutique hotels. The results also showed that from the usual concepts of boutique hotels Generation Z finds the most interesting wellness, unique and personalised experiences, and collaborations with the local cultures. From the point of view of technology, the results indicated that contactless check-in and check-out are appreciated more than other high-tech appliances. Social media was found out to be an important factor when choosing a boutique hotel.</p> <p>In summary, boutique hotels should bring out more on their branding their collaborations with the local cultures and display their benefits to the local more visibly. They should also brand their wellness facilities toward Generation Z if they are not already because they are clearly interested in them. More boutique hotels should also brand themselves as providing unique experiences with activities and culinary experiences since those concepts could capture the interest of young travellers. When trying to get Generation Z customers boutique hotels should market in social media and focus on building a brand that consumers want to post on their social media accounts since based on the results that is highly important to Generation Z.</p>
Key words Boutique Hotel, Generation Z, Branding

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1 Introduction

Boutique hotels have been a part of hospitality industry for many decades all over the world. However, they are still a relatively new concept only gaining popularity over the past decade. They are smaller hotels and a unique product in the industry because of their specific features and offerings. Travellers are also looking for new styles of travelling and accommodation which has also had a part in the changes of the hospitality industry. Accommodation providers have had to meet the changing expectations of the consumers to fit the developing trends of which especially younger travellers follow. (Khalil-ur-Rehman & al. 2021; Wheeler 2006)

The focus of this thesis is on boutique hotels who's target group is Generation Z and more specifically individuals aged between 18 to 25. The goal is to find out what are the most interesting factors of boutique hotels to Gen Z travellers and what features and details boutique hotels should focus on in their branding. To help define the interests of Gen Z their traveller behaviour is examined using previous research on the topic. The boutique hotels that are interested on what the Gen Z target group sees of the brand from the outside are the ones that could benefit the most from the study of this thesis.

The objective for the study is to research the interests of Gen Z travellers by introducing them boutique hotels and then giving them questions with relevant answer options. The study will use quantitative research method to collect data with a survey. The target group for the survey will be 18–25-year-old individuals. The data will be analysed by using statistical methods. Table 1 contains the overlay matrix of the investigative questions that are used to solve the research problem: What kind of boutique hotel branding is interesting to Generation Z?

Table 1. Overlay Matrix

Investigative Questions	Theoretical Framework (chapter)	Results (chapter)	Questionnaire Questions
Are Gen Z individuals interested to stay at boutique hotels?	4	6	1-3
What themes or concepts of boutique hotels are the most interesting to Gen Z?	3	6	4-6
Does a social media presence influence Gen Z's interest in boutique hotels?	4	6	7-8

The topic of this thesis is interesting because as mentioned previously boutique hotels are still a new concept in the hospitality industry and because Gen Z is continuously creating new trends around the world. It is interesting to research and study what Gen Z thinks about boutique hotels at the moment before the current trends are again changing. Besides, the topic of traveller behaviour is always very intriguing because it gives an insight into what individuals and groups are thinking about and what explains their actions.

Next in the thesis is the literature review which has been divided into parts. The first part is about branding where it is defined and elements of it are introduced. The second part is about boutique hotels where they are defined, and boutique hotel examples are provided. Third is the Gen Z traveller behaviour which consists of discussion about consumer behaviour and different travel objectives of Gen Z. After that in the thesis is introduced the research method and the implementation of the study. The last parts of the thesis are the findings of the study and discussion about the results. From the very last pages sources and the appendices can be found.

2 Branding

This chapter is the first part of the literature review, and it aims to provide the theoretical framework for the topic of branding. Specific processes and topics must be examined and thought about when trying to build a strong brand. Since the focus of this thesis is to investigate branding from the view of consumers the theory is focused on building a brand strategy by concentrating on brand identity, brand positioning, brand values, brand personality, brand image, and brand equity.

Brand as a concept has numerous explanations and descriptions. The dictionary defines brand as a mark on a product that can be traced to a manufacturer. However, that is a rather old-fashioned interpretation. These days the word brand has a deeper definition than just a name or a symbol of a product or service. Brand is about what the name or the symbol means to people. (Gronlund 2013, 2)

A brand can be thought as a nebulous element meaning it is a vague and indefinite idea created for the consumers. Brands have an identity, values, and culture that the consumers can use to identify and differentiate brands. They have fluid meanings and are dynamic entities with a definition that is difficult to put into words that are easily understood. Brands are more about the promise they have made to meet the consumers' expectations. (Gronlund 2013, 2-3; Lalaounis 2020, chapter 1)

To build a successful strong brand ideas such as brand identity, brand positioning, brand values, and brand personality must be used. These terms are defined in the chapters down below. However, while those are the main terms this thesis focuses on it is important to understand that there are also other essential focal points when it comes to building a brand. One of the important points is brand essence which stands for the summary of a brand's core values. This focuses on the main emotions and values the brand communicates to their consumers. Even after these concepts there are more of what it takes to build a brand like the whole branding process consisting of conducting research, clarifying a strategy, designing identity, creating touchpoints, and managing assets. These have sub-topics such as marketing, brand architecture, system development, and a launching plan. (Gronlund 2013, 3-4; Wheeler 2017, 1-6)

As mentioned before marketing is part of the branding process. However, branding is often thought as the base for successful marketing. While branding and marketing are deeply connected and must be examined together when working on one or the other they are not necessarily one and the same. Branding is more than the marketing efforts of a business. It is about the perception of the brand that a consumer has, and it is about the relationship with the consumer. Branding is used to

build awareness of the brand, to attract new customers and, as an end goal, to extend customer loyalty. (Baisya 2013, chapter 3; Gronlund 2013, 4-6; Wheeler 2017, 1-6)

Essentially branding is a tool to help distinguish a business in the competitive world by focusing on the business' brand to attract consumers by giving the brand a meaning, personality, and an idea for the consumers to identify with. (Gronlund 2013, 4-6)

2.1 Brand Identity

The part of a brand that appeals to consumers' senses is a brand's identity meaning the factors of a brand that the consumer can see, hear, touch, or even smell. What consumers see in a brand are usually logos or other symbols important and connected to the brand. Consumers can hear a theme song or for example a specific voice marketing the brand. Touching often happens in store meaning the brand has a physical object as a product. Smelling can happen when interacting with a brand focused on perfumes or for example at a restaurant by smelling the food. Brand identity is about the recognition that consumers have of brands and their products or services. The recognition might, for example, be connected to memories or emotions affiliated with the brand creating a strong sense of recollection, ideas, and differentiation. (Wheeler 2017, 2-6)

Brand identity can be built or developed by focusing on core characteristics that will stay the same as long as the brand exists. The branding team should focus on issues such as the main vision or mission of the brand. An objective of the brand should be identified and fully understood by everyone inside the business. There should also be key design features that are special to the brand and can be recognized by the consumers. These features are what makes the brand different from others. The most important part to keep in mind that, as mentioned above, these characteristics and features must be permanent. (Baisya 2013, chapter 3)

