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**CONTENT ANALYSIS USING USER AND GRATIFICATION THEORY:
UNDERSTANDING THE INFLUENCE OF TIKTOK SOCIAL MEDIA
PLATFORM ON TRAVEL BEHAVIOUR AMONG GEN Z IN MALAYSIA**

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Abstract

This study investigates how TikTok influences travel behaviour among Generation Z in Malaysia through the perspective of the Uses and Gratifications Theory. The research addresses the problem of limited scholarly understanding of TikTok's role in fulfilling multidimensional user needs that shape travel decision-making. The objective is to explore goal-oriented uses of TikTok that influence travel preferences and behaviours in this demographic. A qualitative content analysis was conducted on 30 highly engaged TikTok travel videos, with 300 top comments selected and examined, adhering to ethical standards by utilising only publicly available data. Thematic coding identified cognitive, affective, personal integration, social, and tension release needs. Findings reveal that TikTok operates as more than an entertainment platform, functioning as a dynamic space for information seeking, emotional connection, self-identity validation, peer interaction, and leisure inspiration. These needs influence destination choice, trip planning, and travel experiences by aligning content with personal goals, values, and social aspirations. The platform's immediacy, visual appeal, and peer-generated recommendations strengthen its role in reducing uncertainty and enhancing travel confidence. The study concludes that TikTok is a critical digital influence channel that shapes both practical and affective dimensions of travel among Generation Z. The implications suggest that tourism marketers, destination managers, and policymakers can optimise TikTok's potential by designing targeted, identity-relevant content and promoting sustainable tourism narratives that resonate with younger audiences, thereby enhancing destination competitiveness and fostering loyalty.

Keywords: Generation Z; TikTok; Tourism Marketing; Travel Behaviour; Uses and Gratifications Theory

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid proliferation of short-form video platforms has reshaped the tourism communication landscape, with TikTok emerging as a dominant channel influencing Generation Z's travel awareness, motivation, and decision-making (Borges, 2023; Liu et al., 2024). Unlike earlier social media channels that relied on static imagery or long-form narratives, TikTok's algorithmically curated feed delivers highly personalised content that aligns with individual viewing patterns and interaction histories (Boeker & Urman, 2022). This algorithmic personalisation, combined with immersive audiovisual storytelling, enables the platform to satisfy a range of cognitive, affective, and social needs as conceptualised in the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) framework (Katz et al., 1973; Child & Haridakis, 2017). However, while U&G theory has been widely applied to study information search, entertainment, and social interaction gratifications in tourism contexts (Du et al., 2023; Wei et al., 2023), the integration of platform-specific affordances such as real-time trend amplification remains underexplored. While prior research has explored TikTok's role in destination marketing and user engagement, few have integrated the Uses and Gratifications framework to examine how algorithmic affordances and participatory culture reshape travel motivation among Generation Z. This study advances U&G theory by contextualising gratification patterns within the dynamic, trend-based architecture of TikTok and by empirically grounding the analysis in Malaysian Gen Z travel discourse. Through this, it offers both theoretical refinement and contextual depth to the understanding of social media driven travel behaviour.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In Malaysia, Generation Z constitutes a significant emerging travel segment, characterised by a high degree of social media dependency for destination discovery (Asri et al., 2024; Tan & Halim, 2021). TikTok's viral travel videos often present curated visual narratives of destinations, blending informational cues with affective appeal. Engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares are frequently used in research to identify high-impact content (Campbell et al., 2020). However, this selection strategy may bias samples toward entertainment-oriented content at the expense of informational depth, which could influence the prominence of certain gratification categories in thematic analysis. Furthermore, interpreting user comments as indicators of travel intent requires methodological caution. Expressed intention in social media discourse does not necessarily translate into behavioural outcomes (Fong et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024). Triangulation techniques such as cross-referencing comment

