

Exploring Gen Z's Event Participation Intention through Social Identity and Event Attachment: A Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

Events are not only service encounters but also social settings in which participants express identity, experience belonging, and develop emotional bonds. These processes may be especially relevant to Generation Z (Gen Z), whose consumption often involves authenticity, value expression, and digitally connected communities. However, event participation research has largely emphasised motivation, quality, satisfaction, and perceived value, while the mechanism connecting group-based identification to continued attendance remains less developed. Drawing on Social Identity Theory, this conceptual paper proposes that identification with the community associated with a recurring event increases participation intention directly and indirectly through attachment to the event itself. Unlike studies that examine event identity, team identification, place attachment, or revisit intention as closely linked outcomes, the model separates a group-referent construct (social identity) from an event-referent construct (event attachment) and specifies the process connecting them. Four hypotheses are developed, including a partial mediation hypothesis. The framework contributes a more precise identity-to-attachment mechanism for explaining future participation among adult Gen Z attendees and offers organisers guidance for developing identity-congruent event communities and experiences.

Keywords: event attachment; event participation intention; Generation Z; social identity; Social Identity Theory

INTRODUCTION

The event industry has developed beyond the provision of entertainment and functional services towards the creation of social, emotional, and symbolic experiences. Festivals, concerts, sporting events, cultural activities, and community events allow participants to interact around shared interests and values. Event experiences are situated and co-created; their significance lies not only in programme content but also in interactions among participants, organisers, performers, and communities (Getz & Page, 2019). Physical attendance can also strengthen social connectedness, positioning events as important social settings rather than solely leisure products (Kitchen et al., 2023).

Within this context, Gen Z represents an important audience for event organisers. This paper adopts 1997 as the beginning of Gen Z, while recognising that generational boundaries are approximate rather than definitive (Dimock, 2019). Gen Z has grown up in a digital environment and routinely moves between online and offline settings to obtain information, evaluate consumption experiences, and discuss them with others (Priporas et al., 2017). Members of this cohort also tend to value authenticity and use media and consumption selectively to communicate their values and identities (Tirocchi, 2024). Evidence from sustainable consumption further indicates that social identity can shape Gen Z's behavioural intentions when choices represent group values (Elgammal et al., 2024). These tendencies make identity and belonging relevant to explanations of event participation.

Most explanations of event attendance and re-participation nevertheless continue to focus on motivation, event quality, satisfaction, perceived value, and memorable experience. These factors remain important: event quality and satisfaction predict revisit intention (Liu et al., 2024), while emotional experience and place attachment contribute to loyalty in festival settings (Gautam, 2025). Yet attendees exposed to similarly attractive events may form different intentions when an event carries social meaning or represents a valued community. Emerging research supports an identity-based explanation. In a sporting-event context, team identification was associated with emotional responses and event attachment (Prayag et al., 2020). In a recurring dance festival, event identity predicted re-participation intention and positive word of mouth (Özgen et al., 2023). These studies demonstrate that identity and attachment matter, but they begin from different referents and do not fully specify whether identification with an event-related community becomes future participation through attachment to the event itself, particularly among Gen Z attendees and across event categories. Much event and tourism research also examines attachment to a place or destination rather than to the event as a distinct experiential object (Habachi et al., 2024; Zhang, 2022).

Accordingly, this conceptual paper develops a framework in which social identity influences Gen Z's event participation intention directly and indirectly through event attachment. Social identity refers to identification with the community associated with a focal recurring event; event attachment refers to the emotional and psychological bond directed towards that event; and event participation intention refers to the willingness, plan, and likelihood of attending its future edition. The contribution is not simply to show that identity and attachment predict intention. Rather, the framework specifies how a group-based self-definition may be transferred to an event-specific bond and subsequently to continued attendance. It therefore extends studies centred on team identification, event identity, place attachment, or general loyalty by separating the referents of identification and attachment, arranging them in a partial mediation model, and applying that mechanism specifically to adult Gen Z attendees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Generation Z and Event Participation Behaviour

Gen Z is commonly defined as beginning in 1997 and following the Millennial generation (Dimock, 2019). Although cohort characteristics should not be treated as universal, this group has been socialised in an environment where mobile technology, social media, and networked communities are embedded in everyday life. Digital platforms allow potential attendees to observe event narratives, interact with participants, and assess whether an event's community and values are personally relevant before attending. Event engagement may therefore begin before the physical experience and continue after it.