2.2 Brand Image

Another essential concept is brand image which indicates the perceptions of the brand in the consumer's mind. To have a positive brand image should the consumers have strong, favourable associations of the brand. Those associations are often brand attributes or benefits. Brand attributes are specific characteristics of a product or service. Brand benefits are the personal ideas and feeling of the consumers connected to the brand's products or services. (Gronlund 2013, 1; Keller 2019, 76)

Previously introduced concept of brand identity is strongly connected to brand image. Brand identity is first received by the consumers when they process it and come to their own conclusions of the brand which leads to them creating the brand image in their minds. It is possible that

sometimes the consumers do not get the intended perception the brand marketers wanted to create. That is why they should pay extra attention on specifying the brand's aim and meaning while also building its self-image by communication and creative action for the brand. (Baisya 2013, 49; Lalaounis 2020, chapter 3)

2.3 Brand Positioning

Brand positioning refers to what a brand represents in the minds of consumers in comparison to competitors and the advantages of promises. According to Gronlund (2013, 6-8) the goal of brand positioning is to describe the entire offering of a business both the tangible and intangible elements to build an authentic experience and an emotional bond between the brand and the consumer. (Gronlund 2013, 6-8)

To start successful brand positioning the business must understand the consumer's mind and why the consumer would purchase the products or services of a business. This is done by researching and understanding the common beliefs and perceptions of consumers that are apparent and connect them to the brand's products and services or even to the competing brands. To accomplish good results in brand positioning the business management should use all elements of their brand's identity. This includes both the tangible and intangible elements of the brand and when using these elements correctly they should all communicate a one chosen position. To help choose a position the business management should identify in which category the brand belongs to and in what ways in the brand different from other brands in that same category. (Baisya 2013, 56-59)

2.4 Brand Values

Brand values indicate the core values the brand stands for. Part of building the core values of a brand is understanding the target customers and their values. Brand personality will also be heavily influenced by the core values of a brand since by communicating specific values that are important to the target customers will help uphold the idea of human-like personality. Values influence the consumers' decision-making since they look for brands whose values are similar to their own values. Studies also confirm that value congruity positively influences consumers' identification with a brand which causes a commitment to the brand leading to brand loyalty. Core brand values should be supported by the brand regardless of any changes in the environment similarly to brand identity. (Lalaounis 2020, chapter 2)

2.5 Brand Personality

One of the main points of branding is building a relationship between the brand and consumers. Bringing the brand alive by giving it personality traits and emotions that mirror the consumers will

help the consumers to connect with the brand. A brand should have distinctive personality traits the consumers can recognize which will create brand recognition and that way create value for the brand. To help build an effective brand personality the previously mentioned brand values should be used. (Gronlund 2013, 3-4)

Part of the personality is communication style. The way a brand communicates to their consumers about their products or services should support the personality traits. This will show the consumers what kind of person would the brand be if it were a human being. This connection inside the consumers' minds will make the emotional bond between the consumer and the brand even stronger. To create human like communication businesses often gives their brand a spokesperson. This can be real or symbolic. Examples of real spokespersons of a brand are celebrities representing the brand in, for example, commercials. This helps the consumers to associate real people with brands and develops brand character in their minds. (Baisya 2013, 14-16)

2.6 Brand Equity

One of the most important parts of a brand strategy is brand equity. Keller (2019) talks about customer-based brand equity also known as CBBE which is from the perspective of the consumers. The point is to understand the needs, wants, and their desired thoughts and feelings of the consumers. The goal to reach positive customer-based brand equity is to have consumers that react favourably to product or service marketing when it is connected to the brand that they know. This way the consumers are often more accepting and less sensitive to changes in the products such as price increases or new distribution channels. In summary customer-based brand equity occurs when the consumers are connected to the brand and have strong emotions, memories, or other associations about the brand. This is brand awareness by showing brand recognition and brand recall. (Keller 2019, 58)

2.7 Brand Awareness

As mentioned above brand awareness consists of brand recognition and brand recall. Brand recognition is when the consumer can recognise prior exposure to the brand when the brand is being brought up. Brand recall is when the consumer can connect a specific brand to a product category. Brand recognition is very important to brand because studies show that many of the consumer decisions are made when the brand name, logo and so on are visible to the consumer, for example, at the point of sale. However, when consumer decisions are made in a setting where there are no visible cues of the brand is brand recall more important since that is when the consumer is bringing the brand from their memory. Brand recall is especially important for online brands. (Keller 2019, 72-73)

There are three advantages of creating strong brand awareness: learning advantages, consideration advantages, and choice advantages. Learning advantages refers to the fact that brand awareness is influenced by the strength of the associations consumers make up of the brand image. Consideration advantages means the process of the consumer thinking about the brand when they are making purchase decisions. The goal is to be the main brand that comes to the consumer's mind when doing that decision. Choice advantages is important because it can affect the choices made between brands when there are no strong associations to any brands. Then the fact that the consumer has even a minimum amount of brand awareness is beneficial in the purchase decisions. (Keller 2019, 73)

3 Boutique Hotels

This chapter includes the latest trends for boutique hotels and helps to build an understanding of the concept of boutique hotels by introducing its definition. The understanding of the concept is also supported by giving examples of boutique hotels in Europe. Each example is examined from the point of view of why it is a great example of boutique hotels and what typical aspects of boutique hotels the examples have.

3.1 Definition

There is no formal definition for boutique hotels as a concept. Rather, it is more like vague ideas of concepts for smaller hotels that are offering some kinds of unique products or services with the focus on detail and luxury. Boutique hotels have been around and part of hospitality industry at least since the 1980s but have only gained popularity all around the world over the past decade. As mentioned above they are smaller hotels with special features that make them different from original hotels.

According to Wheeler (2006) the term “small” is often associated with boutique hotels when trying to define the concept. Usually, the number of rooms in a boutique hotel is 25. Boutique hotels are also usually connected to having excellent customer service with specialized amenities or features such as wellness areas, theme rooms, and unique culinary experiences. They are also associated with urban locations where they have the leverage of being culturally relevant by preservation or restoration of old buildings. They want to be part of the local community and create memorable stays for their customers. (Khalil-ur-Rehman & al. 2021; Ting 2017; Wheeler 2006)

As a summary of the definition, it can be said that boutique hotels are small and typically luxurious accommodations that provide personalised services and unique experiences to their guests. They often have a distinctive design approach that emphasizes attention to detail.