sentiment with creator follow-up content or external visitation data can improve validity (Abbadia, 2023; Vivek et al., 2023).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Existing studies on TikTok's role in tourism often focus on destination marketing or influencer strategies but provide limited theoretical integration between U&G constructs and platform-specific affordances (Wei et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2023). Moreover, few studies address the temporal fragility of findings in an environment where algorithmic parameters change rapidly, potentially altering which gratifications are most salient. This creates uncertainty about whether observed patterns reflect enduring motivational drivers or temporary artefacts of a particular content-distribution model.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study aims to apply U&G theory to examine how TikTok travel content gratifies cognitive, affective, and social needs among Malaysian Generation Z, while explicitly addressing three methodological imperatives: distinguishing expressed travel intent from actual behavioural outcomes through triangulation, justifying the use of engagement-based sampling over alternative stratification strategies, and evaluating the resilience of findings in light of potential platform algorithm changes. Through this approach, the study seeks to refine the theoretical fit of U&G in a short-form video context and provide more durable insights into the intersection of social media affordances and tourism behaviour.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) framework has been extensively applied in media and communication research to explain why audiences actively choose specific media channels to satisfy various needs (Katz et al., 1973; Ruggiero, 2000). Within tourism studies, U&G has been adopted to examine how travellers engage with online content for informational search, entertainment, and social interaction (Wei et al., 2023; Du et al., 2023). The cognitive dimension encompasses the pursuit of information and knowledge about destinations, activities, and logistics (Child & Haridakis, 2017), whereas affective gratifications refer to the pursuit of pleasurable, aesthetically pleasing, and emotionally stimulating content. Social gratifications capture the desire for interaction, self-presentation, and community belonging through content creation and engagement. The adaptability of U&G makes it a suitable theoretical lens for analysing short-form video platforms such as TikTok, which combine informational cues with strong affective appeal.

TikTok in tourism communication

TikTok's meteoric growth has introduced a new layer to tourism communication, distinguished by algorithmic personalisation, interactive audiovisual formats, and participatory culture (Boeker & Urman, 2022; Borges, 2023). Unlike traditional social media, TikTok's "*For You*" feed prioritises content relevance over network ties, allowing travel-related videos to reach users without prior connection to the creator. This algorithmic structure amplifies the visibility of emerging travel trends and destinations, which can influence tourist perceptions and intentions (Asri et al., 2024). Research has shown that TikTok facilitates both direct and indirect destination promotion, with viral travel content shaping destination image, curiosity, and perceived social endorsement (Pitanatri et al., 2024; Fuad et al., 2023).

Generation Z travel behaviour

Generation Z represents a digital-native cohort characterised by a high degree of media multitasking, a preference for visual communication, and reliance on peer-generated content for decision-making (Tan & Halim, 2021). In tourism, this group demonstrates a tendency toward experiential consumption and spontaneous travel decisions, often triggered by short, visually appealing content encountered on mobile devices (Liu et al., 2024). TikTok aligns well with these behavioural traits by delivering highly curated content in brief, engaging bursts, meeting both the entertainment needs and informational expectations of this demographic (Campbell et al., 2020). However, scholars have cautioned against equating engagement metrics with actual behavioural outcomes, as the performative nature of online commenting may inflate stated travel intentions (Fong et al., 2024).

Platform affordances and gratification patterns

According to the official TikTok Business Insights report (2023), the platform surpassed one billion monthly active users. This statistic provides contextual relevance rather than theoretical grounding. Studies on social media platforms in tourism contexts indicate that the platform satisfies overlapping gratifications. Cognitive gratifications arise from informative destination overviews, travel tips, and logistical insights embedded in video captions or voiceovers (Du et al., 2023). Affective gratifications emerge from cinematic storytelling, music synchronisation, and aesthetic framing, which create an emotional resonance with viewers (Wei et al., 2023). Social gratifications stem from features enabling comments, duets, and stitches, fostering parasocial interaction and community co-creation (Boeker & Urman, 2022). While these align with the classic U&G dimensions, platform-specific elements such as trend cycles, audio memetics, and

the algorithm's dynamic content curation may alter the relative prominence of each gratification over time (Zhou et al., 2023).

Research gaps

Although previous studies have examined TikTok's role in destination marketing, few integrate U&G theory with a critical analysis of platform affordances in the Malaysian tourism context. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to the methodological challenge of distinguishing between expressed intent in online discourse and actual travel behaviour. Existing works often rely on cross-sectional content analysis without triangulating findings through interviews, follow-up studies, or observational data (Abbadia, 2023). Another gap lies in understanding the resilience of gratification patterns when algorithmic distribution mechanisms evolve, which has implications for both theoretical refinement and practical application in tourism marketing.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employed a qualitative content analysis approach to investigate how TikTok travel videos meet the cognitive, affective, and social needs of Malaysian Generation Z viewers. Content analysis was selected for its capacity to systematically interpret media messages and uncover latent themes that align with the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) framework (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003). The approach was designed to capture both manifest content, such as explicit informational cues, and latent content, such as underlying emotional or social appeals. The analysis incorporated triangulation to enhance validity, integrating video content, user engagement metrics, and audience comments to cross-check thematic interpretations (Abbadia, 2023; Vivek et al., 2023).