Gen Z research frequently highlights authenticity and alignment between personal values and mediated content (Tirocchi, 2024). Social identity also predicts behavioural intention in value-laden consumption contexts for this cohort (Elgammal et al., 2024). Applied to events, these findings suggest that participation may provide more than enjoyment. It may enable individuals to express interests, affirm values, and connect with communities that support their desired social identity. This interpretation is consistent with broader consumer research showing that consumption objects and reference groups can contribute to self-concept and identity expression (Belk, 1988; Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

Events are particularly suitable for identity-related consumption because they combine symbolic content with visible social participation. A music festival may connect attendees to a fan culture, a sporting event to a supporter community, and a cultural or sustainability event to shared beliefs. Such meanings do not eliminate the effects of price, quality, accessibility, or satisfaction. Instead, they provide an additional psychological explanation for why one event becomes personally meaningful while another with similar functional attributes does not. This paper therefore examines how social identity may influence Gen Z's intention to return to a focal event both directly and indirectly through event attachment.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) proposes that part of an individual's self-concept derives from membership in socially meaningful groups. Identification involves more than awareness of membership: it reflects a sense of belonging and the incorporation of group meanings into the self. Individuals are consequently motivated to maintain positive identities and to adopt attitudes and behaviours consistent with valued in-groups. This perspective helps explain positive responses to brands, experiences, and communities that represent an in-group or desired identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). In an event context, perceiving an event-related community as comprising 'people like me' can affirm identity and belonging. Rituals, symbols, shared language, and interactions among attendees may heighten the salience of that identity and the personal relevance of participation.

Conceptual clarity requires a clear distinction among the four related terms. Social identity refers to the extent to which an individual identifies with an event-related community and incorporates that group membership into their self-concept. Event identity concerns the defining characteristics or image of the event and its relevance to an individual's identity. Community attachment refers to an emotional bond with the community, whereas event attachment reflects an emotional bond with the event's meanings, memories, atmosphere, and rituals. In the proposed framework, only social identity and event attachment are included as constructs. Therefore, these terms are treated as conceptually distinct and are not used interchangeably.

Event Attachment

Attachment describes an enduring emotional and psychological bond with a person, object, place, or experience. Although its conceptual origin is associated with interpersonal Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), tourism and leisure research has extended attachment to places and experiences. Place attachment commonly includes symbolic identity and functional dependence related to a physical setting (Kyle et al., 2004; Williams & Vaske, 2003). Event attachment is narrower and has a different referent: it is the bond with the focal event's meaning, memories, atmosphere, and recurring rituals, rather than with its venue, destination, or attendee community.

Research increasingly supports this event-specific concept. Prayag et al. (2020) demonstrated that team identification and discrete emotions contribute to event attachment in a major sporting-event context. Jin and Tang (2026) described event attachment among mega-event volunteers as developing through shared experience, identity formation, and the internalisation of event memories. Taheri et al. (2025) similarly examined attachment in ski-event settings and linked it to continuing emotional and loyal responses. Together, these studies indicate that event attachment may persist beyond the event period and cannot be reduced to satisfaction, identification with a team, or attachment to a place.

This paper proposes that social identity is an antecedent of event attachment. When a focal event represents a valued community, identity congruence makes the experience self-relevant. Interaction with like-minded participants and repeated exposure to event symbols can then transform group identification into an emotional bond with the event. For Gen Z, the process may be reinforced through ongoing online community interaction, although the present model focuses on the core identity–attachment relationship rather than treating digital engagement as a separate construct.

Event Participation Intention

Event participation intention is defined as an individual's willingness, likelihood, and plan to attend a future edition of a focal event. Behavioural intention is not identical to actual behaviour, because attendance can still be constrained by time, cost, access, or competing commitments; nevertheless, intention is a proximal indicator of readiness to act (Ajzen, 1991). To maintain construct clarity, the present framework does not combine participation intention with recommendation or word-of-mouth, which are related but separate behavioural outcomes.