3.2 Latest Trends

Pre-pandemic travellers focused more on social media and how they can share the most amazing travel experiences to their followers. Boutique Lifestyle Leaders Association is happy to notice that social media is not the main focus for travellers anymore. Customers are paying more attention to finding accommodation that aligns with their values instead of following the latest travel trends. Boutique hotels in general have noticed a change in their customer base after the COVID-19 pandemic. They have more returning customers seeking a home-like feeling for their accommodation. The focus for the travellers when choosing their accommodation seems to be quality over quantity. (Barrie 2023a)

Travellers have also been noticed to be more appreciative when boutique hotels are partnering with the locals for a more original feel. This means local produce, artists, and artisans with a unique style. Customers of boutique hotels would also like to see more personal connections in the service. According to Boutique Lifestyle Leaders Association this can be accomplished by bringing forward the personal interests of boutique hotel owners such as wine culture or music. This is part of the fact that travellers focus on common values between the traveller and accommodation. (Barrie 2023a)

It seems that travellers are also more attracted to functionality with unique details than overhyped social media trends. Travellers want to stay at buildings with history that tell a story of growth and appreciation for what has once been. Renovating old buildings also supports the growing value for sustainability in the hospitality industry. Another expanding value is wellness which should also be taken into account in boutique hotels. The previously mentioned unique details can for example be about what the boutique hotels can offer for their customers that connects to wellness in a deeper level than calming essential oils. It has been noticed that many boutique hotels have planted gardens to provide fresh produce. It should also be noted that wellness can also be seen from the energy the staff transmits which is why boutique hotels wanting to focus on wellness should also pay attention to the wellbeing of their staff. (Barrie 2023a)

Since boutique hotels are smaller establishments they have more possibilities to focus on what their unique interest are and what trends to they wish to follow. They have more possibilities when it comes to technology or innovation in general. However, boutique hotels should keep a collaborative mindset instead of just competing against each other to ensure the possibilities for all independent boutique hotels to succeed. (Barrie 2023a)

3.3 Boutique Hotel Examples

AlmaLusa is a boutique hotel brand in Portugal founded in 2016. Their main goal is to show travellers Portuguese culture with their three hotels of which two are in Lisbon and one in Comporta. The hotel in Comporta opened in 2022 and is one of the few hotels in the small fishing and farming village with white sand beaches known by the locals and only recently appearing to travellers. While AlmaLusa Comporta with its 53 rooms of which 31 are suites was one of the first hotels to open in town the other accommodation options for travellers are villa rentals. AlmaLusa wanted to bring another option for travellers by building the hotel but also focus on respecting the local nature and people. Their centre of attention is sustainability by using less energy and avoiding plastic when possible. (AlmaLusa s.a.; Barrie 2023b)

AlmaLusa Comporta is also supporting the local community by hiring locals and marketing the local businesses such as local guides and restaurants. They also market the use of in-season ingredients from local producers and their art collection from local artists. While suits and other formal wear is usually connected to luxury hotels AlmaLusa Comporta has made the choice to have the staff dress in less formal clothes with the idea that since their guests are wearing clothing like jeans they might feel out of place in a place that is too formal. These focal points are the unique details travellers currently value in boutique hotels and supports the changes travellers are making in their accommodation choices. (AlmaLusa s.a.; Barrie 2023b)



Figure 1. AlmaLusa Comporta pool area (AlmaLusa Comporta s.a.)

Figure 1 shows the style of the pool area of AlmaLusa Comporta. They focus on harmoniously merging with the local landscape by using neutral colour and wood. This brings out a relaxed atmosphere by also making it clear that the hotel gets its inspiration from the local architecture and heritage as they also mention in their website. In their design they have clean lines and natural materials which creates a blend of traditional and contemporary design. (AlmaLusa s.a.)

AlmaLusa Comporta is a good example of boutique hotels from the side of luxury with a hint of a more relaxed customer experience. They focus on creating a clean and intimate atmosphere at the hotel, but they also pay attention to the mood of the local area by paying attention to small details such as the uniforms of the staff. AlmaLusa Comporta is also collaborating with the locals in multiple different ways which supports the trends for boutique hotels.

1 Place Vendôme is a boutique hotel in the heart of Paris founded in 2023. It is located in a building from the 18th-century and was renovated in four years into a luxury hotel. The hotel has 15 rooms of which 10 are suites and the hotel specializes in luxurious experiences. The rooms are divided and named after crystals or other stones or materials such as the Saphir Suite, the Jade Room, and the Perle Room. They have high-end clientele, and they focus on making sure their guests can enjoy their stay in privacy while utilizing the luxurious facilities such as the offerings of their wellness area. The hotel also has a glass-roofed sitting room called “Winter Garden” to add another detail into their luxury. (1 Place Vendôme s.a.; World Travel Magazine 2023)

The suites in the hotel have been planned and decorated in high detail. As an example, one of their suites called the Chopard Apartment is 131 square meters and has a ceremonial salon. Another suite called the Rubis Suite is 73 square meters with wooden beams seeking a rustic country house atmosphere while keeping up the luxury with its cathedral ceiling. (1 Place Vendôme s.a.; World Travel Magazine 2023)



Figure 2. 1 Place Vendôme room (1placevendome Instagram 2024)

From figure 2 it can be seen how the design is historic charm combined with modern elegance. The different style rooms provide more opportunities for guests to try new atmospheres at the hotel and gives meaning to the idea that there is something for everyone. The hotel also focuses on the guests' privacy while maintaining the secluded luxurious feel with detailed personal touches. (World Travel Magazine 2023)

As a boutique hotel 1 Place Vendôme is classy and modern but as is typical for boutique hotels it has history combined in its luxury. It is a great example of a boutique hotel since it is in the middle of a big city blended in with the local architecture while the inside of the hotel has themed rooms designed in different styles.

Andersen Hotel is located in the Vesterbo district in Copenhagen and has been run by the same family for over 80 years. This hotel is especially for business travellers and for people visiting Copenhagen for a short period of time. The hotel has 69 rooms and suites which are divided into four room types suggesting the vibe in the room: Amazing, Wonderful, Brilliant, and Cool. They also have styles the guest may choose from: Princess, Mermaid, and Emperor. Princess style is a colour combination of purple and magenta providing an elegant but warm atmosphere. The style of Mermaid room is colours of turquoise and lime reflecting the soothing elements of water. Lastly the Emperor room which is decorated with blue and magenta bringing forward an idea of regal luxury. Figure 3 is an example of a room from Andersen Hotel. It shows how the colours are used in the design of the room. (Andersen Hotel s.a.; Da Silva 2018)



Figure 3. Andersen Hotel room. (Andersen Hotel s.a.)

The hotel has a courtyard with outdoor seating where guests are encouraged to spend time at enjoying the luxury of a bio fireplace. Andersen Hotel has extra amenities such as bike rentals, babysitting, and a gym. They also have a unique concept of being able to have your room available for 24 hours from check-in to check-out. The hotel is Green Key Certified and wishes to reduce their environmental impact further. (Andersen Hotel s.a.; Da Silva 2018)

Andersen Hotel is another typical boutique hotel with its themed rooms. However, the hotel is bigger than boutique hotels generally are since it has 69 different rooms. It is also important to note how the hotel has been in business for multiple generations which, even though it is not necessarily custom for boutique hotels, gives the hotel character and supports the feeling of history. Andersen hotel is also different with its customer base since it focuses on business travellers. This focus makes it possible to have so many extra amenities personalised to their customers.

Myst Boutique Hotel is located in Santorini in Greece. It was founded in 2018 and it offers its guests comfort and tranquillity close to the sea. The hotel has a traditional Cycladic style which

means it is very characteristic to the known Greek design. The common colour themes are cream, grey, and aqua which matches with the sea. Example of the colours in their pool area can be seen in figure 4. Myst Boutique Hotel is especially for couples and friends travelling together who are looking for something more relaxed. The hotel has luxurious rooms with sea views and a good collection of rooms with different styles and sizes to choose from. (Arfin 2018; Myst Boutique Hotel s.a.)