Sampling strategy

A purposive sampling method was used to identify videos that were likely to yield rich, relevant data for the research objectives (Campbell et al., 2020). Videos were selected from the "travel" category on TikTok's "For You" feed and filtered by Malaysian geotags to ensure contextual relevance. Engagement-based thresholds (minimum 50,000 views, 1,000 likes, and 50 comments) were applied to focus on content with demonstrated audience reach and interaction. This approach follows prior qualitative tourism research that prioritises high-visibility media for content analysis while recognising the need to critically interpret engagement signals (Asri et al., 2024; Arfan et al., 2023). A total of 30 videos were included, ensuring thematic saturation without overwhelming the coding process (Lacy et al., 2001).

Data collection

Each selected video was downloaded along with its associated metadata, including the upload date, creator profile type, number of likes, shares, and comments. Comments were exported using an online scraping tool, with care taken to preserve original text for contextual accuracy. To reduce bias introduced by TikTok's algorithmic personalisation, video searches were conducted using a cleared browser cache and a newly created account without prior watch history, following recommendations for mitigating platform bias in social media research (Boeker & Urman, 2022).

Data analysis procedure

The analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti software, which supports the systematic organisation, coding, and retrieval of qualitative data (Adelowotan, 2021; Soratto et al., 2020). An initial deductive coding frame was developed based on the core U&G categories, cognitive, affective, and social gratifications (Katz et al., 1973), with inductive codes added to capture emergent themes unique to TikTok's affordances. Coding proceeded in three cycles: open coding to identify relevant text and visual elements, axial coding to link patterns across cases, and selective coding to refine categories and integrate them into the theoretical framework (Bazén et al., 2021).

Ethical considerations

Ethical protocols for research using publicly available social media data were followed, in line with established guidance (Bhatia-Lin et al., 2019). No personally identifiable information was disclosed, and comments were anonymised in reporting. Given that TikTok users may not anticipate their content being used in academic research, interpretive sensitivity was applied to avoid misrepresentation of creators' intent.

FINDING

In this research, 30 TikTok videos related to travel were selected based on their high levels of likes, comments, and shares, ensuring the relevance and generalizability of travel industry trends. A total of 300 best comments were retained for analysis, with 10 comments analysed per video. The content analysed was specific to a Generation Z audience in Malaysia, based on activity on their TikTok accounts and other available information, while adhering to ethical research practices by using only publicly available data.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To explore goal-oriented uses in social media, focusing on TikTok, that influence travel behaviour among Generation Z in Malaysia.