Event research indicates that event quality, satisfaction, perceived value, and emotional experience can influence attendees' willingness to return (Gautam, 2025; Liu et al., 2024). Identity and psychological connection may provide an additional basis for continued participation. Event identity influenced re-participation in a recurring dance event (Özgen et al., 2023), while app-supported event experiences strengthened place attachment and subsequent behavioural intentions (Habachi et al., 2024). These findings concern different identity and attachment referents, but collectively suggest that personally meaningful events are more likely to generate future attendance intentions.

In this framework, participation intention is restricted to re-participation in the same recurring event used as the referent for social identity and event attachment. Holding the focal event constant across all three constructs prevents respondents from reporting identification with one community, attachment to another event, and intention towards events in general. The proposed empirical study therefore concerns future attendance among previous attendees rather than first-time attendance.

Hypothesis Development

According to SIT, experiences connected to a valued social group become personally relevant because group membership forms part of an individual's self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In an event setting, attendees may identify with a community organised around shared interests, values, lifestyles, or cultural preferences. This identification changes the meaning of participation: the event becomes a setting in which individuals enact identity and sustain belonging, rather than merely a temporary leisure activity.

The relationship between social identity and attachment may be especially salient for recurring events. Repeated interaction and shared rituals, symbols, and stories can make the event increasingly self-relevant and emotionally meaningful. Team identification shapes emotional responses and event attachment in sporting-event contexts (Prayag et al., 2020), while shared experience and the internalisation of event memories contribute to attachment among event volunteers (Jin & Tang, 2026). Thus, when adult Gen Z attendees identify with the community surrounding a focal event, the group-based meaning of participation is expected to support an emotional and psychological bond with the event itself. Accordingly:

H1: Social identity positively influences event attachment among adult Gen Z attendees.

Event attachment represents an emotional and psychological bond with a specific event's meaning, atmosphere, memories, activities, and rituals. Whereas satisfaction evaluates a particular experience, attachment reflects a continuing relationship that can persist after the event ends. Returning to a recurring event enables attendees to renew and maintain that personally meaningful bond.

Attachment encourages continuity because individuals seek to maintain relationships with objects and experiences that are emotionally significant. Event and tourism studies connect attachment with loyalty, behavioural intention, and continued engagement (Habachi et al., 2024; Taheri et al., 2025; Zhang, 2022). Therefore:

H2: Event attachment positively influences event participation intention among adult Gen Z attendees.

SIT also predicts a direct behavioural effect of social identity. Individuals tend to adopt behaviours that affirm valued group membership and conform to relevant group norms (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Attending an event associated with a valued community can therefore express membership, reinforce a preferred self-definition, and sustain belonging. Re-participation may consequently occur as identity-consistent behaviour even beyond an attendee's emotional bond with the event.

Evidence from recurring events supports a connection between identity and future participation: event identity predicts re-participation intention (Özgen et al., 2023). Although event identity is conceptually different from the community-based social identity proposed here, the finding supports the broader expectation that identity-relevant meanings can shape attendance decisions. When an event-related community becomes part of an

individual's social identity, returning enables the attendee to enact that identity and maintain group membership. Accordingly:

H3: Social identity positively influences event participation intention among adult Gen Z attendees.

The indirect pathway explains how a group-referent identification may be converted into an event-referent bond and, subsequently, future behaviour. Social identity initially makes an event relevant because it represents a valued community. Through interaction, shared experience, and exposure to event symbols and rituals, this group-based relevance can become an emotional connection with the event itself. Event attachment then provides a continuing reason to attend future editions. Event attachment is therefore proposed as the mediator rather than community attachment. Event attachment reflects an emotional bond with the event itself, whereas social identity represents an individual's sense of belonging to the community associated with the event.

This mediation model explains how social identity may influence participation intention through event attachment. It proposes that identification with an event-related community strengthens attachment to the event, which then increases the intention to participate in future editions. Previous studies have linked identification with event attachment (Prayag et al., 2020) and attachment with behavioural intention and loyalty (Habachi et al., 2024; Taheri et al., 2025; Zhang, 2022). Therefore:

H4: Event attachment mediates the relationship between social identity and event participation intention among adult Gen Z attendees.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 presents the proposed partial mediation model. H1 links social identity with the event-related community to event attachment. H2 links event attachment to event participation intention, while H3 represents the direct path from social identity to participation intention. H4 concerns the positive indirect effect of social identity on participation intention through event attachment. The hypothesis numbering in the figure corresponds exactly to the hypotheses stated in the text.