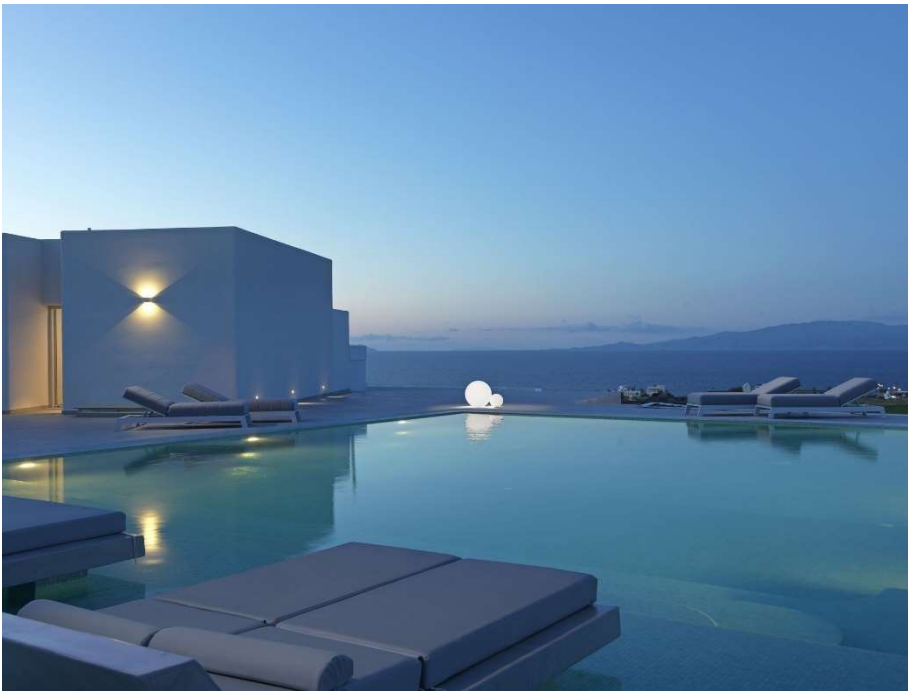


Figure 4. Myst Boutique Hotel pool area (Myst Boutique Hotel s.a.)

Myst Boutique Hotel's philosophy is to greet their guests with warmth, candour, and excitement. They want to create memorable experiences and pays attention to returning customers. The hotel has the possibilities for a relaxing pool day as well as activities the guests can experience such as wine tasting at one of the island's famous wineries and Santorini's best restaurants. The hotel also encourages guests to take pictures at the premises and guides guests to ask the staff for best tips to get the best vacation photos. (Myst Boutique Hotel s.a.)

As is typical for boutique hotels Myst Boutique hotel offers unique experiences to their guests. The other boutique hotel examples have been more focused on the actual hotel stay but Myst Boutique hotel brings out the trend of personalised experiences such as culinary experiences. The hotel also follows the trend of "Instagrammable" pictures at their premises which is not so typical for boutique hotels because it is too focused on shallowness and looks instead of true feelings and experiences.

Maison ELLE Paris is a boutique hotel opened in Paris in 2022. It is located in the centre of Paris near the Arc De Triomphe. The hotel has 25 rooms and suites with the style inspired by the great Parisian couturiers of the 20th century such as Coco Chanel and Jean-Paul Gaultier. The hotel is overall very chic and iconic Parisian style with a décor fitting to the latest fashion trends. The rooms are said to have elegant and urban atmospheres with femininity and masculinity. Figure 5 gives an example of the designed used in the hotel's rooms. The black and white theme with intricate design is trendy and the added pictures and paintings support the urban feeling the hotel wants to bring forward in its design. (Jain, 2022; Maison ELLE s.a.)

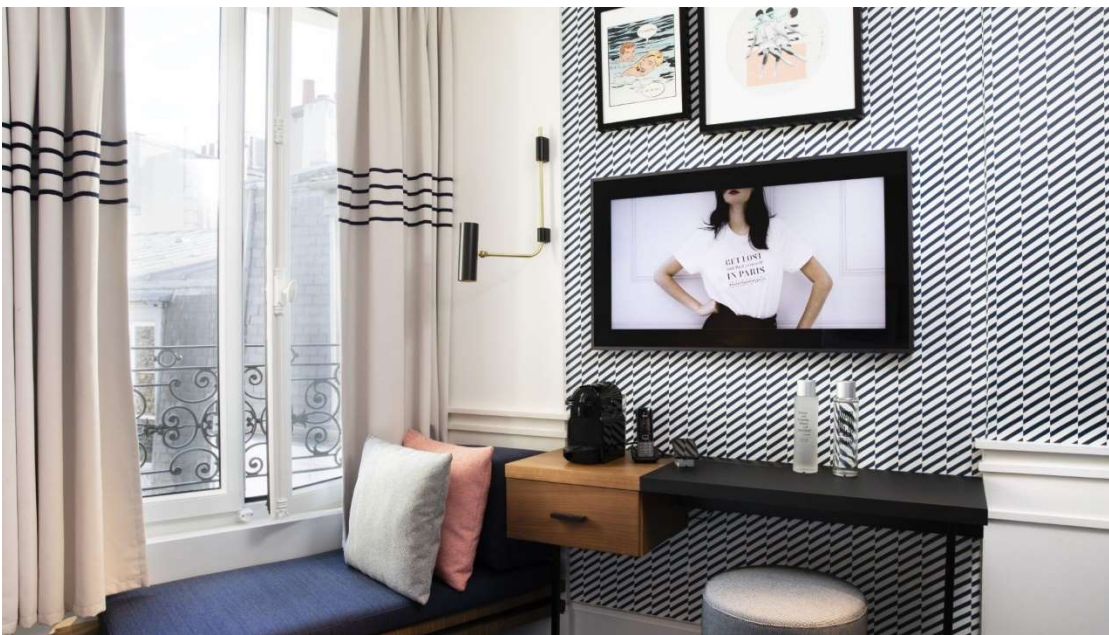


Figure 5. Maison ELLE Paris room (Maison ELLE s.a.)

The ELLE has collaborated with Dr Hauschka to provide guests with a boutique spa that has facilities such as a steam room, sauna, and a yoga studio. The collaboration makes sure the products used in the spa facilities are organic and green to provide a natural approach to skincare. (Jain 2022; Maison ELLE s.a.)

The fact that Maison ELLE Paris follows the latest fashion trends is rather untypical for boutique hotels which makes it a great example of the diversity of boutique hotels as a concept. The possibilities are endless when it comes to design and style of boutique hotels since the definition of boutique hotels is so vague. However, what is typical for boutique hotels is the focus on a facility which in the Maison ELLE Paris' case is their wellness area. It is one of the biggest trends in the boutique hotel scene.