1. Cognitive Needs

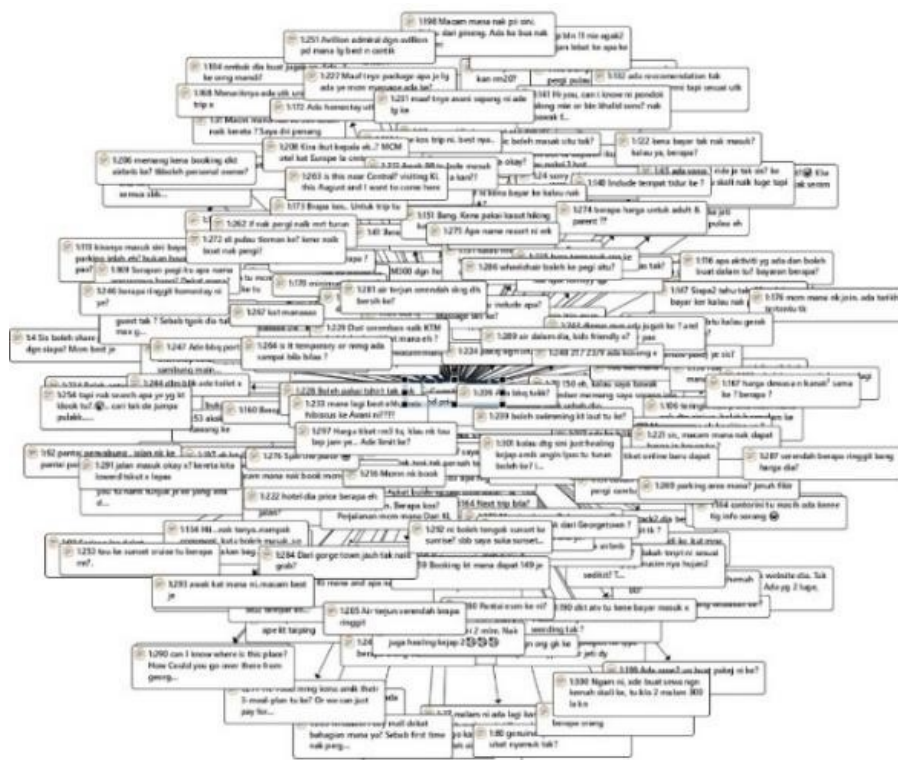


Figure 1: Comments on Cognitive Needs

Self-interest activities, such as knowledge acquisition, learning, and understanding, that are affiliated with cognitive components substantially affect the travel behaviour of Malaysian Generation Z. These demands are highly influenced by social networks, especially TikTok. Many people turn to TikTok for recommendations on various aspects of their travel plans, as well as tips and reviews of specific locations. These questions include: “*Macam mana nak pi sini dari Penang*” (How do one get here from Penang?) and “*boleh tengok sunset kt mana*” (Where can we watch the sunset?). These interactions shed light on TikTok’s relevance to users’ informational needs and, consequently, to their trip

planning and choices (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The interaction with TikTok, which also contains pictures and texts, can be considered to meet the cognitive needs of Generation Z users; For instance, comments such as *“Hotel dia ada swimming tak?” Does the hotel have swimming facilities?* and *“How much is the price for adults and children?”*. The most noticeable example is the following questions: *(Where should we eat?)* and *(What is the price for adults and children?)* These questions demonstrate the users’ interest in specific and practical information regarding meals and expenses during a trip.

This pertains to the Uses and Gratification (U&G) theory, which posits that individuals use media to fulfil certain wants, including the pursuit of knowledge (Dewi Yanti et al., 2023; Katz et al., 1973). TikTok helps address the cognitive needs of its users, as it not only provides the information they seek but also nurtures the educational aspect through cultural, historical, and experiential content related to travel destinations. This educational dimension is most apparent in narrative descriptions and user-generated contributions that provide a holistic picture of the experience one can have in a given place. For example, debates such as *“berbaloi tak masuk ke sini” (is it worth entering here)* and *“berapa lama nak drive ke sini?” (how long is it going to take to drive here)*. Examples of specific questions asked by such users include *(is it worth entering here, and How long does it take to drive here?)* as described by the users before making travel plans.

From the thematic coding, three sub-themes emerged within cognitive needs: (i) Informational research, where users sought details on destinations, lodging, and attractions to support itinerary design; (ii) Decision-making support, where peer advice reduced uncertainty and enhanced confidence in travel choices, consistent with Shao and Lee’s (2020) observations on digital travel communities; and (iii) journey planning, involving discussions on transportation costs, parking availability, and public transit options, consistent with evidence that social media platforms provide both inspiration and logistical support in trip planning (Hamid et al., 2016). Users make informational inquiries online to learn about travel destinations, lodging options, and attractions. The majority of their comments discuss recommended sites to visit, along with essential experiences to have. Building on the classic U&G paradigm proposed by Katz et al. (1973), users rely on TikTok for personal travel recommendations due to their need for informational understanding. The exploratory learning process receives support from TikTok, as the platform showcases immediate user-generated content, enabling informed decisions about travel destinations (Shao, 2009).

TikTok enhances decision-making processes and provides tools to explore travel logistics, demonstrating its ability to satisfy cognitive needs. Users discuss travel options while seeking confirmation and recommendations; thus, the platform helps reduce decision uncertainty regarding travel choices (Shao &

Lee, 2020). These sub-themes demonstrate that TikTok has a vital role in meeting cognitive needs through its interactive, real-time travel resources, which affect user travel behaviours and engagement.