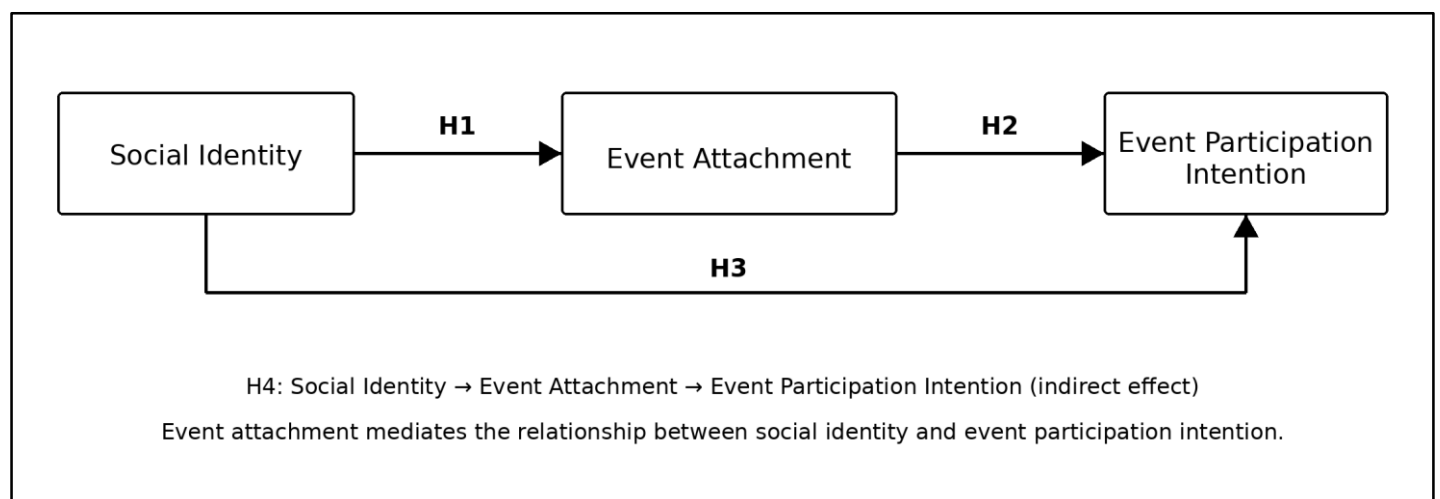


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework

METHODOLOGY

The proposed study will use a quantitative cross-sectional survey and a deductive design to test the relationships among social identity, event attachment, and event participation intention. The unit of reference will be one focal recurring event previously attended by each respondent. All predictor, mediator, and outcome items will refer explicitly to that same event. Eligible participants will be adult Gen Z attendees aged 18–30 who have attended a festival, concert, sporting event, cultural event, or community event within the previous 12 months and for whom a future edition is possible. Purposive recruitment will use relevant online and offline channels. Screening

questions will verify age, previous attendance, the focal event, event recurrence, and the possibility of future attendance.

A structured questionnaire will contain screening questions, respondent characteristics, event characteristics, and reflective measures of the three constructs. Social identity will be measured using six items adapted from Mael and Ashforth (1992), covering perceived oneness with and belonging to the event-related community. Event attachment items adapted from Prayag et al. (2020) and Taheri et al. (2025) will assess emotional bond, personal meaning, and felt connection to the focal event. Event participation intention will be measured with three adapted items capturing the intention, plan, and likelihood of attending the event's next edition (Liu et al., 2024; Özgen et al., 2023). All items will use a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Expert review and a pilot test with approximately 30 eligible respondents will assess content clarity, referent consistency, and questionnaire completion time. PLS-SEM is appropriate because the study seeks to predict participation intention, estimate a mediation model involving latent variables, and accommodate data that may not meet multivariate normality assumptions (Hair et al., 2022). The analysis will evaluate the measurement model through indicator loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted, and discriminant validity. The structural model will assess the path coefficients, explanatory power (R^2), effect sizes, predictive relevance, and the indirect effect of social identity on participation intention through event attachment. The study will target approximately 220 respondents to obtain at least 196 usable responses after data screening.