4 Gen Z Traveller Behaviour

Generation Z also known as Gen Z is the generation born between 1997 and 2012 meaning that the oldest of the generation are turning 27 this year and the youngest are turning 12. Gen Z are the first digital natives, also known as the tech-savvy generation. Their consumer attitudes, expectations, and travel preferences are shifting as a result of unprecedented online presence, rapid technological advancements, and increased global awareness. (TravelPerk 2024)

4.1 Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour is individuals or groups using, selecting, purchasing, and disposing of products or services to fulfil their needs and desires. It is an ongoing process of decisions and actions instead of short at the moment situations. (Solomon, Russell-Bennett & Previte 2013, 3-4)

In this case the focus group is Generation Zen's consumer behaviour. The State of Gen Z (2017) study shows than 48% of Gen z individuals are influenced by their friends and family while 30% also appreciate peer reviews from the actual users of a brand's products or services. Ratings and reviews are important to Gen Z individuals in general since they look at online reviews to make almost any purchase. No matter whether it is picking a movie, eating at a restaurant, or buying a product online, Gen Z checks the ratings before decision making. Online influencers are also important in decision making when it comes to a purchase since 19% of the Gen Z from the study shows that they value the recommendations of famous bloggers, YouTube, or other internet personalities. (Dorsey & Villa 2017, 21-23)

4.2 Travel Objectives

Gen Z individuals are the trend setters in the travel industry by creating new behaviour models. For example, Gen Z travellers are more likely to incorporate technology in their travels and contribute to the local communities during their visits. The main objectives for Gen Z travellers seem to be sightseeing and experiencing new cultures, travelling to places their family or friends are not familiar with, and culinary experiences which means Gen Z is planning trips around visiting a specific restaurant. 70% of Gen Z travellers are said to have been inspired to visit a location after seeing it mentioned in a TV show or a movie and 53% use social media to find travel recommendations. It should also be noted that when travelling, 26% of Gen Z travellers desire to reconnect with their cultural background. (TravelPerk 2024)

4.3 Eco-Conscious Travel

More than half of Gen Z travellers are willing to pay more for a travel company with an ecologically conscious mindset and practises and six out of ten opt for more ecologically friendly transportation after they get to their destination. Sustainability is also important, with more than half of Gen Z travellers preferring to stay in green or eco-friendly hotels. (TravelPerk 2024)

Brands should prioritise implementing sustainable practices and supporting social issues in order to draw in and keep Gen Z consumers. This can involve carrying out environmentally beneficial projects including lowering the amount of plastic trash produced, encouraging energy saving, and supporting local communities. (Johnston 2023)

Part of the eco-conscious travel might come from eco-anxiety of which studies have confirmed that Gen Z is heavily affected by. A survey made by the Global Climate and Health Alliance with 10 000 respondents from 10 different countries revealed that 45% of Gen Z feel climate change “negatively impacted their day-to-day life”. Eco-anxiety can show as forms of anxiety or distress causing behavioural issues and physical issues such as headaches and stomach-ache. (Global Climate and Health Alliance s.a.)

4.4 Accommodation

Along with luxury accommodation Gen Z travellers like one-of-a-kind experiences as long as the accommodation is perceived as secure. Compared to Generation X and Baby Boomers, Gen Z travellers are more inclined to stay in bed & breakfasts or vacation rentals. They also prioritize housing providers who offer unique experiences and have excellent reviews over quality. Gen Z travellers prefer individualization over personalization which increases the need for understanding behaviours. Individualization will also create remembrance within the Gen Z which will lead to returning customers and brand loyalty. (Ting 2016; TravelPerk 2024)

4.5 Technology

Since Gen Z is knowingly the social media generation and, as mentioned previously, finds travel inspiration from social media they are best reached with mobile-first marketing campaigns. This means unique activities and experiences that are marketed in hand hold devises and are often considered as “Instagrammable”. Gen Z is best reached in social media with examples of the possibilities such as influencers marketing businesses by interacting with it themselves. (Expedia Group Media Solutions + Skift 2019; Gibbons 2022)

Overall marketers should take advantage of the technology to reach Gen Z travellers since they are constantly using new apps and other internet services. Gen Z travellers are booking their accommodations and flights using technology and is more likely to book trips through online travel agencies. Gen Z anticipates interactions from others to be efficient and convenient which is why seamless digital experiences are important. These efficient digital interactions can involve incorporating mobile payment methods, allowing mobile check-in and check-out options, and setting up a high-speed Wi-Fi. (Expedia Group Media Solutions + Skift 2019; Johnston 2023)

5 Method

The research target for this study is Generation Z travellers and more specifically 18- to 25-year-old travellers. This target group was decided on because as mentioned in the literature review Gen Z travellers are the trend setters when it comes to travelling and the current hospitality industry. The main objective of this study is to find out what kind of branding draws the attention of the research target group when it comes to boutique hotels. Boutique hotels was chosen as a topic since, as mentioned in the chapter 3, it is still a rather new concept in the hospitality industry.

Sub-objectives are to find out how many of the responders have stayed at boutique hotels or wishes to do so in the future and what kind of features and concepts gets the attention of Gen Z when it comes to boutique hotels. This data will help understand what kind of branding boutique hotels targeting Gen Z should pay attention to.

The chosen research method for this study is quantitative research because the goal is to get a broad understanding of the target group's thoughts on what kinds of hotel branding details rise their interest and catch their attention.

5.1 Quantitative Research Method

The focus of a quantitative research are the quantities. It means that measurements refer to several aspects of life, such as quantity and duration, as well as providing an explanation for events and maybe forecasting their likelihood or intensity in the future. In quantitative research the analysing of the collected data can be done by numbers. As a contrasting example, in qualitative research the data is collected and analysed as words. (Williams, Wiggins & Vogt 2021, chapter 1)

The quantitative research process includes the determination of questions to be answered by the study, determination of the participants in the study, selection of the methods that are needed to answer the questions, selection of analysis tools, and understanding the results. (Swanson & Holton 2005, 31-33)

Quantitative research often has a specific hypothesis that are created from theory that are then tested in the study. However, research questions can also be used especially when quantitative research is used to discover new theory and define new problems. It is important to formulate the research question because without a clear understanding of the expected outcomes from the study the likelihood of error is high. (Swanson & Holton 2005, 31-33)

5.2 Survey as a Data Collection Method

For this study the data collection was decided to be done by using a survey because they can reach many respondents and can be easily accessed and sent forward. The survey was done using the Webropol tool with Haaga-Helia domains and the analysis of the data was conducted using Webropol's analysis tools that divide the data into easily accessible charts and figures. The survey was anonymous, and it was sent to respondents by personal messages by the author and her friends and family. It was also posted on the Instagram page of the author to reach a wider audience.

The survey had several questions for the respondents to answer with the focus being on multiple choice questions. Due to the nature of the survey multiple choice questions were the most useful to gather the information needed. The survey also had yes/no/maybe questions to help the respondents provide an answer. In total the number of questions was eight and all of them were mandatory. The questions can be found in detail in Appendix 1.

Because the topic might have been unknown to some of the respondents it was important to provide the information needed to answer the survey. This is why boutique hotels and branding were defined in the beginning of the survey. This also ensured that all respondents had the possibility to understand the survey and answer the questions as accurately as possible.

With a survey there is a possible risk of misunderstanding the questions which will decrease the trustworthiness of the data. Another problem is acquiring enough respondents to reach a trustworthy amount of data. The goal for this survey was 100 respondents which was reached during the two weeks the survey was open.