2. Affective Needs

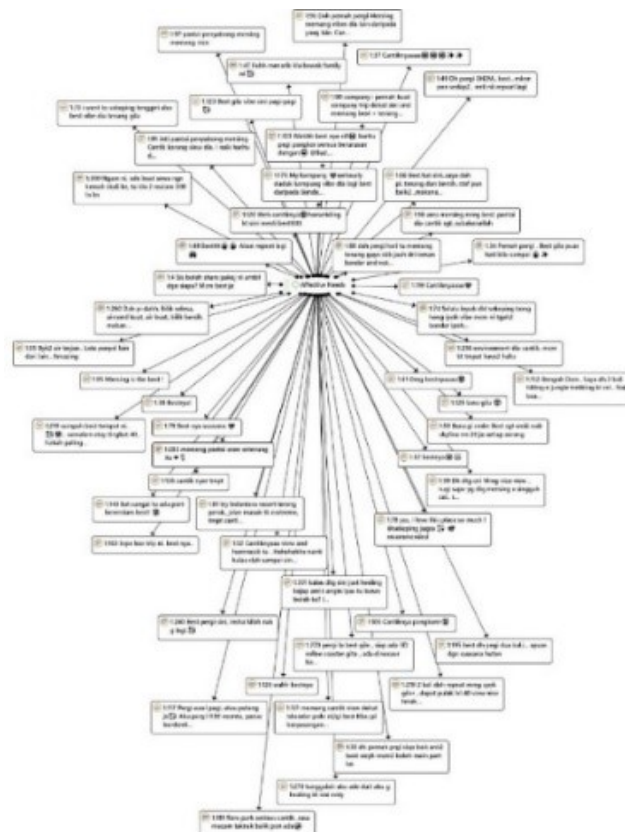


Figure 2: Comments on Affective Needs

An understanding of the affective needs depicted in Figure 2 reveals that they play a central role in shaping the travel behaviour of Gen Z in Malaysia, particularly through the adoption of the TikTok social media application. Affective needs relate to self-actualisation needs, which include fun, fascination, and pleasure, as conceived by users when consuming travel-related information (Dewi Yanti et al., 2023). Comments related to affective needs involve qualities that stimulate users' senses and emotions regarding the travel destination. Such

utterances as “cantiknya view” (beautiful view), ‘best sangat’ (so amazing), ‘sumpah best tempat ni’ (this place is truly amazing) are clear indications that positive feelings elicited by what the travel bloggers find aesthetically interesting or which they find engaging, form part of users’ motivational pull toward travelling.

The feelings reported in comments as “akan repeat lagi” (will visit again) and “rugi siapa yang tak singgah sini” (a pity for those who do not drop in) show that affective motives are intertwined with utilitarian purposes. Positive emotional experiences serve more than the direct self-need gratification, and lead users to have more specific travel-related goals, such as returning to the place or recommending it to colleagues. Figure 2 illustrates three sub-categories of affective needs, including emotional expression, experience sharing, and sentimental attachment, as observed in TikTok user responses. Users share their travel emotions by giving descriptive feedback that includes terms like “bestnya” and “cantiknya” as well as “wahh best.” These words reflect their elevated feelings of admiration, along with their enthusiasm and deep happiness. Social media operates as an emotion-sharing platform, which confirms the emotional need principles documented by Shao (2009). People utilise social media to meet emotional needs by obtaining psychological satisfaction when they share upbeat content (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). People use media actively for emotional satisfaction through enjoyment, along with escapism and self-expression, according to the Uses and Gratifications Theory. This demonstrates why TikTok users are enthusiastic about sharing their experiences (Katz et al., 1973).

3. Personal Integration Needs

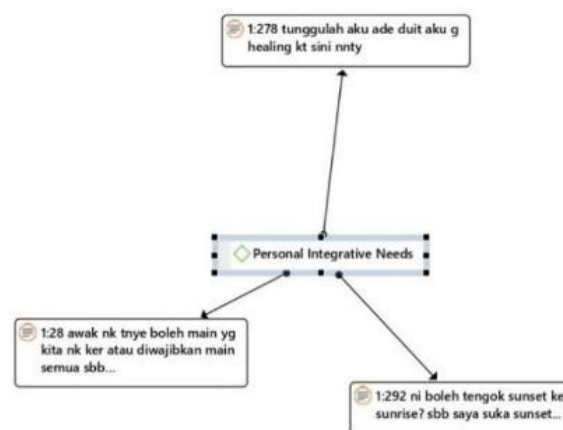


Figure 3: Comments on Personal Integration Needs

Figure 3, assessing personal integrative needs, again reveals how TikTok content helps Generation Z users in Malaysia achieve their desired travel goals, complemented by self-actualisation and acceptance through social recognition. Isolation-related needs are defined as the need for identity, self-esteem, recognition, and personal development, and are met through interaction with the intervening variables of social media platforms. In the context of the research question, TikTok serves as a means for users to set goals related to travel and learning, and, in turn, influences their travel identity.