The data will be screened to ensure that only complete and valid responses are included in the analysis. Potential issues relating to missing data, unusual response patterns, multicollinearity, and common method bias will be assessed using appropriate procedures. Information on event category and attendance characteristics will also be collected to identify possible variations across respondents and event contexts. Where appropriate, these characteristics will be considered in the analysis. Ethical approval will be obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee before data collection. Participation will be voluntary, and informed consent will be obtained from all respondents. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants will be protected, and the collected data will be securely stored and reported only in aggregate form.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretical Implications

The framework contributes to event research by specifying a mechanism rather than merely combining established predictors. Previous studies have linked team identification to event attachment (Prayag et al., 2020), event identity to re-participation (Özgen et al., 2023), and place or event attachment to behavioural outcomes (Habachi et al., 2024; Taheri et al., 2025; Zhang, 2022). The present model distinguishes between two clearly defined referents: identification with the community associated with an event and emotional attachment to the event itself. It proposes that identification with an event-related community may encourage future participation both directly and indirectly by strengthening attendees' attachment to the event.

This distinction separates identity-consistent participation from attachment-driven participation. Social identity concerns an individual's sense of belonging to an event-related community, whereas event attachment refers to an emotional bond with the event itself. Event identity describes the defining or identity-relevant characteristics of an event, while community attachment refers to an emotional bond with the community. The proposed mediation model includes only social identity and event attachment. By examining both direct and indirect relationships, the framework explains how group identification and emotional attachment may independently and jointly influence Gen Z's intention to participate in future editions of an event.

Practical Implications

The framework emphasises the importance of developing a credible event-related community. Shared values, inclusive symbols, recurring traditions, participatory activities, and opportunities for interaction may strengthen community identification. However, the identity conveyed in promotional communication should match the actual event experience. An event that claims to be inclusive or sustainable should embody those values in its programme and operations.

Organisers can also develop distinctive and meaningful experiences that strengthen event attachment. Memorable activities, shared rituals, personal interactions, and opportunities for attendees to contribute may deepen connection with the event. After the event, online communities, follow-up stories, photographs, and announcements of future editions can help maintain both community identification and the event bond. Gen Z should nevertheless not be treated as homogeneous; community-building strategies should reflect the values and interests of each event and its attendees.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The proposed framework has several limitations. First, it includes only social identity, event attachment, and event participation intention. Event quality, satisfaction, perceived value, accessibility, and cost may also influence future participation. The framework should therefore be understood as an explanation of one identity-and-attachment mechanism, rather than a comprehensive account of every determinant of event participation.

Second, a cross-sectional survey assesses all constructs at one time and cannot establish how social identity and event attachment develop. Purposive sampling may also limit generalisability. Combining event categories may obscure differences among festivals, concerts, sporting events, cultural events, and community events. Finally, intention does not always translate into behaviour because attendance may be constrained by cost, time, accessibility, or competing commitments (Ajzen, 1991).

Future research could use longitudinal designs to examine changes in identity and attachment before and after an event and, where possible, compare participation intention with attendance at a subsequent edition. Differences across event categories, cultural contexts, generations, and prior attendance frequency should also be examined. Perceived authenticity, online community involvement, event quality, and attendance frequency may be tested as additional predictors or moderators. These directions would provide a fuller account of when group identification becomes attachment to an event and when each process produces continued participation.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper proposes that future event participation among Gen Z can be understood as both an identity-based and relational process. Identification with an event-related community is expected to influence participation intention directly and to foster an emotional and psychological bond with the focal event. Event attachment, in turn, is expected to mediate the relationship between social identity and event participation intention. The framework's theoretical contribution lies in separating a group-referent construct from an event-referent construct and specifying the ordered process connecting them. This differs from research focused on event identity, team identification, place attachment, or revisit intention as direct associations because it explains how community-based identification may be transferred to the event itself and then support future attendance.

The emphasis on Gen Z is especially important because members of this generation are commonly found in settings where community extends beyond the physical to the virtual and often place importance on authenticity, belonging, self-expression, and congruence with personal values. Practically, the model encourages organisers to develop credible event communities through shared values, participatory activities, inclusive symbols, recurring rituals, and meaningful interaction. Communication prior to and after an event can also help maintain connections between attendees and the event community, provided that identity claims remain consistent with the actual experience. In general, the proposed model provides a basis for future empirical studies on the process of social identity formation and how this process relates to subsequent involvement in and attachment to events across various event types and settings.

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