5.3 Reliability and Validity of Research

Reliability in research refers to how repeatable the study is. This means that a new study done in similar conditions as the previous one should produce similar results. Validity in research is how truthful a study is. This means that the study is valid if it measures what it is supposed to measure. In an invalid study the answers got from the questions are not relevant to the research question. (Bailey s.a.)

Since the research method for this study was a survey a large number of respondents is needed to minimise sampling error and to increase the precision of the data. For studies like these 100 responses is usually enough data which was reached in this study. However, 100 responses are still a rather small number of responses which means the data cannot be too generalised. This means

that there might be a sampling bias meaning a certain group or characteristics might be overrepresented or underrepresented.

Another risk is that even though the main topics were introduced in the description of the survey and in the answer options, some respondents might not have understood the questions or answer options correctly. Because this was a quantitative research method additional information could not be given by the author. One risk is that the survey might not have been working correctly. To minimise this risk the author had an outsider to test the survey while also testing the survey by herself several times.

Part of the discussion of validity in the research is the quality of the questions and whether they produce accurate data in relation to the theory and research questions. This is difficult to measure but should be taken into account when discussing reliability and validity of the research. This is especially relevant since the author is still a student. Related to the accuracy of the data is the correct way of analysing the data and getting a conclusion of the main results that are relevant to the study and answer the research questions.

6 Findings

The first question was “How old are you?”. Even though the target group for the survey was explained in the introduction of the survey it was thought to be beneficial to add the age question to minimise the possibility of answers by respondents outside the target age. This was done by asking the age of the respondents and giving them only two answer options since age data in general was deemed unnecessary for the purpose of this study. As can be seen in table 2, in the end 98 of the respondents had chosen the correct answer of 18-25 years old and two chose the answer Other which then directed them to the end of the survey explaining to them that they are not the age demographic the survey is for. This means that the total number of actual answers that can be used in the study is 98.

Table 2. Respondents' ages (N = 100)

	n
18-25	98
Other	2

The second question was “Have you ever stayed at a boutique hotel?” which had answer options Yes, No, and I am not sure. Figure 6 shows that 54% of the respondents answered No, 24% answered I am not sure, and the last 22% answered Yes.

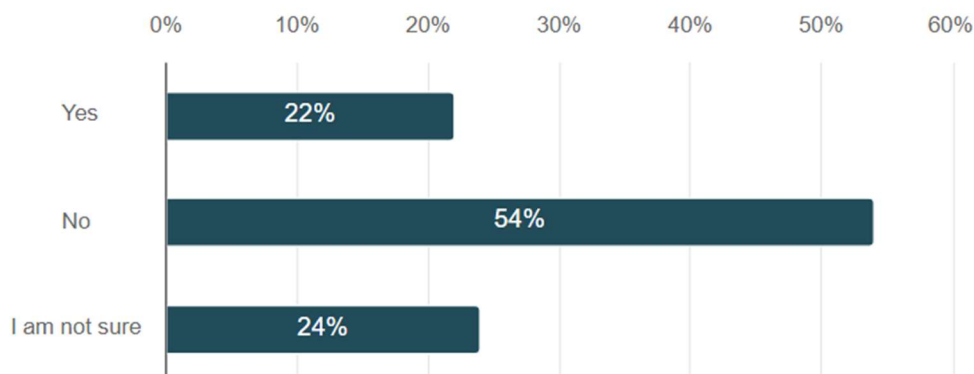


Figure 6. Stays at boutique hotels (N = 98)

Similar to the previous question the third question “Would you ever consider staying at a boutique hotel in the future?” had the answer options Yes, No, and Maybe. From figure 7 can be seen that 51% of the respondents answered Yes, 44% answered Maybe, and only 5% answered No.

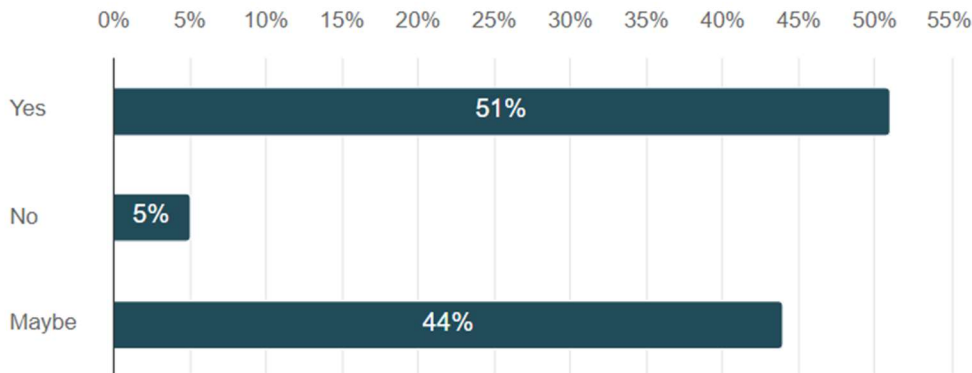


Figure 7. Interest to staying at boutique hotels in the future (N = 98)

The fourth question was “Which themes or concepts resonate the most with you for a boutique hotel? Please choose 3 that are the most relevant to you”. This question had six answer options from which the respondents were to choose 3 that felt the most relevant to them. Table 3 shows the number of answers to each option. Most answers with 65 responses got the option Wellness sanctuary. The second most chosen answer was Culinary experiences with 63 responses. Third most chosen was Cultural immersion with 57 responses. Next was Adventure with 50 responses, Sustainability with 37 responses, and lastly was Tech-forward with 22 responses.

Table 3. Themes and concepts of boutique hotels (N = 98)

	n
Sustainability (focus is on minimizing the environmental impact and promoting the social responsibility of the hotel)	37
Tech-forward (integration of cutting-edge technology, e.g. smart room controls and innovative tech amenities)	22
Cultural immersion (engaging with the customs and traditions of a culture)	57
Wellness sanctuary (focus is on the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of guests)	65
Adventure (aims to create a sense of exploration and excitement for guests through curated activities)	50
Culinary experiences (high-quality dining offerings, e.g. creative menus and unique dining environments)	63

Question number five was “Which of these would play a significant role in your decision to choose a boutique hotel? Please choose 3 that are the most relevant to you”. This question had nine answer options of which the respondents were to choose 3 that were the most relevant to them. Table 4 shows that the most answers got the option Distinct identity with 58 responses. Second was Personalised services with 55 responses and third was Unique experiences with 54 responses.

The other answer options in the order of most chosen to the least chosen were Eco-friendliness with 25 responses, Local partnerships and collaborations with 24 responses, Wellness amenities and Theme rooms both with 23 responses, Commitment to diversity and inclusion with 17 responses, and lastly Support of local artists and artisans in design and décor with 14 responses.

Table 4. Facilities and focus points of boutique hotels (N = 98)

	n
Theme rooms	23
Unique experiences tailored to the local culture	54
Distinct identity (unique and memorable character setting it apart from chain hotels)	58
Personalised services and curated experiences (service and activities based on personal interests and preferences of each guest)	56
Commitment to diversity and inclusion	17
Eco-friendliness and sustainability	25
Wellness amenities (e.g. fitness programmes and spa services)	23
Support of local artists and artisans in design and décor	14
Local partnerships and collaborations (e.g. fresh local produce and local tour guides)	24

The sixth question was “In terms of technology, what features would enhance your boutique hotel experience? Please choose 2 that are the most relevant to you”. As can be seen in table 5 this question had five answer options of which the respondents were to choose two that were the most relevant to them. Contactless check-in/check-out got the most answers with 69 responses. Second was High-speed Wi-Fi and connectivity with 55 responses, and third was Virtual concierge services with 45 responses. Next was Smart room control with 23 responses. The smallest number of responses got Tech-enabled meeting spaces with only 4 responses.