Comments like “*tunggulah aku ada duit aku g healing kt sini nnty*” (“wait until I have money, I will heal there”) show how TikTok stimulates users to set travel goals that fit their desires and healing needs. Likewise, “*Ni boleh tengok sunset ke sunrise? Sbb saya suka sunset*” (*Can you see the sunset or sunrise here? I like sunsets*) shows how audience goals revolve around the experiences that personally matter to them, and thus TikTok enables and encourages goal setting on objectives that are appealing to the user. Another comment “*awak nk tnya boleh main yg kita nk ker atau diwajibkan main semua sbb sbb kitonyo gayat part tinggi ii tu* 🤔🤔🤔.” (*I just want to know am i allowed to choose what to play or do I have to play them because I have a fear of heights* 🤔🤔🤔). The following interaction demonstrates how users utilise TikTok to align their intended activities with their comfort levels.

These examples illustrate TikTok’s pivotal role in facilitating self-directed travel planning. Users display their personal integrative requirements in Figure 3, which represent their goals for self-improvement, decision-making, and personal confidence when using TikTok travel content. Users choose to acquire knowledge which matches their personal preferences through three examples of questions: “*Can one observe the sunset or sunrise?*” “*Saya menyukai matahari terbenam...*” and “*Adakah anda ingin bertanya jika kita boleh memilih permainan yang kita inginkan atau diwajibkan untuk bermain semua kerana...*”.

The findings indicate that vacation planning necessitates both self-assurance statements and decisions informed by personal preferences. According to the Uses and Gratifications Theory, people use media to validate their values and identities (Katz et al., 1973). Through digital interactions on platforms such as TikTok, users can determine whether their travel preferences align with their lifestyle and personality, thereby strengthening their sense of self (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Travel offers consumers more than recreational enjoyment because they view it as an essential marker of personal development and social validation, as demonstrated by the statement “*wait until I have money for healing at this place that I need.*” Self-improvement functions through social media, according to Whiting and Williams (2013), influencing future user behaviour.

4. Social Needs

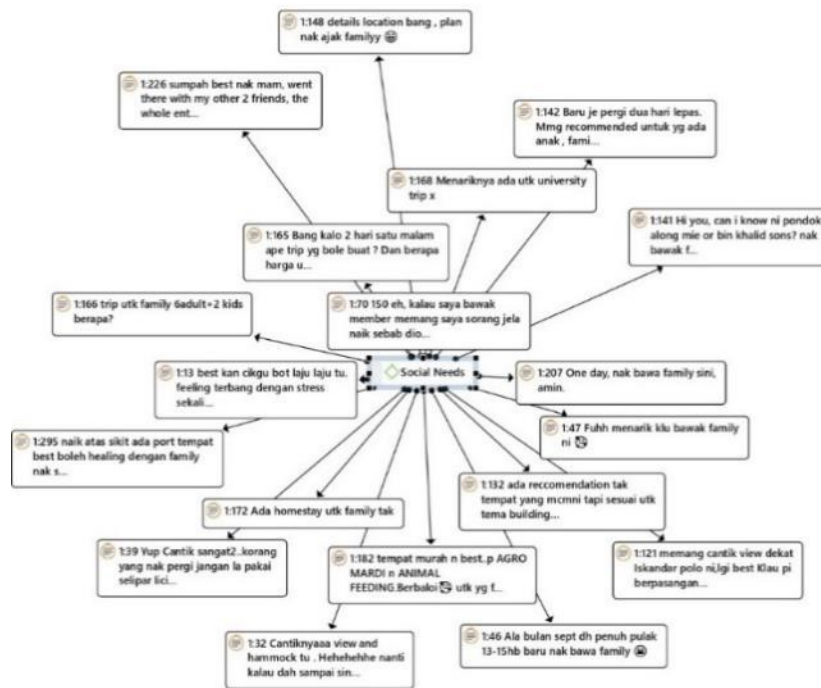


Figure 4: Comments on Social Needs

This study reveals that social needs are critical antecedents to the travel behaviour of Malaysian Gen-Z, mediated by social media. This is a native digital generation, and they tend to use social media platforms to satisfy social needs, such as family time and meet-ups with friends, which in turn significantly influences their travel choices. For instance, remarks like *“details location bang, plan nak ajak family”* (concerning reception referencing intentions to invite family) and *“Fuhh menarik klu bawa family ni”* (it is fun if the family is to be invited). Chung and Koo (2015) acknowledge that the generation places a strong emphasis on family values.

Peer pressure is an important factor whereby one notices comments like this, *“best kan cikgu bot laju laju tu...feeling terbang dengan stress sekali* (fast boat is fun; it helps forget stress), and *“Baru je pergi dua hari lepas...Mmg recommended untuk yg ada anak, family”* (went there two days ago; recommended for children and family). These remarks provide insight into how social influences, including peer endorsement and endorsements, impact travel

decisions. This finding aligns with several research studies that highlight how social norms significantly influence the consumer decisions of Generation Z (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). The goal-oriented use of social media for gathering specific information and sharing experiences is revealed in questions such as “Bang kalo 2 hari satu malam ape trip yg bole buat?” (What activities can one do in two days and one night?) and “Ada homestay utk family tak” which can be translated to mean (Is there any home rental for familie?) These interactions demonstrate how Generation Z utilises social media to make informed travel decisions that cater to the social needs of travellers. This behaviour aligns with the research findings, as social media is vital to travel planning among young people (Priyagus et al., 2024). The platform allows passengers to share information while participating in planning activities, thus demonstrating how social connections influence their travel decisions, according to Sundar and Limperos (2013). TikTok serves as a social platform for connecting with individuals and identifying with groups, while also enabling community participation during travel experiences.

5. Tension Release Needs

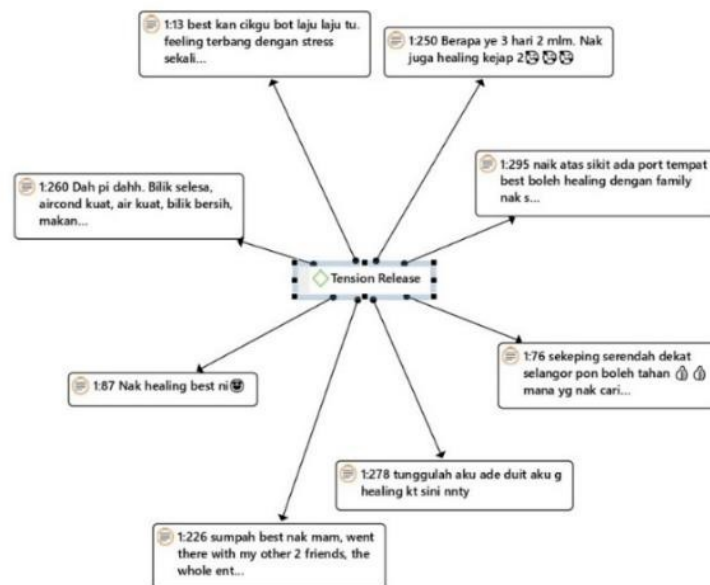


Figure 5: Comments on Tension Release Needs

The desire to find relief from tension, or in other words, to have recreation and leisure, can also be considered one of the goal-oriented factors

influencing the travel behaviour of Gen Zs in Malaysia, where, for instance, they pursue specific goals on social media, such as TikTok. As we see on social media platforms, users post that they need to “fix” or “relax” through travelling. Phrases like *“Nak healing best ni”*, (*I’d like to have a nice healing*) and *“naik atas sikit ada port tempat best boleh healing dengan family”*, (*literally – there is a nice place a little higher where you can relax with your family*), show that stress relief is one of the factors that influences their choice of travel. The above examples illustrate that destinations offering peaceful and relaxing services cater to the needs of this age group, as they satisfy their desire for stress reduction. Furthermore, peer experiences are present in phrases such as *“sumpah best nak mam, went there with my other 2 friends, the whole entire exp mmg very relaxing, mula2 ingtkan cam x syok, no no no, pergi k ❤️”*, (*swear, this is really fun, went there with my other 2 friends, the whole entire experience very relaxing, first thought, this is not fun but you need to go okay*), and *“tunggulah aku ade duit aku g healing kt sini nnty”* (*wait till I have money, I’ll go heal here later*). The above statements illustrate how install-pals waste time and stir up a desire for having a peaceful time away from work, as witnessed by the happy faces of other travellers who are ones one must emulate. This is true according to U&G theory, whereby people consume media to fulfil some needs they require, such as leisure and escape from stress (Whiting & Williams, 2013).

Three distinct categories form the sub-themes of tension release patterns in the data, including healing, stress relief, comfort, relaxation, and socially reinforced relaxation. Travel users express a connection between healing and stress management through phrases like *“Nak healing best ni”* and *“Tunggulah aku ade duit aku g healing kt sini nnty,”* viewing brief vacations as outlets for stress relief. Research indicates that people engage in recreational activities to fulfil their emotional and mental needs (Katz et al., 1973), in line with the Uses and Gratifications Theory. The mention of short getaways, such as *“Berapalah ye 3 hari 2 malam*. The ability to travel for brief periods to heal becomes a central aspect of stress management, according to these statements. Because people need both comfortable environments and clean spaces to relax properly.

DISCUSSION

The integration of thematic findings across the five gratification dimensions reveals a cyclical relationship between TikTok’s affordances and Gen Z travel behaviour. Algorithmic curation enhances informational accessibility (cognitive need), audiovisual aesthetics stimulate emotional engagement (affective need), and interactive functions facilitate identity performance and peer connection (personal and social needs). These gratifications collectively influence travel

decisions, validating the Uses and Gratifications framework while extending it to account for algorithmic mediation. Figure 6 visualises this dynamic process, proposing a model that links platform affordances, user gratifications, and behavioural outcomes within an iterative feedback system.

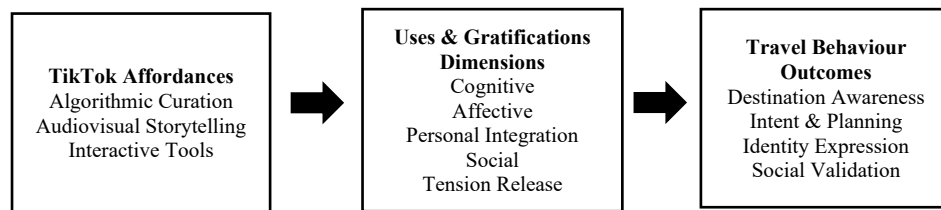


Figure 6: Conceptual Framework

Figure 6 illustrates the model integrates the Uses and Gratifications framework with TikTok’s platform-specific affordances to explain how short-form video engagement influences travel behaviour. Algorithmic curation and audiovisual storytelling stimulate cognitive and affective gratifications by providing personalised, emotionally resonant content. Interactive affordances such as comments, duets, and stitches fulfil personal and social integration needs, reinforcing identity expression and peer belonging. The collective satisfaction of these needs contributes to travel-related decision-making and experiential validation, which subsequently feed back into content creation and sharing. The model conceptualises this as a cyclical process of algorithmic exposure → gratification fulfilment → behavioural enactment → social reinforcement.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to tourism communication theory by extending the Uses and Gratifications framework to capture how TikTok’s algorithmic and participatory affordances shape travel behaviour. The integration of platform-specific features such as trend amplification, audiovisual storytelling, and comment-based validation reframes gratification from a static typology into a dynamic, co-constructed process. Empirically, it provides Malaysia-specific insights into how Gen Z travellers negotiate identity, emotion, and social belonging through short-form video culture, thereby enriching both urban and global (U&G) and digital tourism scholarship.

Despite revealing meaningful links between gratification needs and travel discourse, this study recognises the limitation of inferring actual travel behaviour from digital expressions. Future research should triangulate content analysis with behavioural evidence. Surveys or in-depth interviews with TikTok users who have viewed or engaged with travel content could validate whether the

motivations articulated online translate into concrete visitation choices. Integrating behavioural data such as geotagged posts or digital footprint analytics would enable a more precise understanding of how gratification fulfilment predicts tourism mobility among Generation Z

Recommendation for future studies

Building upon this study's qualitative findings, future work should integrate multi-method validation to bridge the gap between perceived intent and actual travel behaviour. Quantitative surveys could measure the extent to which TikTok engagement correlates with trip planning and visitation frequency, while semi-structured interviews could capture deeper insights into emotional and social gratifications. Such studies would not only validate the Uses and Gratifications framework within algorithmic media but also advance theoretical precision in linking digital interaction to tangible tourism outcomes.

Implications

The insights from this study have significant implications for tourism marketers, destination managers, and policymakers. Tourism marketers can leverage TikTok's interactive and visually engaging format to design content that addresses both the informational and emotional dimensions of travel decision-making. Destination managers may utilise the platform to highlight experiences that resonate with Generation Z's identity and social values, thus enhancing destination competitiveness. Policymakers can consider the role of social media in promoting sustainable and inclusive tourism narratives tailored to the preferences of young travellers. Understanding the interplay between user needs and digital engagement enables more strategic, data-driven approaches to marketing and tourism development in the social media era.

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