Table 5. Technology enhances to boutique hotels (N = 98)

	n
Contactless check-in/check-out (e.g. mobile check-in and digital key access)	69
Smart room controls (e.g. controlling lighting, temperature, and entertainment systems through a mobile app or voice commands)	23
High-speed Wi-Fi and connectivity	55
Virtual concierge services (e.g. mobile app for easy access to information about local attractions and services, and for making requests without direct contact)	45
Tech-enabled meeting spaces (e.g. meeting rooms with audio-visual equipment and video conferencing capabilities)	4

The next question was “Would a strong online presence, including engaging website content and social media posts, be crucial for capturing your interest in a boutique hotel?”. This question had Yes, No, and Maybe answers to choose from. Figure 8 shows that 73% of the respondents answered Yes, 18% answered Maybe, and only 9% answered No.

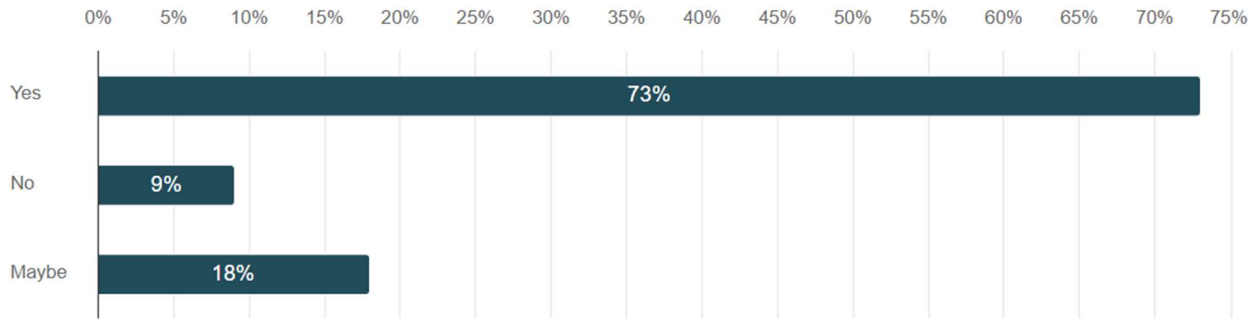


Figure 8. Influence of online media presence like social media posts (N = 98)

The last question was “Would the availability of unique and Instagram-worthy photo opportunities influence your decision to stay at a boutique hotel?”. This question also had Yes, No, and Maybe answer options. Figure 9 shows that 38% of the respondents answered Maybe, 36% answered Yes, and the last 26% answered No.

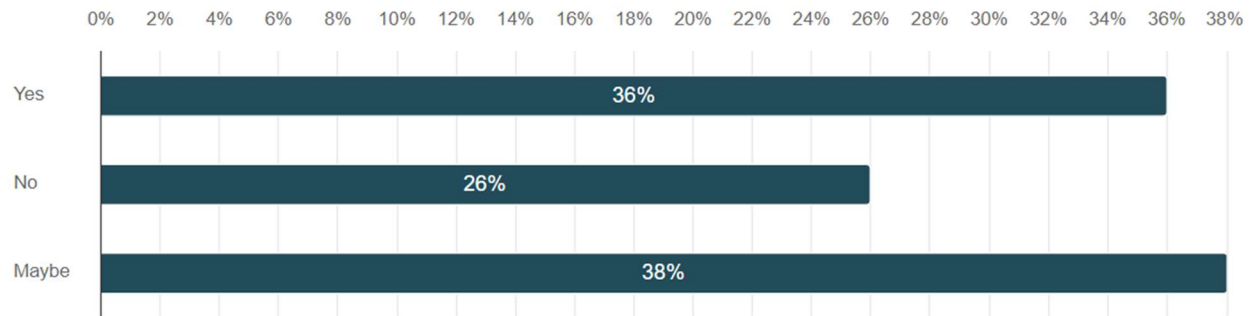


Figure 9. Influence of Instagram-worthy photo opportunities (N = 98)

7 Discussion

This chapter discusses the conclusion of the results and reflects on them with regard to the literature review. Suggestions for further research are proposed and the author's learning during the thesis process is evaluated.

7.1 Conclusion

As mentioned in the literature review Gen Z is creating new kinds of trends in travelling and some of the trends are similar to the trends for the boutique hotel scene. However, over half of the respondents of the survey have not stayed at a boutique hotel before. Some of the respondents answered they might have stayed at a boutique hotel but are not sure about it. This might be because the definition of boutique hotels might not always be clear (see Chapter 3.1). Over half of the respondents would also consider staying at a boutique hotel in the future and almost half might consider it. Only a small percentage of respondents would not consider it. This could mean that they are not interested in the style of boutique hotels or after staying at one they did not like the concept.

The three most resonating themes or concepts the respondents chose were Wellness sanctuary, Culinary experiences, and Cultural immersion. Wellness is not one of the prominent trends in Gen Z traveller behaviour which is why it is surprising it is the most answered theme. However, wellness is one of the biggest trends for boutique hotels (see Chapter 3.2) which would suggest boutique hotels with wellness as their main concept could brand themselves more towards Gen Z.

Culinary experiences were introduced as one of the most appreciated reasons for travel for Gen Z individuals which is why it is not surprising it is the second most popular concept. It is said that Gen Z plans trips based on visiting specific restaurants (see Chapter 4.2) which is not something that is too popular for boutique hotels to focus on. Boutique hotels specialising in interesting culinary experiences would benefit the most from this discovery.

The third most chosen answer was Cultural immersion meaning the engagement with the customs and traditions of cultures which is very much part of both the traveller behaviour of Gen Z (see Chapter 4.2) and the latest trends of boutique hotels (see Chapter 3.2). Based on this data boutique hotels with Gen Z as their target group could brand their connections to local cultures even more than they are currently doing. This might catch the attention of Gen Z travellers who are not familiar with the concept of boutique hotels but find cultural immersion as an important part of their travels.

The least answers as the most relevant theme or concept got the option Tech-forward which is unexpected since Gen Z is known as the tech-savvy generation. However, the examples introduced in the survey about what Tech-forward means were about innovative tech amenities and the integration of cutting-edge technology which might not be important for Gen Z when they are travelling. It could be possible that Gen Z would like to take a break from high tech amenities and focus more on their wellbeing and new cultural experiences.

The top three answers on what would play the most significant role on choosing a boutique hotel were Distinct identity, Personalised services and curated experiences, and Unique experiences tailored to the local culture. Distinct identity relates to a unique and memorable character which sets it apart from chain hotels. Boutique hotels main idea is to be different to chain hotels and to have a recognisable brand thus this supports the idea that Gen Z is interested in the unique concept of boutique hotels. Creating a distinct identity is an important part of branding since that is the factor that appeals to the consumers (see Chapter 2.1).

Second was Personalised services and curated experiences which are services and activities based on personal interests and preferences of each guest. Part of Gen Z's traveller behaviour is the preference for individualisation over personalisation (see Chapter 4.4). However, in this study personalisation was clearly important for the respondents. Boutique hotels are usually focused on generating personalisation for their guests with facilities, themes, and activities. Personalisation is one of the characteristics boutique hotels should bring out more on their services especially when it comes to targeting younger customers. Personalisation can be done in many ways by focusing on different themes and ideas which means there would be something for everyone.

The third most chosen answer was Unique experiences tailored to the local culture. This goes hand in hand with the interest in cultural immersion. In their accommodation Gen Z is clearly looking for unique experiences that support the local culture. In the branding of boutique hotels this would be seen as positive brand image by Gen Z which leads to favourable associations of the brand.

The least answers got the Support of local artists and artisans in design and décor. Since it has been concluded that Gen Z appreciates the local culture on their travels it might be beneficial to look at this data from the point of view of Gen Z not having a big interest in the design and décor of their accommodation choices. Design and décor are not part of the known traveller behaviour for Gen Z. Moreover, Gen Z might appreciate more simple rooms if the most important factors such as culture and unique experiences are focused on.

In terms of technology the most important feature was Contactless check-in/check-out. As mentioned previously Gen Z is known as the digital generation with appreciation to seamless digital experiences (see Chapter 4.5) which is the main point for contactless check-in and check-out. High-speed Wi-Fi and connectivity were the second most important feature which is to be expected for Gen Z because a big part of their life is about internet, social media, and other online communication. The least important feature was Tech-enabled meeting spaces. This might be because of sampling bias or because Gen Z has good enough technology on their own and they do not need the facilities of hotels, for example, for online meetings. Even though some boutique hotels might focus on high-end technology it is not usually part of boutique hotels. However, an exception might be contactless check-in and check-out since that is more popular for hotels in general these days. Technology might be interesting to some individuals but based on this study it is not something boutique hotels should invest in when it comes to targeting Gen Z. Moreover, they should focus on contactless check-in and check-out if that is possible.

Social media matters to Gen Z which is why it is not surprising that a strong online presence like social media posts is important to Gen Z when it comes to capturing their interest in a boutique hotel. For boutique hotels social media focused travelling is not currently trending (see Chapter 3.2) but for Gen Z it is a norm and almost an expectation. Instagram-worthy photo opportunities influence or might influence the survey respondents' decision to stay at a boutique hotel and "Instagrammable" activities and experiences are part of Gen Z's travel behaviour. This means that the boutique hotels with Instagram-worthy locations, facilities, and activities could benefit from branding more towards Gen Z.

Table 6. Main Results.

Gen Z	Boutique Hotels
Is interested in boutique hotels but might not be familiar with the concept.	Brand towards Gen Z by focusing on the factors they find the most interesting.
Is focused on social media.	Be active in social media and have Instagram-worthy aesthetics online and at the hotel site.
Wants a break from high-end technology with personalised services and new unique experiences.	Focus on wellness, culture, and unique experiences to be interesting to Gen Z travellers.
Finds supporting local cultures important.	Focus on supporting local cultures which enhances the positive brand image in the minds of Gen Z travellers.
Distinct identities are valued and found important.	Have a distinct identity that sets you apart from chain hotels.

The main results are introduced in table 6. First is introduced the results from the point of view of Gen Z and then how boutique hotels can respond to those points. The main results are reflecting to both the results gained from the study and the theory from the literature review.

7.2 Learning Process

A big challenge in the beginning of the thesis process was defining the topic and main research question. Branding from the point of view of boutique hotels seemed interesting but when starting the literature review with branding the topic revealed to be more challenging than originally thought. This challenge meant that the author had to restrict the amount of theory from the topic of branding. This caused for the author the feeling that the branding chapter is separate as a topic in the thesis.

The timeline for the thesis was rather short because the author had a strict deadline. This meant that the thesis was done in two months which is quite a short time for a thesis. For this reason, the work on the thesis had to be strictly divided and scheduled which the author struggled with.

The author had not conducted research or written theoretical text for over a year when starting the thesis which created problems with the whole process. Especially the survey's reliability should be questioned because it might not be the most proficient or well-organised as it should be.

For further research on this topic the traveller behaviour of Generation Z could be researched more widely and more in detail. A survey could be used to create data on this matter most preferably with a larger number of respondents than 100. The topic of branding should also be considered more extensively and its position in the study should be defined in a more skilful manner so that it would not feel so separated from the other material.

As mentioned previously the author struggled with the creation of the thesis but with support from the instructing teacher and another student she got good feedback and in the end managed to create a full thesis. The author recommends future students working on their thesis to take their time with it and advises to define their topic very carefully before starting the writing process. She also wants to remind that communication is the key and feedback is extremely valuable. She wants to encourage students to be more open to asking for help when needed and to learn to receive feedback and use it to their benefit.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Survey Questions

1. How old are you?
 - 18-25
 - Other
2. Have you ever stayed at a boutique hotel?
 - Yes
 - No
 - I am not sure
3. Would you ever consider staying at a boutique hotel in the future?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
4. Which themes or concepts resonate the most with you for a boutique hotel? Please choose 3 that are the most relevant to you.
 - Sustainability (focus is on minimizing the environmental impact and promoting the social responsibility of the hotel)
 - Tech-forward (integration of cutting-edge technology, e.g. smart room controls and innovative tech amenities)
 - Cultural immersion (engaging with the customs and traditions of a culture)
 - Wellness sanctuary (focus is on the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of guests)
 - Adventure (aims to create a sense of exploration and excitement for guests through curated activities)
 - Culinary experiences (high-quality dining offerings, e.g. creative menus and unique dining environments)
5. Which of these would play a significant role in your decision to choose a boutique hotel? Please choose 3 that are the most relevant to you.
 - Theme rooms
 - Unique experiences tailored to the local culture
 - Distinct identity (unique and memorable character setting it apart from chain hotels)
 - Personalized services and curated experiences (service and activities based on personal interests and preferences of each guest)
 - Commitment to diversity and inclusion

- Eco-friendliness and sustainability
 - Wellness amenities (e.g. fitness programmes and spa services)
 - Support of local artists and artisans in design and décor
 - Local partnerships and collaborations (e.g. fresh local produce and local tour guides)
6. In terms of technology, what features would enhance your boutique hotel experience?
Please choose 2 that are the most relevant to you.
- Contactless check-in/check-out (e.g. mobile check-in and digital key access)
 - Smart room controls (e.g. controlling lighting, temperature, and entertainment systems through a mobile app or voice commands)
 - High-speed Wi-Fi and connectivity
 - Virtual concierge services (e.g. mobile app for easy access to information about local attractions and services, and for making requests without direct contact)
 - Tech-enabled meeting spaces (e.g. meeting rooms with audio-visual equipment and video conferencing capabilities)
7. Would a strong online presence, including engaging website content and social media posts, be crucial for capturing your interest in a boutique hotel?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
8. Would the availability of unique and Instagram-worthy photo opportunities influence your decision to stay at a boutique hotel?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe